Sources and Issues in Contemporary Christian Contemplative Prayer: Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer and John Main’s Christian Meditation

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College
and the Graduate Centre for Theological Studies of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
awarded by the University of St. Michael’s College

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Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
University of St. Michael’s College
2018

Abstract

This dissertation comprehensively explores the sources of two contemporary Christian contemplative prayer forms: Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer and John Main’s Christian Meditation. Keating and Main claim The Cloud of Unknowing and The Conferences of John Cassian as the sources for Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation respectively, and that their contemporary prayer exercises renewed the lost art of Christian contemplative prayer. Through a comparative analysis, I examine the writings of Keating and Main in relation to various possible sources. The analysis shows parallels and possible influences of both traditional Christian contemplation and Eastern meditation on these popular Christian contemplative prayer practices—specifically Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and Hindu mantra meditation.

The comparative study reveals certain differences between the present-day contemplative prayer forms and their Christian sources: their availability to anyone and the absence of prerequisites for practice, the gentle handling of distracting thoughts, the insignificance of the meaning of a prayer-word (or mantra), the minimization of affection and emotional attitude, and the inclusion of novel elements. In comparing these contemporary Christian contemplative prayer forms with practices of Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and Hindu mantra meditation, the analysis shows significant
methodological and theoretical connections and possible influences between these Eastern traditions and Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation: the overall attitude of gentleness and effortlessness, the acceptance of invasive thoughts as necessary elements, the downplaying of affection and emotion, the importance of the sound and rhythm, and the insignificance of the meaning of a prayer-word (or mantra), and the notion of consciousness. Consequently, I argue that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation should be regarded not merely as renewed traditional contemplative Christian prayer forms, but as creative hybrids of Christian contemplation and Eastern meditation.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have come to light without the assistance and support of so many people, to whom I owe so much. Although I appreciate them all, it is possible to mention only a few names here.

I must give special thanks to Prof. Michael Stoeber (Regis College in the University of Toronto), who has been my thesis supervisor as well as the chairperson of my supervisory committee throughout my doctoral studies at Toronto School of Theology in the University of Toronto. Without his direction, guidance, and patience, this dissertation would have been absolutely impossible. The fundamental idea of the dissertation arose in our conversations in his office. He provided a great deal of encouragement and inspiration for the research and throughout my writing of the dissertation. I deeply appreciate his support and warm-hearted concern for my family.

I am very much grateful to my thesis supervisory committee members, Prof. JohnDadosky (Regis College in the University of Toronto) and Prof. Thomas Reynolds (Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto), TST examiner, Prof. Joseph Schner (Regis College in the University of Toronto), and the external examiner, Prof. Christopher Key Chapple (Loyola Marymount University). They carefully read my thesis and gave me invaluable advice. I thank them for their knowledge, guidance, and helpful comments. I would also like to say thank you to Prof. Dana Sawyer, who inspired me to pursue my PhD program by showing the academic study of religion and spirituality could be indeed a spiritual practice, and Prof. Marvin Ellison, who recognized my academic potential and encouraged me to pursue a doctoral program. If I had not met them both in Bangor Theological Seminary, I would not have had the opportunity to write this dissertation.
I must thank my spiritual mentor, Rev. Hyunju Lee, who has contributed greatly to my spiritual formation and has shown how to use all the gifts and power to serve others. I would like to acknowledge all my friends and colleagues. I consider myself blessed indeed to have Dr. Hyun Kee Na, who introduced me to Toronto School of Theology and provided me with good support and friendship and even a place to stay in Toronto. I must mention Dr. ShinKyu Lee for his friendship and warm encouragement. I would like to extend my appreciation to the following people, Rev. Hankook Ryu, Rev. Eunjung Shin, Rev. Kyunghee Kim, Junkyong Kim, Rev. Woong Yeom, Rev. Yun Jung Kim, Rev. Sung Il Moon, Heejung Cho, Dr. Jon Brett, Rosanne Graef, Jessica Moore, and Roxanne French. For financial and spiritual support, I thank Regis College, my graduate school, in Toronto University and the members of St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Newport, Rhode Island, Good Tree Church in Toronto and United Methodist Church of Good Fellowship in Naples, Maine.

Finally, I acknowledge the sacrificial love of my wife, Eunkyong Kwon and my children, Aeyoung and Hyunsung, who have so patiently endured the many years of the negative side-effects of graduate student life. Without their patience, support, and encouragement, this dissertation would not be. I would like to thank and give honor to my late loving parents, Yongsoon Lee and Malrye Kim, my brothers and sister, Jaesin, Jaekeun, and Seunghee Lee, and my sisters-in-law, Meoungsoon Nam and Jeesuk Jun, who have given me great and unconditional love and motivation through their continued prayers and support. Words cannot express my appreciation. There are countless others I have not included here, but they all have a place in my heart.
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Introduction

1. Context and Setting

This thesis explores parallels and possible influences of both Christian contemplation and Eastern meditation on the Centering Prayer of Thomas Keating and the Christian Meditation of John Main. To begin, I describe the background of today’s contemplative prayer movement and the significant issues associated with these two contemplative prayer forms. Generally speaking, contemplative prayer is a wordless and imageless prayer that is thought to lead one to an elevated state or condition beyond thoughts, images, emotions, and senses.¹ Significant contemporary proponents of contemplative prayer include Thomas Merton, Anthony de Mello, Evelyn Underhill, William Johnston, Bede Griffiths, Abhishiktananda, and Richard Rohr. Their contributions to reinvigorating this exercise of contemplation in our time are obvious and significant.

However, this thesis focuses on Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation because these two forms are the most accessible and widely practiced today in North America and provide concrete how-to approaches for the practitioners. It is important that one keeps in mind that the term meditation in the case of Main’s Christian Meditation, in its meaning, is closer to the Eastern form of meditation than to traditional Christian meditation. Christian Meditation is a method of contemplative prayer rather than discursive meditative prayer.²

¹ A New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality defines contemplative prayer as “the laying aside of thoughts. It is the opening of mind and heart—our whole being—to God, the ultimate reality, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions” (Michael Downey, ed., A New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993], 138-139).

² This becomes apparent when John Main says, “I am using the term meditation…synonymously with such terms as contemplation, contemplative prayer…” (John Main, Word into Silence [New York: Paulist Press, 1981], 1). The aim of Christian Meditation is described as “the realization of our whole being” by transcending
Currently, Centering Prayer’s worldwide organization, named Contemplative Outreach, has over 120 official chapters in 39 countries, supports over 800 prayer groups, and teaches Centering Prayer to more than 15,000 new people every year.\(^3\) Christian Meditation is supported by the World Community for Christian Meditation that has more than 3000 groups in over 120 countries around the world.\(^4\) Both organizations actively promote their version of contemplative prayer and provide helpful teachings and resources to their community members.

Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation were created in response to Eastern meditation disciplines introduced to the West beginning in the early twentieth century. In 1960’s and 1970’s, many Christians turned to Eastern spirituality because there were no easily accessible contemplative prayer forms in Christianity which met people’s spiritual hunger. In this circumstance, Keating and Main were significant figures in the development of simple, how-to, contemplative prayer methods, now called “Centering Prayer” and “Christian Meditation” respectively. These spiritual practices are frequently referred to as the “contemplative prayer movement,” or “centering prayer movement.”\(^5\)

There are volumes of articles and books on each contemplative prayer exercise written by Keating and Main, and there are even more materials written by other scholars and practitioners. Although they are not neatly segmented and sometimes deal with more than one type, most of the writings can be generally categorized as one of three types: (i)

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\(^3\) http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/about-us (accessed March 5, 2018).

\(^4\) https://www.wccm.org/content/meditation-groups (accessed March 5, 2018).

\(^5\) Note that “centering prayer” with a small “c” refers to contemporary contemplative prayer, in general, while Centering Prayer refers to a specific prayer method developed by Thomas Keating.
introductory works that simply speak about Keating and Main as the creators of the practice of contemplative prayer and how to do it; (ii) pastoral works which illustrate how the practice works to bring transformation into the life of the practitioner and the significance of contemplative prayer forms in our time; (iii) theological/historical works which explain how these two present-day contemplative prayer forms correspond to, and reinvigorate, the Christian contemplative tradition and history.

Keating, Main, and most authors of the last category of writings, such as Ernest E. Larkin, Cynthia Bourgeault, Laurence Freeman, and Paul Harris, identify Christian sources as the roots of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. They claim that these contemplative prayer exercises were based on the Christian contemplative tradition and simply renewed the lost art of Christian contemplative prayer for contemporary people. They hardly mention correspondences and possible influences of the theories and practices of Eastern contemplative spiritualities on Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation except for some minor elements, such as body posture, proper breathing, and group meditation. For example, Ernest E. Larkin says, “The architects of these new prayer forms learned from the East, but they based their teaching on the ancient, Western mystical tradition. The Trappists at Spencer, Massachusetts developed Centering Prayer largely from The Cloud of Unknowing. John Main discovered Christian Meditation in John Cassian.”

Outlining Centering Prayer history, Cynthia Bourgeault claims that Thomas Keating and other monks “borrowed some

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of the external trappings from Eastern meditational methods: the convention of group
meditation itself…and an official beginning and ending time, signaled by a prayer or a bell.”
She limits the influence of Eastern meditation traditions to “external trappings.”

This understanding is also prevalent in Christian spirituality books in general. Here
are a few examples. A good example is found in Wayne Teasdale’s comments: “Eastern
meditation has inspired Christian forms of contemplation like Thomas Keating’s Centering
Prayer and the Christian Meditation founded by John Main, an English-Irish Benedictine
monk, though both remain rooted in the Christian mystical tradition”

Concerning Centering Prayer, in The Practice of Prayer, Margaret Guenther says: “The popularity of transcendental
meditation and other forms of eastern meditation in the 1970s and 1980s led eventually to a
new awareness of similar resources in our own tradition…. New translations of The Cloud of
Unknowing, a class text on contemplative prayer written by an unknown author in the
fourteenth century, are enjoying renewed popularity…. The Cistercian writers Basil
Pennington and Thomas Keating have made its teachings current and accessible in their
books and workshops.”

