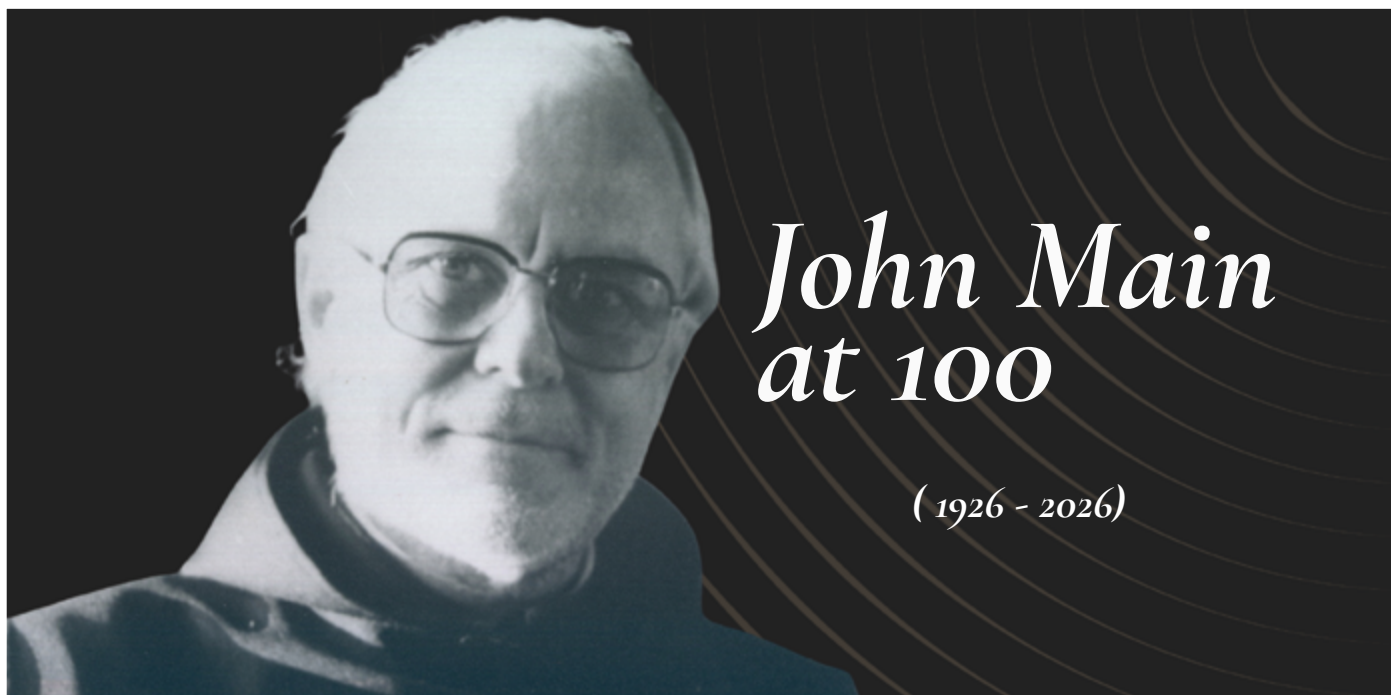




WCCM

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Legacy Friends

A letter from Laurence Freeman OSB

Welcome to our new format WCCM Journal! This year is the centenary of John Main's birth. WCCM national communities will be celebrating it in two complementary ways. Firstly, by encouraging each other to go deeper into the transformative silence which Fr John taught from and into which he has led a generation. And by sharing the gift of meditation in a world even more troubled than his time with more people and by collaborating with other organisations and movements also engaged in raising consciousness. Deeper and wider: the personal journey of every meditator and the goal of every spiritual community.

To remember John Main, who has historic importance in the contemplative tradition he belongs to,

is not about looking backwards. It is to enter more deeply into the present. In the Christian sense, remembering is the opposite of nostalgia. It is closer to what the early church called *anamnesis*, a re-calling in the Spirit of what might otherwise be lost and forgotten in time. The Eucharist, like meditation, is about becoming present to what is eternally *now* in the time-free mystery of the spiritual dimension of reality. In this kind of remembering, something happens in consciousness itself. We do not simply re-imagine a life. We let that life teach us now.

This continuous vital presence of a teacher in the Spirit is why John Main, who died more than forty years ago, continues to matter. The essential part of his life has not receded into history.

THIS ISSUE

Marco Schorlemmer:
John Main's wisdom for an age of AI (p6)

Kim Nataraja:
His teaching answered my search for meaning (p7)

Bram Ruiter: Finding an Integrated Path (p9)

Thomas Litzler: Silence, Simplicity, and the Healing of the Earth (pio)

This essence is what we call legacy. Far from receding, his teaching has grown stronger and clearer as our world has become noisier, more distracted, and more complex.

He did not set out to found a movement or want the searchlight on himself. He shared from what he found in himself, simpler and more fulfilling than any egocentric communication: a way of attention, a discipline of silence in a practice leading from the mind to the heart. In commemorating what he has left us, during this coming year we share more fully in the fullness of experience he found and that he wished others to enjoy.

'Do this in memory of me,' Jesus says - not as observers but as participants. The past can be recalled with greater presence and meaning because it enters into us now and changes us. This is the kind of remembering that asks us to listen, to attend, to be transformed. The life of a great political leader or writer may strongly impress us, and we may admire or reject him or her. The impact of a spiritual teacher is different. It works from within the person who listens, and what it teaches is what it is. It resonates with the future. John Main's authority was not grounded in personality or intellect or status, but rather in that experience of transformation which touches those who follow what he taught.

