



Contemplative Prayer

Thomas Merton

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Thomas Merton's classic study of monastic prayer and contemplation brings a tradition of spirituality alive for the present day. But, as A. M. Allchin points out in his Introduction to this new edition, *Contemplative Prayer* also shows us the present day in a new perspective, because we see it in the light of a long and living tradition. Merton stresses that in meditation we should not look for a 'method' or 'system' but cultivate an 'attitude' or 'outlook': faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, trust, joy. God is found in the desert of surrender, in giving up any expectation of a particular message and 'waiting on the Word of God in silence'. Merton insists on the humility of faith, which he argues 'will do far more to launch us into the full current of historical reality than the pompous rationalisations of politicians who think they are somehow the directors and manipulators of history'.

Contemplative Prayer Details

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From Reader Review Contemplative Prayer for online ebook

Benjamin Vineyard says

Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton (a Book Review)

Merton provided words for what I was experiencing and what I wanted to nurture in the life of prayer. More than devotional stick-to-it-ive-ness, I felt and wanted to continue to feel drawn to simply be with God.

But, while my heart desired more than accountability or discipline, I've also known by experience that, for me, the sense of being aware of God's presence often occurs within the frame of my disciplined life. When I am making space, clearing time, attentiveness to the God who is always present occurs more freely. The opposite happens when I slip out of disciplined rhythms or whimsically wish to feel a bit more connected. Of course, God works in these seasons too; he is present there also.

The most impactful thing I read in the book was about meditation. In my circles, where theology and life with God is much more cognitive than affective, "meditation" is an experience similar to tracing through cross references, learning more and more, "chewing on" a question the texts brings up. The end goal is often to come to a mastery of the text, to know exactly what it means, though I doubt many would say it so proudly if you asked them if that's what they were hoping for.

What Merton wrote is that meditation is dwelling with God in the text. While it does involve a cognitive pursuit of questions, it comes to a point not of mastery, not of doctrine by itself, but of presence. And this presence is what leads to "contemplation."

"Contemplation" has also lost some of its meaning in my circles. For my circles, it's described as a deeper mode of meditation. Where meditation might be tracing through cross references and study notes, mulling over a question, "contemplation" is lifting your eyes to the sky and daydreaming through a thought. It is a pause, but it is not restful -- it is still seeking to make sense of something; it is looking for where to place it within the systematic shelving system of personal theology.

Merton, then, frees these concepts (meditation and contemplation) from being only about an academic-theological pursuit and lets them return to lived-theological experience, where the goal is not to master the text but to be mastered, to become present to God, the One who is waiting for your attention.

It's at this moment that silence replaces Scripture, just for this moment (you'll return to Scripture again later). And in this silence, there you are, you and God. There are no answers, no questions, no images - just restful peace. If you didn't have a watch or light from the sun to tell time by, you might just slip into eternal time, right then and there.

This leads to the second best part of Merton's book: how to nurture the above, how it is made possible. Here, he writes frequently from John of the Cross and traces through a few others who are similar. It's a simple trace through the history of Christian thought as told by those often labeled "the mystics." Now, that word throws many off course: mystics. People think a mystic is someone who threw their Bible out the window and now waltz's through life in their own little imagined world, balancing a line somewhere between deep theological thought and schizophrenic experience. No, this isn't the case. So, since the word, "mystic" can be unhelpful, I'll use the phrase, "Aware and Wise Ones."

So then, these Aware and Wise Ones have Merton telling their short stories, writing his favorite gleanings from their past. And now Merton shares that with us in these pages. I like this because these Aware Ones speak to me -- their lives, their inclinations, their pursuit for God's Own Self, or more, to awaken to God Who Is Present in Jesus, is something I am drawn toward. It is something I want my theological meditations to lead me toward.

Cate says

Can't go wrong with Merton. The foreword by Thich Nhat Hahn just adds to the spiritual sweetness.