The last example is from The Blackwell Companion to Christian
Spirituality: “Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington…have been concerned with presenting
classic Christian contemplative practices in a way that is compelling to a modern audience…. Through their writings on the practice of…centering prayer, Keating and Pennington have

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8 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 57-58.

9 Wayne Teasdale, Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions
(Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 32.

introduced new generations to ancient practices and have revived interested in the Christian contemplative tradition."

The creators of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, Keating and Main, trace the roots of their contemplative practices back to the teachings of the early Christian contemplative tradition. For Keating, “Centering Prayer is a renewal of the traditional prayer of the Church leading to contemplation. It is an attempt to present it in an up-to-date format and to put a certain order and method into it.” Keating, comparing Centering Prayer to “a blend of the finest herb teas” claims that it draws elements from various traditions such as the Jesus Prayer, *lectio divina*, and John of the Cross. Yet, he says, “A primary source is *The Cloud of Unknowing*.” Along with two other Trappist monks, Basil Pennington and William A. Meninger—all of whom were at St. Joseph’s monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts in the 1970s and co-developed Centering Prayer—he claims that they used *The Cloud of Unknowing* (referred to throughout this thesis as “*The Cloud*”) as their primary source for the renewed form of contemplative prayer. Second, Main also asserts that his contemplative prayer method has a long tradition in Church history, and so Christian Meditation is a modern Christian form of contemplative prayer. He attributes the source of

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13 Thomas Keating, “A Traditional Blend: The Contemplative Sources of Centering Prayer,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 48, no. 2 (2005), 145. He also says, “[Centering Prayer] is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g., *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form” (Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* [New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997], 139). Here, Keating identifies only *The Cloud of Unknowing* as a significant example of Christian contemplative traditions.
his method to the teachings on prayer of John Cassian in *The Conferences.* Although they admit they were exposed to Eastern meditative practices, both Keating and Main refer exclusively to only Christian spiritual literature as the primary sources for the theories and practices of their contemplative prayer forms.

Scholars and writers do not question Keating and Main about these sources of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. They presume that these two prayer practices are well-formulated contemplative prayer methods rooted in the Christian tradition. There have been no extensive and systematic inquires about the parallels and influences of Eastern meditative disciplines on the theories and practices of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. Although the present-day contemplative prayer movement has become a noticeable and unprecedented phenomenon, there is no critical study concerning to what extent the teachings of Eastern meditation parallel and might have influenced Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation.

2. Thesis Statement

This thesis will explore correspondences between Eastern meditative disciplines and Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer and John Main’s Christian Meditation of John Main, as well as the implications of these connections for contemporary interreligious dialogue. It will argue that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are not merely renewed traditional contemplative prayer practices, but creative hybrids of Christian contemplation and Eastern meditation. The primary concern of this thesis is to explore the major theoretical and methodological sources of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. The aim of the thesis

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is to show (i) that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation go beyond the teachings of their primary Christian sources, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Conferences* of John Cassian respectively; (ii) that the two prayer forms involve theories and practices that parallel those of the Eastern meditative disciplines of Transcendental Meditation, Zen Buddhism, and Hindu mantra repetition meditation; and (iii) that interreligious encounters have played a significant role in renewing today’s Christian contemplative prayer, making it accessible for its modern practitioners.

### 3. Methodology and Procedure

The goal of this thesis is to show that Keating’s Centering Prayer and Main’s Christian Meditation is not simply a rediscovery of their claimed-primary Christian sources, but a creative incorporation of theories and practices, including some which parallel the Eastern meditative disciplines of Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and Hindu mantra repetition meditation into traditional Christian contemplative prayer. Evidence thus suggests they are creative hybrids of Christian contemplation and Eastern meditation. For this purpose, I will apply methods of textual analysis and comparative study. I will carefully examine the writings of Thomas Keating and John Main, *The Cloud*, and *The Conferences*, in order to clarify and compare the theologies, theories, methods, processes and effects, and the appropriate participants of the contemplative prayer as found in these texts. The comparison will enable us to recognize certain differences in the present-day contemplative prayer forms from their Christian sources. In consideration of these differences, then, we will analyze writings on Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and Hindu mantra repetition
meditation so as to explore how those differences echo with the teachings of Eastern contemplative spiritualities.

My thesis will be divided into four chapters: (i) exposition and systematic analysis of the nature of contemplative prayer in the primary Christian sources of contemporary Christian contemplative prayer; (ii) comparative analysis of similarities and differences between the theories and practices of contemporary contemplative prayer forms with those of their primary Christian sources; (iii) the creative and critical exploration of possible influences of Eastern meditative disciplines on contemporary Christian contemplative prayer; and (iv) conclusion.

Chapter One will explore and analyze the nature of the contemplative prayer forms in the respective primary Christian sources of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation—*The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. We will examine the main features of Christian contemplative prayer in these sources, by clarifying the theologies, theories, methods, processes and effects, and the appropriate participants of contemplative prayer. In this chapter, we will give a general overview of traditional contemplative prayer.

Chapter Two will examine the theories and practices of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, and then compare them with those of the primary Christian sources, found in the previous chapter. Under the same categories—theologies, theories, methods, processes, effects, and the appropriate participants, Centering Prayer will be compared with *The Cloud*; Christian Meditation, with *The Conferences*. This comparison will reveal similarities and differences between present-day contemplative prayer forms and their Christian sources.
In Chapter Three, parallels between Eastern meditative disciplines on the two present-day prayer forms will be discussed, suggesting possible influences. Although there may be other traditions influence Keating and Main, we will limit our study to correspondences between Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Centering Prayer, and Hindu mantra repetition meditation and Christian Meditation. The parallels and possible influences of the Eastern meditative spiritualities will be considered under three categories: initial, theoretical, and methodological. In Conclusion, we will briefly discuss the implications of the study.

4. Significance of the Thesis

This thesis will explore more fully parallels and possible influences of both Christian contemplation and non-Christian meditation on Centering Prayer of Thomas Keating and Christian Meditation of John Main. Although they have become wide-spread Christian contemplative prayer exercises in our time, theologians have not comprehensively explored their sources. In recognition of the significance of this contemplative movement and the need for in depth study of it, this thesis will illustrate and analyze methodologically and theoretically significant correspondences and possible influences between these Eastern traditions and Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation.

Another significant implication is to show that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are a direct consequence of interreligious dialogue, more the dialogue of practice rather than of theology. Most studies on interreligious dialogue tend to focus on the theoretical aspects of it. Within interreligious dialogue, doctrinal or theological issues and questions are given enormous academic attention. However, exploring the possible influences of Eastern meditative disciplines on today’s Christian contemplative prayer forms
will allow us to show how interreligious encounter played a significant role in the renewal process of present-day Christian contemplative prayer and how interreligious encounter actually has already brought a significant impact on the daily practice of contemporary Christian contemplative prayer.

5. Preliminary Definitions

Prior to exploration of traditional and contemporary Christian contemplative prayer forms, it will be helpful to define some important terms.

_Praye r_

As Roy Hammerling says, “Prayer itself is at one and the same time a very simple and remarkably complicated concept.”

It is simple because everyone seems to understand what it means when they hear it. However, when we try to define it, we soon realize that prayer is an enormously complex subject. For example, while there are different forms of prayer—vocal, meditative, and contemplative, there are also different categories of prayer—adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. Concerning how-to, there are different methods of prayers: Ignatian prayer, _lectio divina_, the Jesus Prayer, rosary

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15 Roy Hammerling, ed., _A History of Prayer: The First to the Fifteenth Century_ (Boston: Brill, 2008), 3. This is a good text, if one is interested in historical/theological understanding of prayer.

16 For the different categories of prayers, see Margaret Guenther, _The Practice of Prayer_ (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), 41-60. For traditional understanding for those categories, see The Conference 9 in John Cassian’s _Conferences_ (Boniface Ramsey, trans., _John Cassian: The Conferences_, [New York: Paulist Press, 1997], 323-363). In his famous book, _The Perennial Philosophy_, Aldous Huxley distinguishes “four distinct procedures [of prayer]—petition, intercession, adoration, contemplation.” For him, “Petition is the asking of something for ourselves. Intercession is the asking of something for other people. Adoration is the use of intellect, feeling, will and imagination in making acts of devotion directed towards God in his personal aspect or as incarnated in human form. Contemplation is that condition of alter passivity, in which the soul lays itself open to the divine Ground within and without, the immanent and transcendent Godhead” (Aldous Huxley, _The Perennial Philosophy_ [New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970], 219).
prayer, centering prayer, etc. Because our primary concern is the “practice” of contemplative prayer, we will take a pragmatic look into the meaning of prayer in general, meditation, contemplative prayer, and contemplation.

In a general sense, prayer is communion with God. Here communion includes all different means of communication with God, such as using words and images, reading the scriptures, kneeling/bowling down, staying in the presence of God in silence, and so on. Ann and Barry Ulanov give a beautiful definition for prayer: “Prayer above all else is conversation with God. It is the primary speech of the true self to the true God.” However, I prefer to use the term *communion* to *conversation*, because *communion* implies mutual sharing with and participating in one another, while *conversation* gives us an impression that prayer primarily involves an exchange of words or thoughts. Yet, whether you call it conversation or communion, it is clear that the prayer is not one-directional but two-directional.

When a person is in prayer, the act of prayer presupposes God with whom s/he has a relationship. Entering into prayer requires a person to have faith in God. Prayer is an “act of faith.” As Cunningham and Egan write, “the very act or gesture of prayer ‘says’ that an individual or a community has a conviction…that the person or community recognizes someone with whom they have a deep and meaningful connection who is greater than, and concerned about those who pray.”

17 Lawrence S. Cunningham’s and Keith J. Egan’s definition of prayer is also helpful: “By prayer,…we mean something very general: those acts which symbolize, by words and/or gestures, a person’s relationship with God” (Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996], 66).


Nevertheless, prayer is possible because of the faithfulness and loving presence of God. In the act of prayer, it is not the pray-er, but God who makes prayer exist because God is the Ground of her/his being and God is ever ready to have communion with Her/His creature. In the words of Karl Rahner, “God is the very possibility of address; [S/He Her/Himself] brings our prayer about when we pray.” Rahner reminds us of an important fact in relation to the act of prayer: “A product of [hu]man’s hands does not talk to its creator. God, however, can in [Her/His] all-powerfulness so posit us that we are really something in [Her/His] sight and with relation to him…. This basic relationship between God and the creature, as Christian understand it, must be clear if we are to understand the possibility of [prayer].” In prayer “God [humbly] becomes our You.” Thus, God’s faithfulness and humility precedes a person’s faith in God.