The Quest for Fullness that Shapes a Life

John Main lived several lives before discovering the one that could hold them and finally integrate all parts of himself in the freedom and peace he sought. He became a monk, he said, because he wanted and needed to be free, whatever the cost.

Born into an Irish Catholic family whose faith was strong but intelligent and questioning, his sense of the sacred was deeply part of him but also woven into a love of life and adventure. His childhood years formed a lifelong



Laurence Freeman, The Dalai Lama and John Main in Montreal 1980

sense of roots and being free to change: two qualities of his personality that anticipated the Benedictine precepts of stability and conversion to which he later took solemn vows.

His early adulthood characteristically involved both risk and change that led to various kinds of success. He served in the army in the final years of the Second World War, briefly entered a religious order, studied law at Trinity College Dublin, and then joined the British Foreign Service where he studied Chinese language. Posted to a war-torn Malaya, he threw himself confidently into his work and also enjoyed life; he was admired for his intelligence and liked for his charm and humour. In Kuala Lumpur, an unexpected encounter brought his professional and interior lives together. On an official visit to a Hindu monk renowned for his work for harmony between the fighting groups, Douglas Main realised he was in the presence of a man engaged with the world and yet having a deep interiority and wisdom.

The official part of their conversation finished, they began to speak of the spiritual life and eventually of prayer. Swami Satyananda spoke of God as dwelling within the human heart and in silence is loving to all. This echo from the Upanishads struck the young Irishman with its personal depth of authentic experience. The monk knew whereof he spoke; and it resonated immediately with John Main's own Christian faith.

He felt not a contradiction of ideas but a convergence of experience beyond words. As they talked more about prayer, it led to his being introduced to the practice of meditation. He learned the simple discipline of the mantra: a twice-daily practice engaged with fidelity and without expectation. He understood this was not theory but a new way of being. Its transformative simplicity would remain with him and later at the centre of his teaching for the rest of his life. Each week, the young colonial officer would sit and meditate with his Indian teacher. In one of the last talks given shortly before he died in 1982, he mused that 'this teaching of the mantra was the deepest wisdom on prayer' that he learned in his lifetime.

However, he had an inner restlessness, like many touched by God. He succeeded at what he did – in public service, law and teaching - but achievement for its own sake failed to satisfy him and if things did fail, it did not embitter him. At key moments in his life he quietly - and to those who knew him, surprisingly - changed career and eventually abandoned the career path entirely and followed his early sense that he was called to be a monk. A capacity for detachment at different stages of his life taught him what would later become a key element of his spiritual teaching: radical, interior renunciation as the way into the fullness we seek.

Love, Loss, and the Breaking Open of the Heart

What he learned from his teacher about meditation and integrated into his Christian spiritual practice became part of his life and meaning. It did not shield him from suffering or allow him to cling to success. Faith spares no one the need for detachment in which God forms us equally through joy and loss. Returning to Europe, he fell in love and hoped for marriage. Then, soon after that disappointment, he suffered deep grief over the death from a brain tumour of a young nephew whom he had helped his sister to raise. A heart broken open by love and grief becomes more spacious. He soon saw again how he needed to let go of an enjoyable and successful academic career and start a new chapter in his life. His daily spiritual practice led him to become a monk, not to escape from the world but to open himself more fully to commitment to the mystery of God whose love had become his most powerful attraction.

Monastic life, which he entered before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, did not simplify his path by making it easier but by making it clearer. It was still the era when novices learned to be content with the used razor blades handed down from the older brethren. Now, as Br John, he understood that any authentic spiritual choice will lead to fuller simplicity and joy if it is prepared for an ever-greater renunciation. His most difficult order was to stop meditating, as it did not conform to traditional monastic practice. Later he was to say that he entered a spiritual desert which it would take him a decade to cross.

We celebrate his life because of how he helped to restore the inclusive contemplative spirit of Christianity, but also because the stages of his life form an image of his later teaching. His watershed moments reveal the kind of obedience St Benedict wants a monk to develop – to obey wholeheartedly and immediately. For most people, a

new stage in life means they hesitate to obey, instead resisting the call to a more absolute letting go of possessions or status or even of certainty itself. In others, the capacity to obey the call is more spontaneous and so faith grows in them more freely.

He later taught others what the pattern of his own life had taught him. The whole of life is a spiritual journey. Work, relationships, success, failure, joy and suffering are not blocks to meaning any more than they are crudely 'sent by God'. They are the ways through which meaning is experienced because they connect us to freedom to love God and others with that very love. When he resumed his practice, meditation concentrated all this for him, even during the busiest period of his monastic life. He had recognised the universal teaching of the mantra at the source of his Christian monastic lineage. He saw it very differently from how it was being taught in western society at that time, as a technique for self-enhancement or stress-relief. For him it was the 'oratio pura' (pure prayer) of the Christian Desert tradition: a way of purifying the heart in order to see reality. A way of faith. And a way of life.

Meaning in a Fragmented World

In a time of crisis, everyone is a seeker and the common question is persistent: *What is the point of it all?* Realising how most young people were coming to experience life as broken, empty and meaningless, he also saw the failure of traditional religious approaches to give them guidance and hope. Fr John felt the urgent need – and the opportunity – of restoring an authentic contemplative dimension to our world and to the church.

