

The contemplative tradition



The fact that meditation, contemplative prayer, is authentically Christian can also be seen from the fact that in many Christian traditions silent prayer forms the centre of worship. In the Carmelite tradition St Teresa of Avila was very influenced in the first twenty years of her spiritual journey by a popular devotional book of the time called the 'Third Spiritual Alphabet' by the Francisco di Osuna, a Franciscan monk, who recommends praying by repeating a spiritual phrase. With him as a guide she was led from discursive prayer to what she called the 'prayer of quiet' and even the 'prayer of union'. These ways of prayer are characterised by an increasing depth of inner silence and stillness. It is a way of opening the heart to God in prayer.

The 'Jesus Prayer', which became known in the West in the 19th century through the delightful book 'The Way of a Pilgrim' by an anonymous author, was a continuation of the tradition of prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church known as the 'Prayer of the Heart.' Again the emphasis is on repetition of a prayer phrase leading to inner silence and solitude. Both this tradition and the one that John Main rediscovered for us in the writings of John Cassian is based on the teachings of the Desert Fathers, in particular Evagrius Ponticus, who was an important source and inspiration for both.

In 14th century England it is the 'Cloud of Unknowing', again by an anonymous author, that recommends the same way of prayer. He emphasizes 'piercing the heart of God with a flaming dart of love'. To do that we need to focus all our love and attention on one word. He suggest we take a word of one syllable like "God" or "Love", which expresses the intention of our heart. The 'Centering Prayer' movement of Thomas Keating takes their inspiration from this book. The author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' expresses what is behind all the teaching of the Christian mystical Tradition, namely we need to let go of thoughts by focusing on our word: "Fix it in your mind so that it will remain there come what may." Or as John Main always said: 'Just say your word.'

All the spiritual guides mentioned are part of what is known as the mystical tradition of the 'via negativa', in which God is unknowable and inexpressible to our limited rational powers. Therefore we need to let go of thought, of all thoughts, whether about worldly or spiritual things, to become more open to Him and deeply listen to the 'still small voice'. The emphasis is on Love, on lovingly, faithfully repeating your prayer. The differences in our time between for instance, the Carmelite Tradition, 'Centering Prayer' and 'The World Community for Christian Meditation' are much less than the correspondences between our respective ways of prayer. We may take our inspirations from different sources, but we are all engaged in reconnecting people on the spiritual path with an authentic way of prayer that leads to silence and awareness of the Presence of God in our heart.

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