In terms of the possibility of prayer, another important issue is a human desire to pray. Without a desire for God, a desire to pray to/with God does not come to heart. One’s prayer is fueled by one’s longing for God, the desire to move closer to God. About 2800 years ago, a psalmist eloquently expressed this desire: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” It is spiritual thirst, the desperate desire that drives a human heart to seek God. In the words of a contemporary


21 Ibid., 86.

22 Ibid.

23 Concerning desire, Evelyn Underhill’s words are noteworthy: “This longing, this need for God, however dimly and vaguely we feel it, is the seed from which grows the strong, beautiful and fruitful plant of prayer” (Evelyn Underhill, The Spiritual Life: Great Spiritual Truths for Everyday Life [Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 1993], 44-45).

spiritual writer, Simone Weil: “Desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire alone draws God down.”

Soon it becomes obvious that a desire for God itself is prayer. Augustine of Hippo realized it: “It is your heart’s desire that is your prayer; if your desire continues without interruption your prayer continues also.” Usually a person’s desire is occupied by trivial objects and concerns, and dispersed and pulled into numerous directions. A noticeable desire for God is not common in ordinary people’s consciousness. In this context, the words of Evagrius Ponticus make sense: “Happy is the spirit which, praying without distraction, goes on increasing its desire for God.”

How can one’s desire to pray arise from the human heart? How can a creature long to commune with one’s creator? Is this desire for God merely a human product? If the words of Rahner are true: “A product of [hu]man’s hands does not talk to its creator,” we cannot say that this desire for God is a human invention. Rather, as Evelyn Underhill says, it is God who “stoops towards [her/]him, and first inspires then supports and responds to [her/]his seeking.” For the first place, God stirs the human heart to desire for God. A person’s desire to pray is a response to God’s call within her/him. In the words of Kieran Kavanaugh, “The initiator of our relationship with God is God. God spoke to us and invited us to


communion, going out to meet us at a more profound level than that of Creator and creature.”

Therefore, the desire for God is itself a pure gift from God.

As a working definition for this thesis, prayer is “one’s conscious/intentional communion with God.” I added the word “conscious” to limit the scope of prayer for this thesis, because every person has communion with God to a certain degree, whether s/he acknowledges it or not. In this view, a person’s conscious praying reflects her/his relationship with God and her/his response to God’s invitation to that relationship.

**Degrees or Grades of Prayer**

In the Christian spiritual tradition there are different degrees or grades of prayer. Christian prayer is traditionally classified by three levels: vocal, meditative, and contemplative. These correspond to the traditional stages of the mystic journey: purgation, illumination, and contemplation (union). In his book, *Being in Love: The Practice of Christian Prayer*, William Johnston offers a different map of prayer, which has four degrees of prayer: discursive prayer, affective prayer, the prayer of simplicity, and infused contemplation. Because Johnston’s classification of the degrees of prayer will be helpful for our later discussion on the nature of contemporary Christian contemplative prayer forms, I want to look at these four degrees of prayer.

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30 Gordon Mursell, ed., *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 209. It is important to see the degrees of prayer not as hierarchical, but as developmental. It means that as one grows in prayer, one organically moves from vocal prayer to meditative to contemplative prayer. However, the higher stages of prayer does not negate the previous stage of prayer, rather enriches it with new, deeper meanings and tastes.

One’s prayer begins with active meditation, called *discursive prayer*. It involves the “three powers of the soul: the memory, the understanding and the will.”32 One prayerfully remembers scriptures or Christian teachings and tries to understand their deeper meaning, while expressing one’s love and adoration to God. As prayer becomes more loaded with the activity of the will and intellectual efforts decrease, *affective prayer* begins. In this prayer, “one makes aspirations, acts of love of God and of gratitude, and so on.”33 While reasoning and thinking are absent, “aspirations or ejaculations of love or trust” are at work. This second degree of prayer is a “prayer of refined feeling sometimes accompanied by tears or spontaneous outcries to God.”34 It is followed by *the prayer of simplicity*. In this third stage of prayer, there is “only one aspiration,” which consists “in the repetition of one single word or phrase or ejaculation.”35 (In the Teresian Carmelite tradition, this kind of prayer is called “the prayer of recollection.”)36 Johnston regards the Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Church and Francis of Assisi’s phrase “My God and my All” as examples for this prayer. As the repetition of one single word or phrase leads one to occasional periods of wordless silence, it is also called *acquired/active contemplation*. It is called *acquired/active* because it is attained by ordinary human efforts. The final step is *infused/passive contemplation*. (Teresa of Avila calls this prayer “the prayer of quiet.”) This prayer is “characterized by an

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32 Johnston, *Being in Love*, 44.


35 Johnston, *The Still Point*, 29 and also *Being in Love*, 45.

36 Kavanaugh, “How to Pray: From the Life and Teachings of Saint Teresa,” 122-123.
experiential sense of God’s presence.” The contemplative has a sense that God is here and now beyond thoughts and images. One’s awareness is enhanced by conscious contact with the presence of God. It is called infused/passive because it is something given as a pure gift from God, not achieved or attained through human efforts.

*Meditation and Contemplation*

Although it has already suggested through the discussion of the degrees of prayer, it will be beneficial to be reminded of the differences between meditation and contemplation in the Christian tradition. The term meditation becomes confusing because in our daily life it is now used mostly to refer to Eastern meditative practices.

The Christian experience of prayer largely falls into two categories: meditation and contemplation. The former, which includes vocal prayer, refers to active prayer while the latter is passive prayer. Meditation is “reflective prayer which awakens love of God and neighbor and which may prepare one for the gift of contemplation.”

In meditation, one makes use of one’s ordinary faculties such as memory, intellect, imagination, and will. On the contrary, contemplation is “the gifted and transforming experience of the presence of

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38 Anne and Barry Ulanov briefly describe this journey of prayer with contemporary language: “[We] move from verbal prayer, spoken with our lips out loud, to the mental prayer we say in our minds silently. We move from meditations where we methodically examine aspects of the divine mysteries, to prayers of simple union where we lift our hearts spontaneously to God in bursts of affect. Sufficiently tutored and graced, we may move to prayers of quiet, and even deeper union, where our words and feelings fall ever more still, and God’s moving in us becomes ever more dominant” (Anne and Barry Ulanov, “Prayer and Personality: Prayer as Primary Speech” in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], 23-24).

God.” As one enters into the sphere of contemplation, one is not able to exercise one’s natural faculties and remains fully in loving awareness of God. In other words, as Cunningham and Egan explain, “meditation is what [we] can do through graced human effort and contemplation is what only God can do [for us].”

It is worth noting that meditation in the Christian tradition is different from typical Eastern forms of meditation since the former implies discursive reasoning and imagining while the latter aims to transcend all normal faculties. Eastern meditation is closer to Christian contemplation than to Christian meditation. Also, concerning the term meditation the readers are advised to pay special attention to distinguish between Christian meditation with a lower case “m” and Christian Meditation with an upper case “M,” as John Main calls his contemplative prayer form “Christian Meditation.”

While the distinction between meditation and contemplation is helpful and convenient, it is not that straightforward. Theoretically, where meditation ends contemplation begins. Or, where contemplation begins human activities cease. However, as the concept acquired/active contemplation suggests, some early kind of contemplation is experienced to some degree as fruit of human efforts. Thomas Merton acknowledged this obscurity: “Strictly speaking, contemplation is an immediate and in some sense passive intuition of the inmost reality, of our spiritual self and of God present within us. But there is also an active and mediate form of contemplation in which this perception is attained in some measure by our own efforts, though with the mysterious and invisible help of grace.”

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
of the distinction between meditation and contemplation if there is a grey area? Despite its ambiguity, this distinction is still useful because it shows that the more advanced one’s prayer is, the more one’s own efforts diminish and the more “God takes possession of the soul’s faculties and moves them directly according to [Her/]His will.”

In other words, in the movement of one’s prayer from meditation to contemplation, activity and labor decrease and yet receptivity and passivity increase.

*Contemplative Prayer*

What, then, is contemplative prayer? How is it different from contemplation? Is contemplative prayer the prayer of contemplation, the fourth degree of prayer in Johnston’s scale, or something, equivalent to the prayer of simplicity, which aims to help a person move toward contemplation? Or, both? Recognizing this possible obscurity, Ernest E Larkin distinguishes contemplation and contemplative prayer as follows: “The waiting is the contemplative prayer, the touch or inbreaking of God is contemplation. There is a distinction between these two: the contemplative prayer is the means, the contemplation the goal, and the contemplation may be an ordinary grace of peaceful presence to God or infused contemplation. The prayer is positioning oneself to welcome the spirit, the contemplation is the spirit praying within.”

According to this distinction, while contemplative prayer is the means, contemplation is the end. The former is the practice; the latter is the state. In other

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words, through contemplative prayer, one is open to, and prepared for, the felt presence of God in contemplation.

In this thesis, while recognizing the truth that the practice and the state, are not separable, I accept Larkin’s heuristic distinction. Therefore, contemplative prayer is a spiritual practice the purpose of which is to help its practitioners go beyond discursive prayer in order to have an experiential sense of the presence of God without the mediation of the words and images.
Chapter One
The Nature of Contemplative Prayer in the Primary Christian Sources of Contemporary Christian Contemplative Prayer

This chapter explores and analyzes the respective primary Christian sources of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation—The Cloud and The Conferences. It examines the main features of Christian contemplative prayer in these sources, by clarifying the theologies, theories, methods, processes and effects, and the appropriate participants of contemplative prayer. Although chronologically The Conferences was written almost a millennium earlier than The Cloud, we will look into the latter first, because it is a primary text for Centering Prayer, which is better known than Christian Meditation.