Therapists today often observe that there lies a deeper loss of meaning behind our endemic anxiety and loneliness. For many, life is busy and pressured but weightless and empty. Espoused values sound good but prove to be provisional. Institutions,

including religions, are disconnected from the reality of the sacred. John Main's teaching speaks directly into this condition because he understood the core problem. He did not attempt to repair religion at the level of ideas or external structures. He went to the root.

Religion, he believed, must be grounded in experience. Authenticity was increasingly undermined and our assent to truth had (as Cardinal Newman saw a century before) to move from being a 'notional' assent to concepts, dogma or abstractions, to being a concrete personal experience that awakens passion to right action. Real assent, John Main believed, could not be fabricated merely through enthusiasm or a regressive appeal to external authority. Like Evagrius and the Desert tradition that inspired him, John Main saw the true 'theologian is one who prays and one who prays is a theologian'. Prayer needs to be redefined beyond intercession and devotionism and re-discovered as what is described by Jesus: a personal encounter with reality. Meditation restores religion to its true purpose: 're-ligare', re-connecting the human person to an ever-present origin and source. This does not take place outside ourselves or in a future time. It takes place within, here and now: the mystic's *eternal* now. He therefore stressed the ordinariness and simplicity of the daily practice of meditation.

John Main sensed the dangers of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'religionless Christianity', becoming a spirituality without roots. The danger is a new quietism, often marketed as a passive, self-absorbed, even narcissistic inwardness that avoids real transformation. Anything that turned the spiritual into a commodity or ignored the asceticism of any spiritual practice would fail to yield fullness. Meditation, he said, is a direct way onto a narrow but expansive path towards the unlimited goal of 'other-centredness'. It cannot be just a tranquiliser or escape into altered states. It is *metanoia*: a

change of direction, a turning to the heart-centre, away from the falsity, fears and fantasies of the ego.

John Main's own metanoia at the end of the turbulent decade of the sixties awakening reshaped the way he read Scripture and understood the purpose of the monk. As he taught them, familiar texts stirred with fresh immediacy. Teachings about poverty of spirit, childlike simplicity, and the Kingdom ceased to be abstractions and instead became pointers to real experience. The Kingdom, he saw, is not a place we go to or a reward, but the reality we enter when we pay attention to it in stillness of mind, body and spirit.

Those who knew John Main felt his own quality of attention. He listened without hurry. He saw without judgement. His authority was felt but not imposed. It proceeded from love and so he rarely told someone what to do because he helped them to discover it for themselves. Like the story of Jesus looking into the heart of the rich young man, his way of seeing others had a self-confident humility, compassion and humour. He was not condescending, but he accompanied; he reacted against being placed on a pedestal. Teaching was not self-expression but obedience to an indescribable experience he wished to help others discover for themselves. I asked him once what he felt was his primary gift. He answered 'loving'.

John Main is best appreciated as one of a long line of contemplative revolutionaries who have experienced the transformative experience of Christian faith and understood it in its essential mystical meaning. This is the opposite of abstraction: it is embodying. And so, the expression of his teaching took form in meditation groups of ordinary people gathering in person, weekly, and now also online, to sit in faithful and creative silence together.

He believed that these Christian Meditation groups bore seeds of the contemplative revolution initiated by Christ and sustained through centuries and cultures. A non-violent and self-renewing revolution connecting human depth to God and to human beings in new ways. He emphasised practice and observed that after six months of meditating regularly you would begin to see life differently. Values shift and the quality of life is re-humanised. Such change is not theatrical. It is incremental, patient, often invisible at first. But its effects spread outwards like ripples - into relationships, work, justice, peacebuilding and community.

If you were looking for two three-word phrases that capture this teaching, you could not do better than 'say your mantra' and 'meditation creates community'. Meditation, he insisted, creates community.

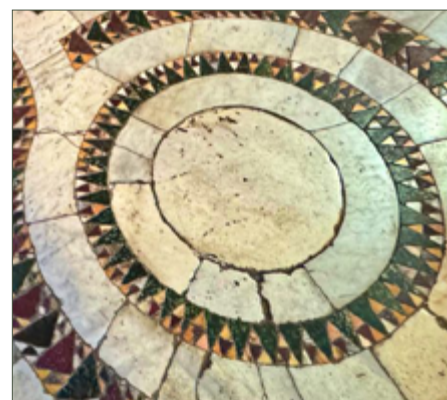
Meditation teaches us how to leave self behind. Or — to put it in a different but equally true way — meditation alerts us instantly when we relapse into egocentric habits. Either way, through deep self-knowledge, it releases a spring of living water within us. It restores us to ourselves by awakening us to the source of being and in that fundamental reconnection, we open to our connection to others. John Main did not over-psychologise this spiritual journey, but he saw, and often quoted St Augustine to this effect, that 'we must first be restored to ourselves so that, making of ourselves as it were a stepping-stone, we rise thence to God'. As Christianity continues to search for a new vocabulary, John Main sheds light on its essential priorities.

He taught a specific practice without suggesting it was the 'only way'. Yet, following Jesus who, he believed, prays in, with and for us, he shows the universality of Christ's teaching: interiority, silence, equanimity,

centredness and the present moment. Not abstract or theoretical, but a path of unself-conscious experience which heals the human being from fragmentation to wholeness.

