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The Way of Contemplation: Encountering God Today

Willgas Jager

Translated by M.J. O'Connell

Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987.

144pp.

Most of us have asked the question, or have been asked by others, "How can I deepen my experience of God." Some may have felt that the popularity of oriental approaches to meditation and mysticism exposed an element of spirituality neglected in the Christian tradition. The author of this gently suasive book is well qualified to respond to such a deficit: he is a German Benedictine monk who has studied Zen in Japan.

He provides not only explicit instructions on how to contemplate—meaning non-discursive and non-ideational meditation, but also describes comprehensively the gradations of experiences that may arise from faithful contemplative practice. This description of the mystical path is fully contextualised in the classical texts of the medieval and post-Reformation Spanish Mystics drawing particularly on the great Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart.

The author starts by tracing the word "contemplation" to a Latin word meaning "gazing". In chapter one he describes correct breathing and posture for contemplation and the use of a repeated word or mantra. We are reminded here that indeed the body is not only the vehicle for the awareness of God, but indeed the very birth and dwelling place of the divine presence. Breathing in particular is the moment by moment connector of spirit and body. By attending to our exhaling with attendant letting go of the abdominal muscles we may also release into God. Posture is considered important—the main element being that the spine should be upright and as actively supporting of our breathing as is comfortable for the individual person.

To further aid recollection of the Divine, Jager advocates using a "word" with long vowels and soft consonants. Any word chosen for mental repetition should incorporate the pure long vowel sounds of primal wonder such as "ooo" or "ah" as in "Abba" or "Maranatha". The story is told of the Franciscan brother Masseo who when he was praying would express his joy in a soft constant cooing like a gentle dove: "Ooo-Ooo". What is hard for moderns to appreciate, whether religious or not, is that it is the sound and inner vibrational quality of the chosen word or phrase that takes precedence over its meaning. The great value of contemplation as a way into the Godhead is that it brings us into balance by limiting our overactive intellectual and even imaginative functions so that we are called into simple being. The second chapter, in fact, is devoted to cultivating body awareness as a way to experiencing one's own being as the dwelling place of God. This, the author suggests, is the essence of St. Theresa of Avila's Prayer of Quiet.

What is experienced at our centre as naked being is described in the book by such adjectives as limitless space, quiet, peace, freedom and life.

Chapter three moves on to describing the effects of regular meditative or contemplative practice upon our awareness of God. A dual aspect is highlighted: (1) the experience of God as ultimate reality, along with (2) sorrow with the heightened awareness of our great habitual limitedness. Paradoxically it is this "cloud of unknowing" that connects us as human souls to the infiniteness of God.

A further point developed in chapter three is that the ego of modern individuality is simultaneously brought into awareness and yet transcended, as is the duality of subject and object. A sense of timelessness may ensue, resulting in an abiding sense of unity subsisting and undergirding the multiplicity of consciousness that is habitual in the everyday world of action and relationship. Creation becomes experienced as God.

The topic of chapter four is "Personalising the Experience". Jager cautions that contemplation must only be the spawning ground of the process. Along with many Western and Eastern spiritual teachers, Jager emphasises that the residue which remains in our daily lives is more important than particular beatific experiences enjoyed in contemplation. In short these experiences must be personalised. This involves accepting that, while we have roles and possessions, ultimately everything is from God including the suffering and "the dark side of God". Everything comes eventually to taste of God.

Chapter five describes how this process of personalising is able to effect a structural transformation to the personality. Jager identifies these shifts: (1) a reorganisation of values; (2) a profounder understanding of sin; (3) a natural and broader sense of social responsibility; (4) the changed meaning of personal petitionary prayer to one of the simple recollection of Presence; (5) a direct experience of the truth replaces assent to doctrinal dogmas and adherence to conventional ethics.

In the last two chapters Jager details obstacles along the mystical path. The very liveliness that emanates from contemplative practice can bring tensions within a conventionally religious community. Compassionate judgement is required not to stereotype other religious people, especially those who do not so readily see the conspicuous apparatus of religious life as instrumental and, therefore, subordinate to the direct encounter between the enlivened soul and the Divine. Secondly the ego undergoes an assault and demotion. Feelings hitherto repressed rush into awareness and dominate it. The ego is apt to identify with these feelings resulting in an oppressive distortion of reality. From this breakdown there slowly and perhaps painfully emerges detachment from the feelings, without repressing them. The evolved contemplative, however, possesses not only the vibrancy of energy newly released from repression, but the objectivity that comes from no longer treating feelings as the definition of truth. Jager concludes the book with a powerful *tour de force* presenting mysticism as the ecumenical ground of the religions. Mystical experience is seen as the stable viewpoint

from which to contextualise the specific perspectives of particular religious practices. Mystical experience may well be the loom on which to weave a compassionate and integrated cloth of shared religious generosity.

There are some limitations to the book. The essence of contemplative practice is even simpler than the clear presentations in chapter one. Consulting the writings of Benedictines John Main and Lawrence Freeman of the Montreal Priory will provide balance. Both approaches, however, tend to put more emphasis on concentration than is necessary, and so may needlessly deter people who seek the kind of spiritual depth that meditation may provide. It is the disposition, not the performance of the person in contemplation that makes the difference.

The Way to Contemplation: Encountering God Today has the power quietly to move the reader. It will remain a highly valued reference for those who wish refreshment from the overemphasis in the Christian tradition upon thought and neglect of the body as an instrument for spiritual growth. In so doing the work brings into focus the otherwise remote allusions of pre-modern mystical theology. Its lucid description of contemplative practices provides access to personal spiritual nourishment required for a lifetime's commitment to the healing of a broken world. If "My body that is broken for you" can be allowed to refer also to global community, then contemplation may truly be the healing birth of God both at the micro and macro interstices of Being.

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Preach the Word: Expository Preaching From the Book of Ephesians

John R. Mumaw

Scottdale, PA and Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1987
286 pp.

Mumaw, a Mennonite pastor and educator, now retired, was president at Eastern Mennonite Seminary for a time; he taught homiletics there for 38 years. Throughout his ministry in six congregations and as seminary professor he has consistently used the expository method. We assume, then, that this book is a summation of some 50 years' experience with expository preaching.

The concept of the book is praiseworthy, namely, to present and discuss the aspects of expository preaching and at the same time to develop (in outline) a course of sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians.

"Expository" preaching is here defined in the common way as sermons whose "theme and major divisions are drawn from the content of the text";