1. Contemplative Prayer in The Cloud

1. 1. Historical Background

There is very little known about the life of the anonymous author of The Cloud. What is thought to be known about him has come primarily through reading and analyzing his texts. Studying his six or seven treatises and two translations from Latin into Middle English, scholars generally agree that he was a fourteenth century writer, who was a “priest, well trained in theology, and a master of the contemplative life.”¹ The Cloud’s author was a contemporary of another Late Medieval England mystic, Walter Hilton (d. 1396), and like Hilton was also from the northeast Midlands. Because the anonymous author’s primary focus is on contemplative prayer and the form of life in advanced spiritual stages, he is

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believed by some scholars to have led a solitary life as a hermit, though this is open to debate. Although we do not know the identity of the author, it has been suggested that he was a Carthusian priest.\(^2\)

The date of *The Cloud* is placed between 1349 and 1396 because of the apparent possible influences of the works of Richard Rolle (d. 1349) on *The Cloud* and “some close connection” between *The Cloud* and the works of Hilton.\(^3\) The text was written as an instruction on what the author calls “contemplative work” to a young man of twenty-four.\(^4\) The text is “full of individual experience,” as the author draws from “his own mystical experience” to provide practical and theoretical spiritual advice on contemplative work.\(^5\) The author of *The Cloud* wrote another treatise on the same theme, *The Privy Counseling*, which is his final work and is addressed to the same student as *The Cloud*. This work shows the author’s maturity and profundity of his teachings on contemplation. We will also draw on this work in our investigation.

1. 2. Theories and Theologies: Affective Apophaticism and the Clouds of Forgetting and Unknowing

The mystical theology of *The Cloud* was greatly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a fourth century theologian. The author insists on “the absolute

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incomprehensibility of God,” because God transcends all human understanding and apprehension.  

6 Like Dionysius, *The Cloud* asserts that natural human faculties fall short of comprehending the nature of God. According to the author, all knowledge of God, no matter how wonderful and profound it is, becomes a hindrance in the contemplative’s approach to God. One must let go all one’s conceptual ideas and earthly emotional associations of God, so as to plunge into the darkness of unknowing. *The Cloud* urges the contemplative to annihilate the “God of positive attributes to strive toward the unknown ‘naked being of God.’”  

7 This is why the teaching of *The Cloud* is referred to as “apophatic mysticism.”  

*The Cloud* adds a distinctive characteristic, the supremacy of love, to Dionysius’ apophatic mysticism.  

8 For *The Cloud*, the negation of all thought is just one aspect of the contemplative practice. To become free of all the intellectual concepts and categories attributed to God does not necessarily lead one to a direct experience of God. In Hodgson’s words, “The exercise of contemplative prayer taught by the English author involves more than the negative process of freeing oneself from all images and all discursive thought stressed by Dionysius. It is a positive reaching up of love towards God.”  

9 *The Cloud’s* emphasis on the supremacy of love transforms the intellectual mysticism of Dionysius into an “affective Dionysianism.”  

6 Ibid., lix.  


8 McGinn says, “It is true that the anonymous Englishman makes use of the Dionysian writings, but his Dionysianism is of a special western type that was primarily dependent on Thomas Gallus (d. 1246) and the Carthusian Hugh of Balma (d. 1340)” (Bernard McGinn, “The English Mystics,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987], 199).  


This apophatic yet affective mysticism is well illustrated in the following comment: “For a man may, by grace, have the fullness of knowledge of all other creatures and their works, yes, and of the works of God’s own self, and he is well able to reflect on them. But no man can think of God himself. Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved, but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought.”\(^1\) In this view, the spiritual path is that of love, not of knowledge. To that end, *The Cloud* describes two types of clouds to symbolize a twofold strategy for contemplative work: the cloud of forgetting and the cloud of unknowing.

First, one must put a “cloud of forgetting” beneath oneself, which is between oneself and creatures. This includes all conceptual understanding of God, which must be “cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting.”\(^2\) If “[one’s] mind is occupied…with a clear picture of something beneath God,” one has to “put down such clear pictures, no matter how holy or how pleasant they may be.”\(^3\) This cloud is “nothing else but the abandonment of all images and concepts to allow the soul to love mystically.”\(^4\) Second, one must enter into the “cloud of unknowing” so as to reach out to God as God is. The cloud of unknowing is above oneself, that is, between oneself and God. This cloud represents the darkness of unknowing, or the ignorance that one encounters when one begins practicing contemplative exercises. Because one has forsaken all of what one knows of God in the cloud of forgetting, one now has to

\(^1\) Walsh, *The Cloud*, 130 (chap 6).

\(^2\) Ibid., 128-131 (chaps 5-6).

\(^3\) Ibid., 139 (chap 9).

endure the dark road of unknowing. However, the contemplative does not stay passively in
the cloud of unknowing. S/he is to “step above [the cloud of forgetting] stalwartly but
lovingly, and with a devout, pleasing, impulsive love strive to pierce that darkness above
[her/himself]. [S/He is to] smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of
longing love.”15 These two clouds serve the contemplative with different purposes: “the
cloud of forgetting helps a person separate himself from all things, including the self; the
cloud of unknowing directs the ‘naked loving intent’ to its proper target, the God who cannot
be known but who can be attained by loving unknowing.”16

The “sharp dart of longing love” is the central teaching of The Cloud. Contemplative
work is “essentially an act of will and of love, and the union it leads to is also a union of
love.”17 William Johnston claims that “The work of the English author is largely a eulogy of
this blind stirring of love.”18 It is a “little blind impulse of love” that allows the
contemplative to pay no attention to anything beneath the cloud of forgetting and to rise up
above the cloud of unknowing.19 Thomas Merton comments: “Even when there is no very
definite experience of a hidden presence in the darkness of contemplation, there is always the
positive and urgent movement of love which, on the one hand, wants to forget and ‘trample
down’ all clear knowledge of everything that is not God and, on the other, strives to ‘pierce

15 Walsh, The Cloud, 131 (chap 6).
16 McGinn, The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 404.
18 Johnston, The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing, 98.
the cloud of unknowing’ with the ‘sharp dart’ of its own longing.”

Thus, the whole contemplative work of *The Cloud* depends on the unifying power of love.

### 1. 3. Method: Contemplative Prayer as Work of Love

*The Cloud* is practical in nature. It is written to offer spiritual instructions on how to be “knit to God in spirit, in oneness of love and union of wills.”

The purpose of the text is to provide practical instructions about what the author calls “contemplative work” or “contemplative exercise.” The author is not anti-intellectual, so speculative theology is present in the text, but it only helps the practitioner undertake the work with confidence. The reason that *The Cloud* has received special attention from present-day contemplative practitioners is that it is considered to provide a methodology with which one can engage in contemplative prayer. Due to the practicality of it, many modern contemplative figures regard *The Cloud* as one of the most significant classics in the Christian contemplative tradition. Centering Prayer is said to be based on the method found in *The Cloud*. Here we will look into the method of contemplative prayer, in order to later compare it with that of Centering Prayer.

Before introducing the method of contemplative prayer, *The Cloud’s* author gives preliminary general directions: “to be…as loving to your spiritual spouse, that is, to almighty God,…as he is himself” and to allow God to be “alone with you, by himself” because God is

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“a jealous lover and allows no other partnership.”

He continues, “You should simply gaze at him, and leave him to act alone. Your part is to keep the windows and the door against the inroads of flies and enemies. And if you are willing to do this, all that is required of you is to woo him humbly in prayer.”

Here contemplative work is depicted in the imagery of a loving relationship: this prayer is situated in the context of a relationship between two lovers, God and the contemplative.

In the third chapter, we are presented with a method of contemplative prayer that responds to the questions: “What are you going to do? How will you move him?” Yet, his instructions are not very different from his previous general description of contemplative work: “Lift up your heart to God with a humble impulse of love; and have himself as your aim, not any of his good. Take care that you avoid thinking of anything but himself, so that there is nothing for your reason or your will to work on, except himself.”

If one has expected a well-formulated method in a how-to fashion, as Eastern meditation techniques usually offer, these instructions might be disappointing. However, *The Cloud*’s author affirms that “This is the work of the soul that pleases God most,” the work the contemplative should undertake. He continues to give the instructions: “So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him whom you love.” In his method of contemplative work, it is clear that the contemplative does not passively sit and wait for God

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22 Ibid., 118-119 (chap 2).

23 Ibid., 119 (chap 2).

24 Ibid., 119-120 (chap 3). This imperative is given again and again.

25 Ibid., 120 (chap 3).

26 Ibid., 121 (chap 3).
to reveal Her/Himself, but s/he strives to rise up to God with a sudden impulse of love, “as the spark flies up from the burning coal.”

In Chapter 7, he gives the instructions for a very well-known contemplative prayer form which uses a “little word” often called a mantra, prayer word, or sacred word. (I will use the term “prayer word” for *The Cloud*’s “little word.”) Thomas Keating refers to this specific technique as the source for Centering Prayer. *The Cloud*’s author writes:

Take just a little word, of one syllable rather than of two; for the shorter it is the better it is in agreement with this exercise of the spirit. Such a one is the word ‘God’ or the word ‘love.’ Choose which one you prefer, or any other according to your liking—the word of one syllable that you like best. Fasten this word to your heart, so that whatever happens it will never go away. This word is to be your shield and your spear, whether you are riding in peace or in war. With this word you are to beat upon this cloud and this darkness above you. With this word you are to strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting; so that if any thought should press upon you and ask you what you would have, answer it with no other word but with this one.

This method is often thought as the primary method that the author of *The Cloud* suggests to the practitioner of contemplative prayer. However, right before the above instructions, he says, “For a simple reaching out directly towards God [by a humble impulse of love] is sufficient, without any other cause except himself. If you like, you can have this reaching out, wrapped up and enfolded in a single word.” Here, it seems that the prayer with a little word is suggested as an aid to a simple reaching out to God with a blind impulse of love, which is the primary dynamic.

The same technique is expounded in more detail in Chapters 35–40. The author addresses contemplative work in the context of *lectio divina*, which is an ancient spiritual

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27 Ibid., 126 (chap 4).