He taught a practice equally suitable for young and old, for believer, half-believer and non-believer, in the jumble of their lives. He exposed a radical way of peace and order for what Yeats called the 'rag-and-bone shop of the heart'.

The Future of Religion



It is not coincidental that John Main's centenary should be celebrated this year as the WCCM ponders its theme of 'the Future of Religion'.

When John Main and I arrived in Montreal to establish a Benedictine community integrating and teaching meditation, we found a once powerful and dominant church on its knees: in the other sense of the phrase, humbled and brought low. Under strong cultural pressures, it had imploded. As he observed it, Fr John remarked that one day the same would happen in Ireland: as it has done, and in many other traditionally religious societies. He was not reviving the contemplative wisdom of the church to shore up its collapsing infrastructure, but to lay foundations for an entirely new form of Christianity.

While visiting Taiwan some years ago, I was struck by the teeming business of temple life in what is also a

very secular society. There, as elsewhere, many people claim to be 'spiritual not religious'. Watching long lines of worshippers queuing to speak a few words to a temple priest and hand him a small red envelope, I asked my friend what they were seeking. The answer, he replied, is simple: what human beings have always sought from ancestors or higher deities - health, prosperity, peace of mind, family, to be left alone to live a quiet life.

No one understands better the roots of modern secular societies than Charles Taylor. He sees how Christianity is one of its main causes (didn't Jesus say he was 'Lord of the sabbath' and warn against superficially external religion?). Yet the secular is not the enemy of religion. At its core, secularism is the freedom to choose whether to be religious or not. For centuries, religious belief was imbibed at birth or violently imposed. In 1500, the choice whether to believe in God, angels, purgatory and relics, was barely an option. Today we live in an age where religion and spirituality are separated, as are faith and belief; and the authority we seek for our necessarily fragile choices is no longer external but identified with hard-won personal 'authenticity'.

This freedom is unsettling and confusing, but it is (we hope) integral to a new chapter of human evolution. To understand the future of religion, to get a sense of the direction it is moving in, we need to look at its past and read the signs of the present time. 300,000 years ago, our ancestors began to bury their dead with reverence and meaningful symbols. We are still innately religious beings. The failure of all atheistic movements to eradicate religion prove this. We sense both the immanent and transcendent dimensions of experience. Their expressions interact to make our lives meaningful. We have learned, although we forget as soon as

we learn, that fullness of being, peace and truth are not calculable but may be discovered within ourselves.

Christianity survived its self-betrayals and continued to disseminate, though not without frequent pain and self-distortion. Wars of religion, imperial ambitions, and civil wars left deep scars, and it is understandable that many today say they are 'not religious'. But at its heart, as in the heart of every wisdom tradition, there lies a living core of contemplative wisdom. It points true north, toward silence, attention, stillness, nonduality and an eternal mysterious presence. When religion forgets this inner core, it becomes desecrated, anxious, competitive, and destructive, just as do we individually when we lose the spiritual connection. When remembered, however, it becomes a path to wholeness and fullness: a union of contemplation and action.

Prophetic voices of modernity, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil, saw this. Bonhoeffer declared in word and action that God is found at the centre of life, not just at its margins. Simone Weil loved the church but refused to enter it institutionally because, she said, to the degree it was an institution it belonged to the prince of this world. She described prayer as intense attention which awakens in the presence of suffering as compassion - not an asking but a waiting in which the ego dissolves. More recently, contemplatives from the monastic lineage, like Thomas Merton and John Main and others like Bede Griffiths and Thomas Keating, inspired by the prophetic vision, helped to recover a spiritually democratic practice in ordinary life - a 'secret discipline' as Bonhoeffer called it, a 'daily meditation' as John Main taught.

In a secular age, belief can no longer survive merely as a cultural habit. The



age of nominal Christianity is over. As another prophet, Karl Rahner, predicted, the Christian of the future will be a mystic - 'one who has experienced something' - or will cease to be anything at all. This may well be true across all traditions. The future of religion will depend not on institutional force but on personal depth of experience.

We cannot return to the past; except perhaps by losing it and going forward without certainty, eventually recognising in new forms what we have lost, as if for the first time. We are entering a new phase of the contemplative revolution which is central to the evolution of humanity itself, even to the survival of the human.

Please join the community worldwide this year as we understand John Main's teaching and engage and reflect on this mystery of transformation. To help you do this, I welcome you to join our monthly online 'Future of Religion' series: <https://wccm-int.org/tfor> (in which I gave the first presentation recently).

May we travel together in hope and faith, and most of all

With love,

John Main

Science

John Main's wisdom for an age of AI

BY MARCO SCHORLEMMER

Research scientist in Artificial Intelligence and former Coordinator of WCCM Catalonia

John Main, in his teachings about meditation, expressed how for men and women living in a 'transistorised' culture, silence can be something terribly threatening; and also how the simplicity of meditation is quite a challenge to all of us who were brought up with a modern consciousness in a scientific age, obsessed with the idea of techniques, methods, and methodologies. Decades later, our societies have moved from a 'transistorised' culture to a 'WhatsApped', 'Instagrammed' and 'TikTokerised' one, where the distractions of the modern world seem to have become even worse. John Main did not know about YouTubers and influencers, but he already noticed how we shuffle with the ideas "we had presented to us by the prepackagers of second-hand, convenience-concepts." Today, the prepackaged ideas are used to train large-scale AI systems, which we use to tirelessly generate all kinds of content that adds even more noise to "a world of almost frenetic movement." Consequently, Fr John's request is timelier than ever: "We must learn to be still." "We have to learn to be silent and to be profoundly silent." And, as he reminded us, "the extraordinary thing is that, in spite of all the distractions of the modern world, this silence is perfectly possible for all of us."

