

Basically sinners or essentially good?

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Bede Griffiths called John Main *“the most important spiritual guide in the Church to day”*. This accolade does not just refer to his teaching on meditation, but also to his essential theology, which supports this way of prayer. His theology resonates with that of the Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century CE and with the early Christians in general. I would go as far as to say he would have fitted in perfectly with the monks of that time, especially Evagrius, John Cassian’s main teacher.

All the concepts about God for both John Main and the early Christians rose out of their experience of prayer. This is summed up by Evagrius of Pontus, one of the important Desert Fathers of the 4th century CE: *“A theologian is one who prays and one who prays is a theologian.”* How did they then experience God? One of the first important figures in the early days of Christianity is Clement of Alexandria (150 -215), who expressed it as follows: God is *“beyond all speech, beyond every concept, beyond every thought”*, and if he felt obliged to put a name to that experience, the best description he could give is: *“The notion of pure being is the closest you can come to God.”*

John Main totally agreed with these expressions: *“We know we cannot analyse God. We know we cannot with finite minds understand the infinitude of God”*. He too saw God as *“present being”*, as *“the ground of our being”*, *“the energy that is love....God is, God is love, God is now.”*

How did they see the relationship between God and humanity? This is expressed clearly by Origen (186 -255), the successor of Clement as Head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, as follows: *“Every spiritual being is, by nature, a temple of God, created to receive into itself the glory of God.”* He went further and stressed: *“Men and women are created in the ‘image of God’ and our human vocation is to manifest ‘likeness to God’ through our manner of life.”* John Main voiced this as follows: *“Jesus has sent his Spirit to dwell within us, making all of us temples of holiness: God himself dwelling within us.”* He further stresses that *“God is the root from which we are sprung...We are created in his image, share in his value and worth as children of God...We know that we are and that we are in God and that in him we discover our essential identity and unique meaning....we know we share in the nature of God.”*

For the early Christians and John Main prayer meant re-entering into the life of God: *“Our daily meditation is nothing less than a return to this fountainhead of life where our spirit becomes wholly immersed in the Spirit of God, wholly alive with his life, wholly loving with his love.”*

“Jesus said, I took my stand in the midst of the world, and in the flesh I appeared to them. I found them all drunk, and I did not find any of them thirsty. My soul ached for the children of humanity, because they are blind in their hearts and do not see, for they came into the world empty, and they also seek to depart from the world empty. But now they are drunk. When they shake off their wine, then they will repent.”

This Gospel challenges us to let go of our habitual ways of perception, to ‘repent’, to experience a ‘*metanoia*’, to change our way of seeing and being. This requires the humility and honesty to let go off our false images of ourselves, our ‘ego’ masks, our “clothes”:

“His followers said, “When will you appear to us and when will we see you?” Jesus said, “When you strip without being ashamed and you take your clothes and put them under your feet like little children and trample them, then you will see the child of the living one and you will not be afraid.”

This is really not so dissimilar to what Jesus said in the Synoptic Gospels: *“Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must leave self (i.e. the ‘ego’ illusions) behind.”* Once we break through the constraints of the ‘ego’, we will be free, no longer imprisoned. All we need to do is to wake up and discover who we truly are. This search is the most important element in our life:

Jesus said, ‘Let one who seeks not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel and will rule over all.’

It is troubling to realise that the reality we have accepted as the only objective and permanent reality is in fact impermanent, subject to constant change, shaped by the thoughts, images and needs of our material being. But if we persevere in meditation, we can part the veil of these illusions and become aware of our true nature and the true nature of reality. The result will then be a real sense of wonder, we will ‘*marvel*’.

From these few sayings from the 'Gospel of Thomas' it is clear how Jesus' teaching here corresponds to what we have been talking about. Self-knowledge obtained in the silence of deep contemplative prayer leads to knowledge of the Divine Reality, which is Love, and consequently to compassion for others: *"There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world."*

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