28 Ibid., 133-134 (chap 7).

29 Ibid.
practice consisting of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. Although *The Cloud*’s author insists that the first three exercises of lectio divina are essentially preparation for contemplation, the meditations and prayers for those undertaking contemplative work consist of “sudden awarenesses and obscure feelings of their own wretchedness, or of God’s goodness, without any previous reading or listening.”30 These abrupt feelings and knowledge are “not rational or discursive meditations but are concentrated, holistic apprehensions of our own sinfulness and God’s love.”31 In Chapter 37, we come to know the attitude or posture with which one uses a prayer word. The contemplative is instructed to use a prayer word as if a “person is suddenly smitten in the depths of his spirit to cry out and beg for help. And he does this not in many words, or even in one word of two syllables. And this is because he feels that this would take too long to give vent to his need and the laboring of his spirit. So he breaks out in a loud and hideous scream using a little word of one syllable, such as ‘fire!’ or ‘out!’”32

It becomes clear that in his analogy a prayer word is to be expressed as if one is in great danger and cries out to receive immediate help. For this reason, McGinn refers to it as the prayer of “short ejaculations.”33 Francois Vandenbroucke also points out the similarity of *The Cloud*’s prayer method with the prayer of aspirations.34 Ernest Larkin clarifies these two

30 Ibid., 190 (chap 36). Also, see McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 412.


types of prayer: “Ejaculatory prayer describes any and all brief prayers sent like darts to heaven for help, thanksgiving, adoration, or any other good motive….Aspirations are only and always passionate desire or fervent acts of love. They are expressed in words or sighs or silence.” According to Larkin’s understanding, *The Cloud* reflects a mixture of these two types of prayer: the prayer word should be expressed with a “sudden impulse of love” from burning desire for God and also fly like “a sharp dart” through the cloud of unknowing for God’s help. No matter how we categorize the method of *The Cloud* as a form of prayer, what is important is that the contemplative uses it as “monologistic outcries of emotion.”

1. 4. Process and Effects: Self-Forgetfulness and Experience of God in the Fullness of Love

Generally speaking, the contemplative exercise is difficult and deliberate at first. If the practitioner perseveres in the cloud of unknowing, the exercise becomes habitual, easier, and spontaneous. Yet, as he calls the practice “labor,” and says, “All men find this exercise laborious,” the author of *The Cloud* acknowledges that it is not at all easy and demands hard work. While contemplative work is a two-dimensional practice—the cloud of forgetting and the cloud of unknowing, the treading down of the awareness of all things under the cloud of forgetting is the human’s work with the help of God’s grace, and the impulse of love found within the cloud of unknowing is “the work of God alone.”

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38 Ibid., 173-174 (chap 26).
confidently affirms this process: “Press on with your own work, and he, as I promise you, will certainly not fail in his.”

The process and effects of contemplative work are not elaborated in *The Cloud*, in as explicit a way as modern meditation teachers usually outline. However, it is proper to say that the process of *The Cloud*’s contemplative work proceeds from rejecting or transcending all thoughts to inhibiting or transcending the awareness of one’s own being in a total union with God. First, in the early stage, one exerts a tremendous labor to abnegate all intruding sensory material and thoughts under the cloud of forgetting. Then “forgetting God” in the cloud of darkness functions as a means of simplifying one’s dispersed mind and heart. Johnston views this forgetting process as “the form of emptying the mind of all images and concepts.” This simplifying or emptying process is a painful period of warfare. Being constantly bombarded by undesired thoughts and images, one becomes convinced of the unruliness of one’s mind and will. It is also painful to acknowledge the rebellious nature of one’s intellect; which seems driven to seek out things for its own entertainment. Although it is difficult, one must persevere in this contemplative work.

Second, purification of the soul is necessary for one’s union with God. This is one of the most major effects of contemplative work. For *The Cloud*’s author, the pain of contemplative work has to do with purification. Although cleansing of sin and impurity is a perpetual process that exists before undertaking contemplative work and even after achieving

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39 Ibid.


the perfection of contemplation—because original sin cannot be completely rooted out, one must go through a drastic cleansing of the soul. Simplifying one’s awareness can make one’s past wrong doings and sinful inclinations, such as pride, resentment, greed, and the likes, become more transparent. Sometimes one is overcome with these kinds of thoughts and affections. The more one is exposed to the love of God, the more one recognizes one’s sinfulness, or “wretchedness.” Yet, the humble stirring of love, in fact, “burns out the very roots of sin, performing a function that…cannot be done by endless fasting and watching and vocal prayer.” In this way, purification is a natural result of contemplative work.

Eventually, through purification, one comes to a point where one is able to sense one’s own being. It is an ability to feel one’s own self without the associated concepts or emotions. However, for The Cloud’s author, one’s being is intertwined with one’s underlying sin which he calls a “lump of sin.” In his words, this “sort of undefined lump” or “congealed mass” is “nothing else, in fact, than [oneself].” This radical identification of one’s own being with a “lump of sin” may cause some confusion for his reader, because the author also says that “God is your being” and advises the practitioner to reach out to God with “a simple thought and blind feeling of [one’s] own [being].” For the author of The Cloud, according to one’s spiritual maturity, the feeling of one’s own being can take two forms. Initially, it helps overcome distracted thoughts by focusing on one’s bare being. Being simply aware that one exists requires stripping away all thoughts and images about

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43 Recognizing the pain of this process, the author of The Cloud says, “This is your purgatory.” See Walsh, The Cloud, 179-182 (chap 31-33).


45 Walsh, The Cloud, 190-191 (chap 36).

46 Walsh, The Pursuit of Wisdom, 220.
oneself, which at a core level is immersed in sin. When one arrives at the certain stage where one’s simple awareness of one’s self become dominant in the contemplative prayer, the sense of one’s self becomes a hindrance to the full experience of God. This feeling of self, which stands between the contemplative and God, must be transformed in order to find her/his perfection in mystical union.

As contemplative practice becomes easier and easier, “God will work sometimes all by [Her/Himself].” Eventually, the contemplative experiences another effect of contemplative prayer, a development where her/his “affection [becomes] all aflame with the fire of [God]’s love.” This experience is given to the contemplative because God “send[s] out a ray of spiritual light, piercing this cloud of unknowing.” The author of The Cloud does not explain more, so we do not know at what point in the contemplative journey one has this experience, how long it lasts, or how it affects one’s spiritual life. Most likely these factors vary considerably between individual experiences.

Lastly, the climax of the contemplative work described in The Cloud is “Full and final forgetfulness of self.” One “must strip, despoil, and utterly divest [one]self of every kind of feeling of [one]self, so that [one] can be clothed in the grace-giving feeling of God’s own self.” This is accomplished only by God alone. The author only hints about this

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47 See Walsh, The Cloud, 201-204 (chap 43-44).

48 The author says, in his later work, The Privy Letter, “Your purpose and desire in this exercise must always be to feel God. For though at the beginning, because of your coarseness and lack of spiritual experience, I bade you to wrap up and clothe the feeling of your God in the feeling of your own self; later on, when through perseverance you are become wiser in purity of spirit, you must strip, despoil, and utterly divest yourself of every kind of feeling of yourself, so that you can be clothed in the grace-giving feeling of God’s own self” (Walsh, The Pursuit of Wisdom, 236).

49 Ibid., 174-175 (chap 26).

50 Ibid.
unitive experience, never describing it extensively. Yet, it is clear that this total self-forgetfulness is also portrayed as a “work of love” between the contemplative and God. According to the author, losing the self completely in the cloud of unknowing is the highest act the “perfect lover” does in contact with the beloved God. Self-forgetfulness is not merely a mental state of having no thoughts or images, but it is “a rare and brief occasion when God permits [one] to experience [Her/Him] in the fullness of love.” One’s whole awareness is covered with the “rich garment of everlasting love.” For the author of *The Cloud*, the mystical union is irrelevant to how hard one has worked and one cannot control the frequency of these experiences of unity with God—everything depends on God’s grace.

Finally, concerning the effect of contemplative prayer, the author of *The Cloud* insists that all the virtues are acquired through it. Because “virtue is nothing else than an ordered and controlled affection which has God for its single object, himself alone,” the contemplative who desires God alone with a blind impulse of love can obtain all good virtues, such as meekness, charity, and humility. As those who are sincerely involved in the contemplative work of love have come to know God as God is, it is through this work that they obtain perfect virtue.

1. 5. The Participants: Being Called to Contemplative Work

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51 For example, Walsh, *The Cloud*, 126 (chap 4) and 148-149 (chap 13). Johnston says, “The author obstinately refuses…to speak of God’s part in the mystical life; all he wants to teach is the attitude to be adopted by [human] and the co-operation demanded of him—to speak of this is less perilous” (*The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, 192).


The Cloud speaks of the appropriate participants of the contemplative work three times in The Cloud: in the prologue, the middle (chaps 27-28), and the end. This implies that he is very concerned about the type of person called to this exercise. For the author, there are two general types of lives, namely, the active life and the contemplative life. The former consists of good deeds and discursive meditations, and the latter “consists entirely in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing, with a loving impulse and a dark gazing into the simple being of God.”\(^{54}\) Contemplative work is primarily for those who are called to the contemplative life by a special grace. However, even those in the active life “are enabled by abundance of grace to share in the work of contemplation.”\(^{55}\) The author maintains that “Disciplining of the body, the cleaning of conscience, customary spiritual exercises of reading, meditation, and vocal prayer are necessary in preparation.”\(^{56}\) In particular, reading, meditating, and praying are regarded as the “threefold occupation of the contemplative apprentice” to advance in contemplation.\(^{57}\)

For the author of The Cloud, there are some special signs for those called especially to contemplative work. They have sincerely abandoned the world and are not interested in any aspect of the active life.\(^{58}\) When they read or hear about contemplative work, they should feel a strong desire and “a true affinity for the effect of this exercise” rather than

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., 136-137 (chap 8).

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 102-103 (Prologue).

\(^{56}\) Hodgson, The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling, lii.

\(^{57}\) Walsh, The Cloud, 187 (chap 35).

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 175 (chap 27).
possessing a simple intellectual curiosity about it.\textsuperscript{59} The most decisive token is a humble impulse of love that is “always pressing on their minds more regularly than is so with any other spiritual exercise. And…it seems to them that nothing that they do, bodily or spiritually, is of any value…except this little secret love.”\textsuperscript{60} Those called to contemplative life are persons who have undertaken various spiritual practices of Christian piety and virtue, yet found these wanting in their blind loving desire for God alone.