It is actually not - as is commonly understood and pursued in AI research - the information-processing or problem-solving capacities of our intelligence that are the most significant, but in fact this capacity for profound silence. The so-called "intelligent" systems are mainly designed following a narrow approach to intelligence, focused almost entirely on its functional dimension. The

intelligence of living beings, in contrast, is fundamentally conditioned by how organisms have evolved over billions of years, closely coupled with their environments and other living beings. This coupling determines their needs for survival and flourishing, and these needs, in turn, depend on what constitutes the embodiment of each living being. What is meaningful to humans is not experienced in the same way by dolphins or dogs, let alone by computing machinery and software, for which there is no experience, and nothing has meaning.

Most of the worrisome effects of AI technology on society are the result of understanding intelligence only along its functional dimension. Intelligence is driven by interest, but a shallow understanding of this interest is to see it as individual entities attempting to maximise their own profits; this leads to AI technology being put at the service of individual, corporate, and state profit. Intelligence requires communication, but a shallow understanding of communication is to focus only on information exchange; this leads to AI technology being used to generate fake information, favouring post-truth politics. Intelligence is cooperative, but a shallow understanding of cooperation is to model it as individual, autonomous entities acting as nodes in an interaction network, nodes that can be changed and replaced; this leads to AI technology developed to automate jobs and make human labour superfluous. Intelligence is based on inquiry, but a shallow understanding of inquiry is to centre it on data accumulation; this leads to AI technology that is biased, emphasises clichés, and strengthens



Marco Schorlemmer

ideology silos, thus polarising societies. And, ultimately, intelligence requires freedom, and a shallow understanding of freedom is to reduce it to the capacity of choosing among multiple options; this leads to AI technology designed to control and influence human behaviour.

Multidimensionality of intelligence

We thus need to develop this powerful technology to be integrated harmoniously with the multidimensionality of intelligence. In addition to the information-processing and problem-solving abilities of our intelligence, and in addition to our meaningful experience of reality, the human capacity for profound silence leads us to the awareness of the absolute dimension of reality. We humans not only act and react to our environment but, through language, we transfer the meaning of our experiences of reality onto speech, thus creating a distinction between experience and we thus do not remain caught up within a relative understanding, and this provides the freedom to change our understanding of reality and to respond

to it creatively. Science and technology are the fruits of this liberating capacity to respond creatively to our concrete experience of reality, and this is why modern science and technology have broadened the horizons of humanity.

But, “the increasing godlessness of so much modern consciousness has raised an urgent concern about the survival of humanity,” John Main noted, “not only of the race, but of the humanity of the race”. Indeed, the greatest danger of AI technology is not that of “superintelligent” machines taking over the world and turning human beings into something dispensable; no, it’s our humanity that is at stake as we shape our societies mainly according to a functional understanding of intelligence that ignores the absoluteness of reality.

Returning to our origin

We need to nourish the fullness of our intelligence, especially the liberating dimension that frees us from getting

caught in our relative understanding of reality. As Fr John reminded us, “progress does not consist so much in leaving our origin but much more in realizing all the potential in our origin, which we do by returning to our origin.” By being profoundly silent –and all of us are capable of it– we nourish the liberating, contemplative core of our intelligence, and this can lead to AI technology that, in terms of interest, is designed and developed out of selfless, generous love for the common good; which in terms of communication, creates spaces of deep listening, ‘with the ear of the heart’; which in terms of cooperation, honours dependency and diversity; which in terms of inquiry, fosters out-of-the-box thinking; and which in terms of freedom, supports the creative core of our human intelligence by letting computers do the drudgery, and giving humans space to flourish.

The great challenges facing humanity today, including those concerning AI, will

not be solved by more techno-scientific research addressing our human needs. We must reach into the core of our creativity, this contemplative dimension of intelligence which acts at the origin of all things, and which prevents us from being trapped in the relative dimension of our needs. No matter how necessary and attractive our scientific and technological innovations may be, they will always constitute a relative understanding of reality because of our experience as living beings. Consequently, we will never be able to reach, through scientific and technological innovations, the concrete origin of the intelligence that underlies all our actions, and that is the creative power of Reality itself. Therefore, any transformation of humanity must arise from this creative origin if it is to serve the entire human family. The hope that this transformation is possible lies in the fact that this source, this liberating dimension of our intelligence, is accessible to everyone.

Reflection

“His teaching answered my search for meaning”

BY KIM NATARAJA

Founding Director of the WCCM School of Meditation



Kim Nataraja

Let me briefly tell you how I found out about the WCCM Centre in London. It was in a house in Campden Hill Road not far away from our Church

of England Church, St Mary Abbots, in Kensington, and close to my home. In 1993 my Spiritual Director, an Irish Columban, Sister Mary Moylan, encouraged me to go. She knew that I prayed in silence by myself, repeating a phrase from the Lord’s prayer. I had confessed to her that it felt like a lonely journey, as I didn’t know anyone else who prayed like that in our Church. She then told me, that there was now a Christian Community nearby that did so every week. So, the next day I visited the house in Campden Hill Road and was told about the Weekly Meditation Group. The following week I went along to the first Christian meditation group in my life.