Jessica says

This book was written for an audience that does not include me, so the fact that it did not speak to me is not surprising. Nonetheless, I found much to think about in the discussion of what contemplative living and meditation is, and even more specifically, what it isn't. The last few chapters of the book discuss the pitfalls of assuming certain superficial adjustments to beliefs and lifestyles constitutes entering the contemplative or religious life, when in fact what is entered is a life of emptiness built on ego or self-definition. Here Merton is able to describe much better than I ever have some of the problems I have had with the religious life encouraged upon me by well meaning people, and I am grateful to now have the wording to think about some of the sources of my resistance.

Monte Rice says

“What is written about prayer in these pages is written primarily for monks. However . . . a practical non-academic study of monastic prayer should be of interest to all Christians, since every Christian is bound to be in some sense a man of prayer. (13)

The following is from the concluding chapter (pp 114, 116, 117):

“When religion becomes a mere artificial façade to justify a social or economic system—
When religion hands over its rites and language completely to the political propagandist,
And when prayer becomes the vehicle for a purely secular ideological programme,
Then religion does tend to become an opiate.”

“The cure for this corruption is to restore the purity of faith and the genuineness of Christian love: and this means a restoration of the contemplative orientation of prayer.”

“The most important need in the Christian world today is this inner truth nourished by this Spirit of contemplation:

The praise and love of God,
The longing for the coming of Christ,
The thirst for the manifestation of God's glory,
His truth,
His justice,
His kingdom in the world.”

booklady says

Every time I read this book I glean new information from it and am less intimidated by it. five or so more readings and I might even say I actually 'get' most of it. As I'm also reading other things by/about Merton right now, it's all of a piece, with plenty of overlapping coverage.

I am so glad that I just read Pope Benedict's book, *The Fathers*. It is giving confidence and a general familiarity with these great men and their writings as Thomas Merton hurries through centuries of monastic contemplative life. It's easy to see how some would find this book difficult, foreign or of absolutely no use. Merton assumes a high level of expertise in his reader. His writing reminds me of university lectures where I used to kick myself for not having done all the requisite homework beforehand. Would that I had read **all** the authors he cites *in the original* myself! How much better I might appreciate his meaning and benefit from this book... As it is, I know I am deriving more from this reading than from my previous encounters with it.

And yet, reading aside, how many today even have much experience with the terminology, the rituals and practices Merton describes? For example in the chapter I just finished, he writes about the debate between meditation and liturgy. This assumes the reader has attended a formal liturgical service, which given the current state of entertainment-style-worship and 'popcorn churches' is something which cannot be taken for granted anymore.

Jim Gallen says

“Contemplative Prayer” is Thomas Merton’s guide to its subject. Laced with numerous quotations from saints and others who have addressed the topic it is thought provoking and profound. Although clearly written for monks, it is of benefit to the laity and others outside the monastery.

I listened to the audio CD version. I think that this work requires reflection and the ability to review what has been read to really appreciate its meaning. I feel that I have a better appreciation of the Dark Night of the Soul than I had before listening to this, but I recommend a written version and time for anyone desiring to derive the maximum benefit from this book.

Benjamin Stahl says

Meditations by a now-deceased monk, explaining the merits of silent, contemplative prayer. Often one neglects prayer as they feel they just recite a learned string of words without attaching any thoughtful meaning. That's not to say recited prayer is a bad thing. I often decline to consciously speak - mentally or verbally - off the cuff in prayer because I find I ramble and struggle to get to the core of what I desire: to give thanks to God in private communion. The Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary and even the Apostle's Creed are always good to focus on. But certainly, contemplative prayer should not be ruled out as a lazy, effortless replacement for new age weirdos who can't afford the time for God. It is just another, subjectively less

riddled way of surrendering one's self to the universal glory Our Lord.

Brian Tucker says

Reading Merton is good for the soul.

Nathan says

From the introduction, Merton states that the intended audience are those who have made lifestyle/vocational decisions towards a more "extreme" spirituality. He also states that there are lessons to be learned within these pages for even the the religious layman (a position I identify with & appreciate).