2. Contemplative Prayer in \textit{The Conferences}

\textbf{2. 1. Historical Background}

John Cassian (d. 360-435) took the Egyptian monks’ self-effacing humility as his own virtue. Although he left voluminous writings and had a huge influence on the shaping of Western monasticism, we know little about his life, which is quite different from his contemporary, Augustine of Hippo. Cassian was almost silent about his own history and interior life. However, most scholars date his birth at about 360 and his death at about 435, and agree that he came from the Dobrudja, modern-day Romania.\textsuperscript{61} He was bilingual; likely, Latin was his native language, while he was also fluent in Greek.

At about 380, he traveled to and settled in a monastery at Bethlehem, with his life-long friend Germanus. They became monks and lived there for a few years. Then, they traveled to Egypt twice, spending several years there. Settling in one of the monasteries in Scetis, they also visited various monasteries in that region and met and learned from some of

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 262-264 (chap 74).

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 264 (chap 74).

the great Desert Fathers of Egypt.\textsuperscript{62} Around 400, when the Origenist Controversy began,\textsuperscript{63} Cassian and Germanus left Egypt and went to visit John Chrysostom in Constantinople. A few years later, as part of a delegation, they were sent to Rome to deliver letters defending Chrysostom against false charges of financial mismanagement and to denounce his exile.\textsuperscript{64}

In 415, Cassian settled down in southern Gaul, in present-day Marseilles, where he founded two monasteries, one for monks and the other for nuns.\textsuperscript{65} There he wrote three treatises, two of which are \textit{The Institutes} and \textit{The Conferences}.\textsuperscript{66} These two works reflect a spiritual progression. The former is concerned with the basics of monastic life, “the institutes of the outer person”\textsuperscript{67}—such as habit, canonical prayer, and rules and instructions for new comers; the latter is a “study of the Egyptian ideal of the monk, his greatest and most influential book.”\textsuperscript{68} According to Harmless, \textit{The Institutes} was concerned with “‘the external and visible life of the monks,’ while \textit{The Conferences} moves from outer to inner, to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 376.
\item \textsuperscript{63} In 399, the Origenist Controversy began in Egypt, when Theophilus the Patriarch of Alexandria sent out his annual festal letter, which announced the date of Easter and at the same time pronounced a condemnation of the heresy of anthropomorphism. In the desert, there was discord between the educated Origenists, who understood God as incomprehensible and imageless, and the simple monks, who tended to have concrete and even materialistic views of God. So, by this letter, the latter were outraged, marched to Alexandria, and rioted to protest Theophilus’ pronouncement. When they faced Theophilus, they wanted him to condemn the works of Origen, and he assented. Then, Theophilus issued formal condemnations against Origenism and violently persecuted Origenist monks. See Harmless, \textit{Desert Christians}, 359-363, and Owen Chadwick, \textit{John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism}, 1\textsuperscript{st} ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 33-36.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Boniface Ramsey, trans., \textit{John Cassian: The Conferences}, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 6.
\item \textsuperscript{65} We are uncertain about Cassian’s life and movements between about 405 and 415.
\item \textsuperscript{66} The other lesser known work is \textit{On the Incarnation of the Lord, against Nestorius}, which is on Christ’s humanity.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Harmless, \textit{Desert Christians}, 380.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Owen Chadwick, introduction to Colm Luibheid, trans., \textit{John Cassian: Conferences}, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 2.
\end{itemize}
‘invisible character of the inner man.’”

For our study, The Conferences is more substantial than The Institutes because, as John Main notes, the former is the primary source for the development of Christian Meditation and contains the teachings of contemplative prayer. So we will primarily refer to The Conferences to explore the main features of contemplative prayer, though we will occasionally also draw upon The Institutes.

2. 2. Theories and Theologies: Purity of Heart and Unceasing Prayer

There is no doubt that Cassian’s contemplative theology had been influenced by Origen of Alexandria (d. 185-254) and Evagrius of Ponticus (d. 346-399), a follower of Origen. It is thought that Cassian met and learned from Evagrius in person in Egypt. According to Origen and Evagrius, who both used Greek philosophy to interpret Christian thought, human souls are on a pilgrimage to return to God. In their fall, human souls have moved away from God, distracted by impure desires, pleasures, and intentions associated with this created world. To return to God, that is, to reunite with God, they have been given a physical body, which brings a potential redemptive dynamism to life. But they need to purify themselves of their vices and imperfections. As Owen Chadwick simply puts it, “[The soul’s] method of seeking is to strip itself of all distractions that turn the attention to

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69 Harmless, Desert Christians, 388.

70 Keating also regards Cassian’s Conferences as one of his Christian sources for Centering Prayer.

anything lower in the scale of value, that is, everything not the One.” In Origenist theology, through the process of purification and spiritual growth, the now embodied soul is finally united with God in contemplation.\textsuperscript{73}

Cassian closely follows this Origenist theological system, although he never explicitly mentions either Origen or Evagrius in his writings.\textsuperscript{74} Like his predecessors, he believed that the highest state of contemplation is experienced in the unmediated direct perception of God. At the beginning of Conference 10, which is the most important conference regarding contemplative prayer, he criticizes anthropomorphistic understandings of God.\textsuperscript{75} For Cassian, limiting God to a certain image or concept is heretical. Perfect communication with God is “an encounter of the intellect with a divine reality beyond the world of ordinary thought and word, and even beyond self-awareness.”\textsuperscript{76}

For Cassian, the highest form of prayer is what he calls “unceasing” and “pure prayer,” which is “identical with contemplative prayer.”\textsuperscript{77} Unceasing prayer is the goal of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Owen Chadwick, introduction to Cassian: Conferences, ed. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 3-4.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Joseph Wilson Trigg, Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third Century Church (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983),103-107. For Origen, to “have grossly material bodies” is both a “punishment and a remedy for their fall from God.” Physical embodiment is a “means whereby we can be disciplined and trained for our return to God” (Ibid., 106-107).
  \item \textsuperscript{74} The reason that the names of Origen and Evagrius do not appear in Cassian’s writings is related to the Origenist Controversy. Also, Cassian replaces philosophical terminologies with biblical ones to articulate what he learned at the feet of spiritual masters in the desert. His primary interest is in the practical aspect of monastic spirituality, so he avoids excessive philosophical thinking and attempts to simplify spiritual theology (Chadwick, introduction, 5).
  \item \textsuperscript{75} The first set of The Conferences, which are Conference 1 through 10, contain Cassian’s original intent of writing it, and Conferences 9 and 10 are “the climax of his initial literary endeavor and the pinnacle of his spiritual theology” (Harmless, Desert Christians, 92).
  \item \textsuperscript{76} Columba Stewart, Cassian the Monk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Chadwick, John Cassian, 1st ed.,147.
\end{itemize}
spiritual life and must be the monk’s single intention.\textsuperscript{78} It is essential to keep in mind that “unceasing prayer” means both “a practice” as a discipline and “a state” as the fruit of the practice. Specifically, one first strives to exercise unceasing prayer as a discipline in order that it becomes the perpetual state of the heart, where one constantly remains in communion with God. Further, the adjective “pure” indicates that one becomes wholly free from worldly concerns and inner distractions. In pure prayer, one’s mind “not only ponders no image; it uses no words nor voice to follow along….The mind, lifted up beyond all sensation and visible matters, pours itself out to God with speech-defying groans and sighs.”\textsuperscript{79} The primary characteristics of the highest form of prayer are imagelessness, wordlessness, and unceasing communion.

To move in the direction of continuous pure prayer, one needs to acquire “purity of heart.”\textsuperscript{80} Relying on Jesus’ word in the beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,”\textsuperscript{81} Cassian claims that purity of heart is an essential preparation for the contemplative vision of God, or the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{82} For Cassian, “purity of heart” does not involve only the heart (as a faculty of affections in a modern sense), but also the will, the mind and the body. Since he uses it interchangeably with “tranquility of mind,” “purity of

\textsuperscript{78} Cassian, \textit{The Conferences}, 10.7.3.


\textsuperscript{80} Chadwick, introduction, 11. He affirms that “The quest of purity of heart is necessary to a right prayer. The possession of purity of heart is necessary to perfect prayer.”

\textsuperscript{81} Matthew 5:8 (NRSV).

\textsuperscript{82} Cassian, \textit{The Conferences} 1.4.3. Cassian distinguishes the end (\textit{telos}) and the aim (\textit{scopos}) of the spiritual life. He writes, “The end of our profession, as we have said, is the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven, but its direction (\textit{destinatio}), that is \textit{scopos}, is purity of heart” (Bernard McGinn, \textit{The Foundation of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century} [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991], 220). To attain the ultimate end of the kingdom of God, which no one can perfectly reach in this life, one must strive to obtain purity of heart as the nearer and preliminary goal.
heart” suggests a deep inner stillness and stability. One’s being pure in heart means that one is free from dispersed affections, motives, and thoughts, having achieved a constant recollecting of the self. With “purity of heart,” one becomes able to pray with the whole, pure intention of the heart.

In relation to unceasing prayer as a practice, purity of heart is concerned with the process of purification and sanctification. It comes after one cleanses away vices, and it is attained by the flowering of the virtues. Following Evagrius, Cassian presents gluttony, fornication, love of money (avarice), anger, sadness, listlessness, vainglory, and pride as the eight “principal vices.” Concerning these vices, purifying the heart requires the examination of the underlying subtle thoughts or feelings, recognizing hidden motivations and habitual tendencies, and liberating the heart from them. Along with renouncing the vices, Cassian stresses growth in the virtues without giving a list of the virtues, nor does he elaborate on them in detail. For Cassian, however, charity is the principal virtue which encompasses all the virtues. “For the sake of this purity of heart,” he says, “we must practice the reading of the Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to trap and to hold

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83 Harmless, Desert Christians, 390. Cassian frequently uses terms such as “purity of mind,” “purity of soul,” and “purity of body” in ways that are closely linked to purity of heart. So, as an inclusive term, “purity of heart” is employed by him to describe purity of self as we understand it in a modern sense. However, he does not provide a single definition for “purity of heart.” Rather, it refers to “moral and spiritual integrity” or “monastic perfection” and, as Stewart writes, “embraces Cassian’s many other metaphors of perfection such as ‘tranquility,’ ‘contemplation,’ ‘unceasing prayer,’ ‘chastity,’ and ‘spiritual knowledge’” (Stewart, Cassian the Monk, 41-42).