It was one of these moments that you

never forget. There I was, sitting on a meditation cushion to practice Christian meditation in the tradition of John Main, in a circle of people I had never met before, but who welcomed and greeted me warmly. By that time John Main had died in 1982 and had appointed Laurence Freeman as his successor. Fr Laurence would lead the group often and would share with us John Main’s teaching. When I heard the words that meditation was silent prayer, a simple, faithful practice of repeating a sacred phrase and moving beyond thoughts, I felt totally safe and at home. In his introductory sessions, Fr Laurence often reminded us that meditation was a discipline of faithful attention on your prayer word/mantra,

moving beyond thoughts, words and images into stillness and silence, where we simply are with God. If thoughts recur and disturb us, we just gently let go of them and return to our word. On another occasion, Fr Laurence quoted John Main's words, saying: "The purpose of meditating is to advance along the way of the fullness of your own humanity. Meditating is simply to accept the gift of your own creation and develop the potential to respond to the gift fully. We are not people who have to live on the surface, or people who are condemned to live lives of shallow emotions. Meditation is leaving the shallows, leaving the surface, and entering into the depths of your own being."

Sometimes when Fr Laurence was away, we would listen to one of John Main's talks. I loved his calm, measured way of speaking and the wisdom of his words. I still remember him saying: "The silence is there within us. What we have to do is to enter into it, to become silent, to become the silence. The purpose of meditation and the challenge of meditation is to allow ourselves to become silent enough to allow this interior silence to emerge. Silence is the language of the spirit." Being a bookworm, I loved going into the bookstore at the Campden Hill Centre and soon discovered John Main's books. The one I still love most is 'Word into Silence', in which is this beautiful teaching: "The important aim in Christian Meditation is to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality but the reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, everything we are."

Finding a Teacher

I had never met Fr John in person, yet I felt I knew him through his teaching on the tapes and books. What also attracted me was the openness of the Community. No questions were asked about anyone's religious background. I had been brought up between two Christian denominations: my father was Catholic

and my mother Protestant. Therefore religion was not discussed at home, so I was left free to find my own spiritual path and later explore other religions and learn from their wisdom. It was thus heartening to find out how John Main had discovered meditation, by meeting and being taught by an Indian Swami, Satyananda, before he discovered the same way of prayer with the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century.

Because of his discovery of praying with a single sacred phrase in the writings of Cassian about the teaching of the Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers, who were ordinary people, John Main felt called to share this simple form of prayer with everyone. This was very innovative, as it had not been encouraged by the Church in the many intervening centuries and therefore had disappeared from present teaching in the Churches, as I had experienced personally. Fr John stressed the importance of personal experience coming from meditation leading to silent prayer. It made Fr Bede Griffiths call him "the most important, spiritual teacher in the Church today". Therefore, John Main re-discovered more than praying by repeating a word. He also re-connected with a view of Christianity sorely needed today, namely one that had contemplative prayer as an integral and central part of its prayer life. He felt strongly that "religion is a sacred expression of the spiritual, but if the spiritual experience is lacking then the religious form becomes hollow, superficial and self-important." He stressed that "we must verify the truths of our faith in our own experience." Fr Bede Griffiths agreed with him and said it even more strongly: "If Christianity cannot recover its mystical tradition and teach it, it should just fold up and go out of business, it has nothing to say."

But that situation is slowly changing and there are now Contemplative Churches, for example in Ireland and in Australia, and more Churches have meditation groups. Fr John's teaching was Christ-centred and rooted in the tradition. He stressed that silent,

contemplative prayer, was a prayer with and through Christ. As he explained, in the silence we join the prayer of Christ who lives within our heart and so join the stream of love between the risen Christ and the Divine. Fr John's teaching answered so many of my questions about silent prayer and daily living: "The purpose of meditating is to advance along the way of the fullness of your own humanity. Meditating is simply to accept the gift of your own creation and develop the potential to respond to the gift fully. We are not people who have to live on the surface, or people who are condemned to live lives of shallow emotions. Meditation is leaving the shallows, leaving the surface, and entering into the depths of your own being." John Main and Laurence Freeman were for me the first truly spiritual Christian teachers, explaining the transformative teaching of Jesus and the way that was lived out by the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century. All John Main's teaching and Fr Laurence's talks and books so answered my search for meaning that I wanted to commit myself more closely to the Community and felt called to become an Oblate. Fr Laurence accepted my request and in 1998 I was received as an Oblate.

A few months later Fr Laurence, knowing my educational background, asked me to help him guide internationally the recently founded School. I felt a little hesitant at first, but soon realised that this was a useful way of service. I never regretted accepting his invitation. It was such a rewarding task to share the profound teaching I have so benefitted from, and thereby support others along their paths. It was also heartening to experience how the warm and the welcoming reception I received from my first meditation group in Campden Hill Road was repeated all over the world in my conversations with group leaders, meetings and retreats. Strangers became friends I had not yet met. It proved Fr John's words that Meditation creates Community, a Community of Love.

Point of View

Finding an Integrated Path

BY BRAM RUITER

Former volunteer at Bonnevaux, with a background in technology and a passion for theatre and theology.

Hello, my name is Bram Ruiter from the Netherlands, and I would like to briefly share the impact that the thinking and writing of John Main have had on my life. To understand that impact, it helps to first sketch the path that led to it.