"Prayer of the heart" is the topic of a large majority of this book. Merton guides the reader through the process of entering into this state of being. He then speaks to authenticity tests that help those on the journey to gauge motives & practices. The book closes with a particularly poignant admonition around religion for religion's sake.

Although the reading is heady - not crafted for quick, easy consumption - I found the volume a perfect length for conceptual understanding.

Michael Card says

One of the most profoundly insightful books I've had the good fortune of reading in a long time. Highly recommended if your prayer life is in a slump, or if you're interested in learning more about the little mind games we play with ourselves in our attempts to lead a devout Christian life.

Tomáš Sixta says

Just awesome. One of the best books about prayer I have ever read.

Ben Fredrick says

This is not a quick read, not because it is hard to read because of its style, but because there is so much that needs to be absorbed in nearly every sentence. Merton needs to lead us first along that path that goes inward, to our inner being as spiritual creatures derived from God. And in our day and time, that simply takes some doing. But he doesn't insist that we go deep and stay there, as if we could simply say a magical word like "Om" all day and night and live full human Christian lives. On the contrary, living full Christian lives requires allowing the interior to flow to the exterior, and the interior must be prepared to receive at all moments God's grace. All of this takes leading and guidance and Merton's book is written to help those who would seek the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness. As Merton concludes, "Without contemplation and

interior prayer the Church cannot fulfill her mission to transform and save mankind. Without contemplation, she will be reduced to being the servant of cynical and worldly powers, no matter how hard her faithful may protest that they are fighting for the Kingdom of God."

Best to put aside our notions of what "contemplative" and "interior" prayer means and let Merton fill us in.

Jsavett1 says

If you've never read Merton, this is NOT a good place to start. If you want to know about HIM, his life choices, and general philosophy, Seven Story Mountain might be a better choice.

But I read this book specifically to learn about his views on Christian mystical meditation and I loved it. He synthesizes sources from the most renowned Catholic mystic thinkers and does so brilliantly.

A word---I read almost everything Merton says when it comes to Christ metaphorically. So I think it's important to say that this book isn't only for Christian seekers. As a Jew, a secularist, and an naturalist, I found Merton's discussion of meditation inspiring and brilliant. When you consider the way that Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and secular contemplatives all say the same things, almost verbatim! it warms the heart and makes me wonder why we ever fight wars over water and land when, if you go deep enough, we're all sustained by the same well.

John says

When I underline half the book I know I've found a treasure. Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton is no exception. Merton's analysis, synthesis, and developmental ideas set out in this little volume of a book is unbelievably thoughtful, scholarly, and experiential. To be fair, I have meant to read Merton for the past ten years and never got around to it before this treat of a book. Yes it is short, but it is rich. His dialogue with Saints and Clergy that came before him, his prophetic warning of nationalistic propaganda mixing with a liturgy is fascinating. How often we forget to silence and reverent the Creator, The Divine, Yahweh, Our Parent... we must let God's presence... be. Merton has helped me tremendously in my loudmouth journey, he reminds me to shut up... to let go of myself and to sit for the Creator's sake ... with open mind and heart.

Phil says

This is the last of Merton's books and one which focuses on the monastic practice of contemplative prayer. This would seem to be an odd choice of reading for a 50-something father of two, but I do agree with Merton that "Though few have the desire of solitude or the vocation to monastic life, all Christians ought, theoretically, at least, to have enough interest in prayer to be able to read and make use of what is here said for monks, adapting it to the circumstances of their own vocation." This is book is about prayer and that is a good thing.

Merton carefully examines prayer, especially in the monastery, and gives a sensitive and learned commentary on it. I found the discussion helpful, although I must admit that he lost me with the 'mystical night' discussion. That is not uncommon and probably is more about me than Merton.

This is well worth reading. And I don't necessarily love a lot of books on prayer. It isn't as abstract as much as other books are, even the really deeply contemplative sections. That has a lot to do with the kind of writer Merton was, mind you.