84 According to Stewart, purity of heart is “both a goal and a means to something greater. Sometimes Cassian emphasizes purity of heart as a goal in itself, while at other times he emphasizes the experiences that purity of heart makes possible, such as love, contemplation, spiritual knowledge, unceasing prayer, chastity, union with God, the beatitude of heaven” (Stewart, Cassian the Monk, 43).

85 Cassian, The Institutes 4.43.

86 Chadwick, John Cassian, 1st ed., 103. Cassian sees virtue merely as the “opposite side of vice.”

our hearts free of the harm of every dangerous passion and in order to rise step by step to the high point of love.”

Thus, it begins with the renunciation of vices or evil inclinations and is perfected in love.

Therefore, as Irénée Hausherr observes, “pure and continual prayer is at the same time the cause and the effect of purity of heart.” In turn, the practice of unceasing prayer, which will be explored below, contributes to purity of heart. Meditating upon and reciting prayer formulas continuously purify the heart from passions and distractions. In the process of surrendering to a single thought, one strips oneself of a host of unhealthy thoughts and feelings and grows in poverty and simplicity. So, the interaction between purity of heart and unceasing prayer is two-directional.

Finally, it should be mentioned that “purity of heart is the centerpiece of Cassian’s monastic theology.” Purity of heart as an inclusive term is used “to describe monastic perfection,” and so the acquisition of purity of heart is involved with the entire aspect of spiritual life—active life and contemplative life. It is repeatedly emphasized that one’s depth


89 McGinn, *The Foundation of Mysticism*, 220. Chadwick says, “The end of …perfection is in all cases charity, Saint Paul’s charity of 1 Corinthians 13. It is as though perfection were full of movement, a direction toward, a loving aspiration after God, which cannot be precisely defined in terms of a state at any separated moment, but is a loving response to the love of God” (Chadwick, introduction to *John Cassian*, 10).


92 Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 41-42.

93 Ibid., 42.
and scope of prayer relies upon the degree of purity of heart one has gained.\textsuperscript{94} For Cassian, “contemplation is purity of heart in action, the present mode of the vision of God promised to the purity of heart.”\textsuperscript{95} Thus, Cassian’s unceasing prayer as a practice of contemplative prayer is inseparable from the quest for purity of heart.

\textbf{2. 3. Method: Outcry Imploring God for Immediate Help}

In the ninth and tenth Conferences, Cassian’s method of contemplative prayer, “unceasing prayer,” is offered. They are the only two consecutive Conferences dealing with a single theme, that is, “prayer.” According to Stewart, “the two conferences on prayer provide the recapitulation and summit” of the first set (Conference 1 through 10) of \textit{The Conferences}, which is Cassian’s original intent of writing the entire Conferences.\textsuperscript{96} Since affirming the goal of the monk as attaining “purity of heart” in Conference 1, Cassian has addressed how to advance in the interior life and to overcome its various obstacles. The basic topics from Conference 1-8 relate to the inner dynamics of the contemplative, such as discernment (of spiritual thoughts from worldly thoughts), true renunciation, conflicting desires, evil thoughts, temptations, and distractions. The significance of unceasing prayer in \textit{The Conferences} becomes apparent when, on the onset of these two conferences on prayer, we read that “the end of every monk and perfection of heart aims toward assiduous and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer,”\textsuperscript{97} that is, unceasing prayer.

\textsuperscript{94} Cassian, \textit{The Conferences}, 1.15.3, 9.8.1 and passim.

\textsuperscript{95} Stewart, \textit{Cassian the Monk}, 47.

\textsuperscript{96} Stewart, “John Cassian on Unceasing Prayer,” 162.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, 162 (\textit{The Conferences} 9.2.1).
Before expounding on Cassian’s method of unceasing prayer, it is necessary to contextualize it in relation to Hours of Office of Cassian’s monastic community. We should know that monks were his audience, and they already regularly practiced canonical prayers with psalmody and scriptural readings, prior to being introduced to this specific method of unceasing prayer. They gathered for two communal offices, in the evening and before dawn, each of which consisted of twelve Psalms and “intervals of silence for personal response in prayer.”

Several hours of prayer per day were also observed, where three Psalms were recited for each hour. Even between Hours of Office and especially while laboring, they recited and meditated upon Scripture as a means of being mindful of God. “The biblical texts” were “the monk’s constant companion day and night.” It is in this rhythm of Hours of Office that the following method of unceasing prayer should be situated.

In Conferences 9 and 10, Abba Isaac, a Desert Father, appears to be the spokesman on prayer. Abbot Isaac teaches how to fulfill Apostle Paul’s words: “Pray without ceasing.”

Through dialogue, the methodology of contemplative prayer is elaborated in detail. John Main, the founder of Christian Meditation, claims that his method of contemplative prayer primarily draws upon Cassian’s teachings of prayer in Conferences 9

98 Ibid, Cassian the Monk, 100.

99 The second and third books of The Institutes survey the daily Office Hours of prayer; however, their precise order is under debate. For detailed information, see Casiday, Tradition and Theology in St John Cassian, 162-171 and Robert Taft, The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today, 2nd (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 96-100.

100 Steward, Cassian the Monk, 92.

101 Cassian spent about ten years in Egypt with the Desert Fathers learning their ascetic and spiritual life. He wrote The Conferences when he was founding two monasteries in Marseilles. Scholars assume that Abbot Isaac in Conference 9 and 10 is a symbolic Desert Father, rather than a historical figure, through whom Cassian attributes all his ideas and learning of prayer from the Desert Fathers (Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 5-6).

102 1 Thessalonians 5:17.
and 10. (In the next chapter, we will look at Christian Meditation in comparison with Cassian’s unceasing prayer.)

It is crucial to recognize that before teaching monks how to pray ceaselessly, Abbot Isaac re-emphasizes that purity of heart is a requisite for unceasing prayer, as we mentioned earlier. For Cassian, “Any possibility of approaching God now in contemplation depends on quality of life and purity of heart.” Abbot Isaac asserts that one “shall be unable to accomplish this command” of praying without ceasing unless one’s mind and heart have vanquished evil thoughts and been developed in virtues. This is for a very practical reason. According to Cassian, the time before (and after) the period of prayer is as equally important as the period of prayer, because what one has thought and entertained before the time of prayer comes to the mind during prayer time. For this reason, “We have to be outside of the hour of prayer what we want to be when we are praying.” In the words of Chadwick, “since the whole life affects the period of prayer, recollection must be attempted before the time [of prayer] comes.” One needs to establish an underlying tranquility in everyday life, because the same tranquility affects the time of prayer.

103 Stewart, Cassian The Monk, 47.

104 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 331 (9.3 4).


106 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 386-7 (10.14.2). He continues to say, “The mind at the time of its prayer is necessarily formed by what went on previously, and when it is praying it is either raised to the heavens or brought low to the earth by the thoughts on which it was dwelling before it prayed” (Ibid).

107 Chadwick, John Cassian, 1st ed., 141-142.
The primary method of unceasing prayer which Abbot Isaac—or Cassian—teaches is a continual repetition of a biblical formula of only a few words.\(^{108}\) It is known as “monologistic prayer.” Cassian believes that it is “best for the prayers to be short and offered up very frequently.”\(^{109}\) Abbot Isaac prescribes Psalm 70:1 as the fundamental formula for unceasing prayer: “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue.”\(^ {110}\) Using this short formula, one’s prayer is capable of being brief and frequent. Through this verse, one attempts to posture the heart before God, focusing all one’s energy and attention on the presence of God. As Stewart describes the dynamic, this biblical formula functions as an “undercurrent in the river of words that carries [the pray-er] through day and night, coming to the surface in the interstices of other forms of prayer or in times of particular need.”\(^ {111}\)

For our study, it is important to examine how one is to recite this biblical formula, because the manner of repeating it characterizes the prayer. The following words of Abbot Isaac reveal a general sense of how to apply this formula in prayer, and include some methodological features of unceasing prayer:

It [Psalm 70:1] can be adapted to every condition and can be usefully deployed against every temptation. It carries within it a cry of help to God in the face of every danger. It expresses the humility of a pious confession. It conveys the watchfulness born of unending worry and fear. It conveys a sense of our frailty, the assurance of being heard, the confidence in help that is always and everywhere present. Someone forever calling out to his protector is indeed very sure of having him close by.\(^ {112}\)

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\(^{108}\) Cassian is the first writer who gives a concrete description on the method of monologistic prayer.


\(^{110}\) Unlike the *Cloud* author who prescribes a single word for contemplative prayer, Cassian recommends an entire biblical verse.

\(^{111}\) Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 112.

\(^{112}\) Luibheid, trans., *John Cassian: Conferences*, 133 (10.10.3).
As clearly reflected, this prayer is used as a weapon against temptation. It plays a role as “an unassailable wall” and “a very strong shield…under the attack of demons.”\textsuperscript{113} Abbot Isaac asserts that constantly repeating it protects the person in times of trials. This type of prayer is called “antirrhetic prayer,” reflecting Evagrius’ work, \textit{Antirrhetikos} (Counter-Arguments, or Refutation). While, in his work, Evagrius provides about five hundred biblical phrases as counter-arguments against specific temptations and passions, Cassian gives only Psalm 70:1 to combat every temptation.\textsuperscript{114} Cassian prescribes this verse to fight off the eight principal vices, which he lists as occasions for reciting the formula in Conference 10. The biblical formula is also effective against demonic passions and temptations.

In repeating the formula, one cries out for divine help. Psalm 70:1 is expressed as a desperate plea for God’s assistance in the face of danger: it is “the terrified cry of someone who sees the snares of the enemy, the cry of someone besieged day and night and exclaiming that he cannot escape unless his protector comes to the rescue.”\textsuperscript{115} For example, if being troubled by the urges of anger, greed, or sadness, one should “cry out with loud groaning: ‘O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me.’”\textsuperscript{116} To “cry” is the most frequently used verb to describe how to say the formula in the heart. Merton refers to the repetition of the formula as “constant use of this ejaculation in the depths of our hearts;”\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{113} Ramsey, trans., \textit{John Cassian: The Conferences}, 379 (10.10.4).