I went through a long period of burnout—one that was essentially existential in nature. Questions such as *Where do I find meaning?* and *What in life is truly worth living for?* became increasingly pressing. I was raised in a church-going family, and from my teenage years onward I had a rich prayer life. This was deeply comforting to me, but it also created a sense of distance: my secular friends could not recognize or relate to what I was experiencing. My religious life existed largely outside their world.

After finishing secondary school, I pursued a technical education. There I was surrounded by outspokenly atheistic professors, and over time I adopted their view of the human person: that we are ultimately nothing more than our brains, and that my religious experiences were therefore entirely self-generated. This was not a conclusion that brought me any joy, but I felt, intellectually, that I could not simply turn away from it. It left me confused, disillusioned, and exhausted.

Looking back, I now see that I had never really encountered what one might call embodied theology: people in whom thinking, feeling, and living were held together in an integrated way. I seemed to face a false choice. On the one hand, there were liberal voices who could say that Jesus did not literally rise from the dead. On the other hand, there

were orthodox voices who appeared unaware of the intellectual challenges posed by modernity. Neither position felt inhabitable to me.

And then there was John Main—or rather, Sicco Claus, a former teacher of mine who wrote a doctoral dissertation on John Main and led a WCCM meditation group. This meditation group showed me a way forward that moved beyond the usual divide between orthodox and liberal.

Since joining that group, I have been reading John Main's texts on a daily basis. At first I did so cautiously—almost distrustfully—because it all seemed too good to be true. I was afraid I would come across something that felt *too* narrowly religious *or*, on the other hand, *too* secularly liberal. Yet so far, John Main has managed, for me, to hold that balance in a remarkable way. His words have opened up a life-giving path.

In his wake, a community has also emerged to which I feel deeply connected. I am glad to have spent several months living in Bonnevaux. The favourite part of my stay has been the *Llectio Ddivina* with the Rule of Benedict—sharing together which phrases resonate with us and attempting to articulate why. This document stands in such stark contrast to the way of life in the secular Dutch society that it has offered me a rich opportunity for reflection. Reading the Rule is essentially an exploration of a relational perspective on the world, showing how this outlook permeates all kinds of practical matters.

In this way, it reveals to me that my current approach to relationships with others, material possessions, and nature

*Bram Ruiter*

is often characterized by autonomy and efficiency. In contrast, life in a Benedictine monastery is shaped by a lifelong practice of attentive and intentional interaction with one another.

I often hear despairing voices within me and around me concerning climate change and polarization, suggesting that we are like the Titanic heading for an iceberg, unable to change course. My time in Bonnevaux has taught me that steering is indeed possible, but it requires adjustment on a deeper level—beyond the sacred cows of contemporary secular society. And that is uncomfortable. It means stepping into unfamiliar territory, where you can no longer stand independently.

So how do you do this? “Keep saying your mantra in all simplicity,” John Main says. Doing this within a community is a proven way to open your heart despite discomfort, fear, and alienation. It allows your being to expand, so that you can feel the world more deeply.

Environment

Silence, Simplicity, and the Healing of the Earth

BY THOMAS LITZLER

Organic Farmer at Bonnevaux

*Thomas Litzler*

We human beings are experiencing great turmoil on a global scale. Conflict, division and disharmony seem to be the common reality in all countries, as well as on an individual level for the vast majority of us. Environmental crises (climate change, loss of biodiversity, depletion of natural resources, etc.) have a systemic impact that raises legitimate concerns, to the point of giving rise to a new term, 'eco-anxiety'.

What can meditation and our community offer in the face of these challenges and the urgency of these situations? I am convinced that the crucial importance of these questions cannot be answered superficially. As long as we work on external mechanisms, we will only contribute to the turmoil in the world, with the best of intentions, but without producing convincing results. Environmental crises, like others, find their origin, in my opinion, in our inability to love. Our sensitivity to the Earth, to living things, to our fellow human beings, has been eroded. This stems from our own wounds of self-esteem, which are reproduced over generations.

To assert our right to live, to protect our individual existence, we have developed strategies to compensate for our lack of love. Out of fear of not being loved, out of fear of disappearing without having been seen, we try to gain recognition and appreciation through unskillful manoeuvres: seduction, fame and power, wealth... and consumerism, buying things that console us and offer a brief boost to our self-esteem, at the expense of the Earth's tears. Our difficulty in loving fully is also linked to the diminishing contemplative dimension of our lives.

Year after year, we are losing our ability to pay open attention to our surroundings, to enter into subject-to-subject relationships with the human and non-human beings who share our lives, and with the Earth itself.

Global crises are first and foremost crises of our sensitivity. How can we love and protect the otter, for instance, which lives in the same territory in which we live day after day, if we have never noticed its existence? Various approaches enable us to develop our sensitivity towards the Earth: meditating in the wilderness, *Lectio Divina* in Creation, writing our 'ecobiography' and sharing it with friends, and, of course, participating in the many outings offered by organisations dedicated to the protection of the natural world. It is mainly in silence that our ability to pay attention to others is born, to those who are not me, but who are part of my existence simply because they live alongside me. It is in silence that our sensitivity can be born. This in turn gives rise to wonder, to gratitude and, finally, to commitment. Global crises will not be resolved by global policies or

technological feats alone. Primarily, they will find their resolution in the hearts of each and every one of us.

In the silence of meditation, in that safe space where we discover that we are loved unconditionally, we open ourselves to the possibility of calming the turmoil of the world within us. Our wounded self-esteem heals each time we simply sit down, letting go for a moment of the torments we encounter in our lives. From this point of stability, in this new peace, we can then move forward towards Christ's invitation to follow a path of love and poverty (we could formulate this idea nowadays as "minimalism" or "sober lifestyles"). This is His response to the multiple crises of our world.

**More on this topic:**

- *Contemplating Earth*, online course
- *The Earth Crisis Forums*
- *Meditation on Earth*, a booklet by Thomas Litzler (will be released shortly)

Visit <https://wccm-int.org/ecce>

Events

John Main Seminar 2026 - Healing the Breach: Finding Faith, Meaning and Dignity in a Season of Contempt

In this centenary of John Main's birth, we would do well to read his letter written fifty years ago from Thomas Merton's hermitage at the time of an American Presidential election. He appealed for a new language of politics in tune with authentic moral values secured by the awakening of the contemplative dimension of religion. Today Tim Shriver also understands how 'in meditation we learn to live committed to the rule of prayer and to make it the spiritual foundation underlying all our activity.'

Leading this year's John Main Seminar, he asks how a personal practice like meditation directly affects others and helps build a secular society aligned with the peace and justice of the reign of God. He will explore what John Main means by saying that 'meditation creates community'?

Tim has long been committed to the work of re-building society: by

speaking truth to power and caring for the neglected and marginalised. In the talks and dialogues of the Seminar, he will apply his personal conviction of the power of faith and spiritual experience – in the deepest and broadest sense - to transform hearts and open minds. In the global pandemonium of politics today how can we build schools of dignity? How can we find the self-control necessary for mutual respect?

Even more, how can we 'stir into flame' the gift of the spiritual power of love to move definitively from division and violence to dignity and joy? 'I don't have all the answers', he says. But having heard him speak from mind and heart, one feels the way forward has become much clearer - and more hopeful.

JOHN MAIN SEMINAR 2026:
17 - 20 SEPTEMBER,
WASHINGTON DC, USA.
FOR MORE INFORMATION
VISIT wccm.org/jms2026



Tim Shriver

Tim Shriver is husband, father, grandfather, educator, best-selling author, Chairman of the Special Olympics and Chairman of UNITE. As Chairman of Special Olympics, he has driven the largest expansion of the organization in its history—growing the movement from one million athletes to over six million athletes in more than 170 countries around the world. As Chairman of UNITE, a non-profit that also emerged from this exploration, he has helped to pioneer the Dignity Index—a new tool to help Americans disagree without demonizing each other—and catalyze dozens of moonshots that unite Americans in common purpose to tackle our country's most intractable challenges.

Canadian National Conference Retreat
Transforming Together in Peace
27 July - 03 August - Online & In-Person - Register at bit.ly/CCMC-NC2026
Tom Mustil · Chief R. Stacey LaForme · Laurence Freeman OSB



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Would you like to contribute to the WCCM Journal? Our next deadline is 10 April.

Events & Resources



ONLINE - visit wccm.org/events

The Future of Religion Series - 2026 WCCM Theme

Ten sessions from 10th February to 15 December
With Laurence Freeman, Tim Shriver, Elliot R. Wolfson,
Sheikh Kabir Helminski, Matthieu Ricard, Rowan
Williams, Ilia Delio and Rupert Sheldrake

Sacred Texts

Six sessions from 11 May to 9 November

Being Human, Being Real

Four sessions from 14 March to 26 November

Holy Week Retreat online

Led by Laurence Freeman and the Bonnevaux Community
30 March to 5 April

Learning to Meditate courses

Four sessions from 23 Feb to 16 Mar and from 23 November
to 14 December

Deepening Meditation course

8 June to 13 July



BONNEVAUX RETREATS & OTHERS - visit bonnevauxwccm.org/programme

28 Mar-5 Apr **Holy Week Retreat** - Led by Laurence Freeman

28 Apr-3 May **Approaches to Meditation** - Led by Peter Tyler

12-17 May **Deepening Meditation** - Led by Stefan Reynolds

21-24 May **Cultivating the Fruits of our Contemplative
Practice** - Led by Sean Hagan

9-14 Jun **Christian Meditation and Yoga**

Led by Fr Joe Pereira

21-26 Jun **Poets, Prayer and Vision**

Led by Bishop Rowan Williams

5-12 Jul **The Summer School**

Led by Laurence Freeman, Brijji Waterfield & others

21-26 Ju **Reasons for Living**

Led by Revd Richard Carter

28 Jul - 2 Aug **Young Adults Retreat**

Led by Tayna Malaspina & Community members

25-30 Aug **Meditation and Consciousness**

Led by Fr Cyprian Consiglio

8-13 Sep **Contemplation as Action**

Led by Dr Sarah Bachelard

17-22 Sep **John Main Seminar**, Washington DC, US

led by Tim Shriver

6-11 Oct **Learning to Move With More of Myself**

Led by Giovanni Felicioni

10-18 Oct **Monte Oliveto Deep Silent Retreat**

Led by Laurence Freeman

20-25 Oct **International Retreat for Oblates**

Led by Laurence Freeman OSB and Oblates

29 Oct - 1 Nov **Devenir : L'homme ternaire**

Led by Eric Clotuche

17-22 Nov **The English Mystics**

Led by Laurence Freeman

21-27 Dec **Experience Christmas at Bonnevaux**

29 Dec - 2 Jan **New Year's Retreat**

Led by Laurence Freeman

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