\textsuperscript{114} Harmless, \textit{Desert Christians}, 396, and Stewart, \textit{Cassian the Monk}, 104.

\textsuperscript{115} Luibheid, trans., \textit{John Cassian: Conferences}, 133 (10.10.4).

\textsuperscript{116} Ramsey, trans., \textit{John Cassian: The Conferences}, 381 (10.10.10).

hence this type of prayer is traditionally called “ejaculatory prayer.” In this respect, it is very similar to the method of contemplative prayer found in The Cloud: unceasing prayer of the biblical verse is an outcry imploring God for rapid help in the face of danger or temptation.

So Cassian’s unceasing prayer integrates the formula of Psalm 70:1 with emotion. A. M. C. Casiday claims that “in numerous passages,” Cassian “dwells on the profound emotions that enrich the Christian’s life of prayer.”118 As one prays with the biblical verse, one does not leave emotions behind, but brings them into the prayer. The prayer is to be fully charged with human affections related to devotional fervor or ardor. Cassian’s spokesman, Abbot Isaac, asserts, “Not without reason has this verse been selected from out of the whole body of Scripture. For it takes up all the emotions that can be applied to human nature….It contains a burning love and charity, awareness of traps, and a fear of enemies.”119 The biblical verse, “‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord make haste to help me’ is to awaken every devout sentiment in our hearts.”120 Moreover, one is led to experience in one’s heart “the identical feelings in which the psalm was composed or sung” and “find all these sentiments expressed” in it.121

Ideally, the prayer formula should be repeated in one’s heart at all times. One should not stop reflecting upon it. Abbot Isaac stresses that you have to hold ceaselessly to this formula in “whatever task or service or journey you find yourself.”122 Even the time of going


119 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 379 (10.10.3).

120 Hausherr, The Name of Jesus, 203.

121 Luibheid, trans., John Cassian: Conferences, 137-8 (10.11.5-6).

122 Luibheid, trans., John Cassian: Conferences, 135 (10.10.14).
to bed, being asleep, and waking up, are not exceptional.\textsuperscript{123} Meditating upon it should become so natural that one can repeat it even while asleep. In unceasing prayer, the biblical verse is considered to be a “formula of salvation” which delivers one from all situations—not only all dangers in bad times, but also pride in good times.\textsuperscript{124}

In sum, the method of Cassian’s contemplative prayer is a brief ejaculatory invocation for God’s immediate assistance and protection. The biblical formula is believed to defeat temptations and attacks of evil thoughts. One should repeat it without ceasing in whatever situation one finds oneself. In doing so, one is delivered from idle thoughts and passions in all circumstances and led to grow in humility which is colored by the appreciation and acceptance of one’s utter dependence upon God’s help.

### 2. 4. Process and Effects: Union with God in Pure Love

It is a challenge to trace and present the process of contemplative prayer in \textit{The Conferences}. Unlike \textit{The Cloud}, which narrowly focuses on contemplative prayer and its journey, \textit{The Conferences} deals with the whole monastic life and contemplative prayer is mentioned occasionally and in a pretty general manner.\textsuperscript{125} It is a mistake to expect well-elaborated descriptions of mystical states in \textit{The Conferences}, as we find in 16th century Spanish mystical literature. Rather, it gives only very brief and traditional descriptions regarding contemplative progression.

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\textsuperscript{123} Cassian, \textit{The Conferences}, 10.10.14.

\textsuperscript{124} Luibheid, trans., \textit{John Cassian: Conferences}, 135 (10.10.14).

\textsuperscript{125} Chadwick, \textit{John Cassian}, 1\textsuperscript{st} ed., 147. According to Chadwick, Cassian refuses to enter into details concerning his conception of the contemplative vision and higher experiences of contemplative prayer.
For Cassian, the progress of contemplative prayer moves from a multiplicity of thoughts to simplicity. According to Chadwick, in *The Conferences*, the contemplative climbs “a ladder of contemplation in three rungs—the contemplation of many things, the contemplation of a few, the contemplation of one alone.”\(^{126}\) In Conferences 1 and 23, Cassian interprets the story of Martha and Mary of Bethany in Luke 10 as an example of the three-stage advancement of the contemplative journey. Mary is viewed as contemplating “a few things” or “one” while Martha is described as being concerned and distracted with “many things.”\(^{127}\) The more progress one makes, the more one moves away from worldly concerns and distractions and so the more one becomes like Mary who has advanced in simplicity. Like the gospel merchant who sold all that he owned to buy just one thing, a field where treasure was buried, a contemplative must renounce the “many” for the “One.”\(^{128}\) With progression, as Cassian writes, one finally arrives at “the vision of God alone” and is able to be “fed on the beauty and knowledge of God alone.”\(^{129}\) Thus, the practice of unceasing prayer ultimately leads the practitioner to the simplicity of unity with God.

It is not a surprise that Cassian compares the contemplative journey to God to mountain climbing. The contemplative climbs up an inner mountain of transfiguration with Christ. In the “lofty mountain of the desert,” Christ “reveals the glory of his face and image of his brightness to those who deserve to look upon him with the clean gaze of the soul.”\(^{130}\) There one sees Christ not in his humanity, but in his divinity. It means that one is able to

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127 Cassian, *The Conferences*, 1.8.2.


129 Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 47-8 (1.8.3).

understand Christ not based on his earthly deeds or activities, but on his divine essence, which conveys no created image or concept.

Generally speaking, growth in unceasing prayer is to “purge you of every vice and earthly taint, lead you to the theoria [contemplation] of invisible and heavenly realities, and raise you to that ineffably ardent prayer which is experienced by very few.”\(^{131}\) In The Conferences, however, the effects of unceasing prayer are two-fold (but inseparable): to gain spiritual knowledge of Scripture and to experience God.

Cassian agrees with Anthony the Great about the higher state of contemplative prayer, who says, “It is not perfect prayer when monks are aware of themselves or even that they are praying.”\(^{132}\) This saying very well corresponds with Cassian’s notion of pure prayer, which is wordless and imageless. Reaching a higher form of prayer, one experiences a contemplative state that is “ineffable, transcending all human thought, marked not by any sound of the voice, nor movement of the tongue, nor speaking of words.”\(^ {133}\) It is interesting that Cassian calls this kind of ecstatic prayer “prayer of fire” or “fiery prayer.” The intensity of ecstatic prayer is closely linked with the language or image of fire.\(^{134}\) In such a state of contemplative prayer, one’s mind is “inflamed with spiritual ardor,” becomes “like a kind of ungraspable and devouring flame,” and “pours out to God wordless prayers of the purest

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\(^{131}\) Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 382 (10.10.14).

\(^{132}\) Stewart, Cassian the Monk, 49. See Cassian, The Conferences, 9.3.1.

\(^{133}\) Ibid., 114 (Cassian, The Conferences, 9.25.1).

\(^{134}\) In Conferences 9 and 10, the experience of prayer is described by the terms like “‘fiery ecstasies of heart,’ the ‘mind’s intention on fire,’ prayer ‘inflamed with spiritual ardor,’ and ‘a higher stage of that fiery wordless prayer’” (Harmless, Desert Christians, 397). However, scholars are not sure about the source of Cassian’s concept of “fiery prayer” (Steward, Cassian the Monk, 114-122).
This kind of prayer is very rare, experienced by so few, and lasts but a brief duration.

However, the ecstatic form of prayer is not the end of unceasing prayer. Occasional dazzling moments of fiery ecstasy are not the final step. Cassian insists that every ecstatic experience is momentary, no matter how extraordinary it might be. For Cassian, in the words of Harmless, a deeper process of contemplation is found in “graced transfiguration of the ordinary.” It is union with God in pure love in everyday life. The love of God transforms all one’s ordinary things so that “God will be all in all.” Cassian describes beautifully this transformation:

This [union] will be the case when every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, will be God, and when that unity which the Father now has with the Son and which the Son has with the Father will be carried over into our understanding and our mind, so that, just as he loves us with a sincere and pure and indissoluble love, we too may be joined to him with a perpetual and inseparable love and so united with him that whatever we breathe, whatever we understand, whatever we speak, may be God.

For Cassian, union with God in love also means that one who practices contemplative prayer becomes prayer itself. Those who pray become so pure in heart and love and so confirmed to the likeness of God that they reach a state where “whatever they take in, whatever they reflect upon, and whatever they do will be most pure and sincere prayer.”

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135 Harmless, Desert Christians, 397.
136 Ibid., Mystics, 254.
137 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 375-6 (10.6.4-10.7.3). Also, see Casiday, Tradition and Theology in St John Cassian, 196.
138 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 375-6 (10.7.2).
139 Ibid., 334 (9.6.5).
Thus, as one becomes more attuned to God and allows God to permeate every aspect of one’s life, one’s whole life becomes pure prayer. This is the goal of unceasing prayer. To pray without ceasing ultimately means to live out a life in loving union with God by becoming pure prayer itself—where everything one does is directed towards and oriented in God.

The other major effect of unceasing prayer is advancement in spiritual knowledge, which is for Cassian, identical with scriptural knowledge. For Cassian, spiritual knowledge is “the deeper understanding of the Scriptures.” Again, Cassian presented this method of contemplative prayer to monks who already observed canonical prayer of the hours and recited memorized biblical texts. As one grows in contemplative prayer, insight into the Bible is given to him/her by divine grace. According to Stewart, in the practice of unceasing prayer, “to surrender all but those few biblical words will make it possible to navigate the rest of the Bible with keener insight into its meaning.”

At the initial stage, the biblical verse functions as a centering tool. Repeating it recollects wandering senses and thoughts and concentrates the mind on the simple formula. Through persevering in continuous recitation of it, the mind becomes more stabilized and pointed, and the scriptural words gradually become internalized. Later, the recited words become so internalized that they arise from the heart of the contemplative as if they were his/her own original prayer and not one given from scripture. The contemplative has “reached the state of having the simplicity of the innocent” and “penetrates so deeply into the

140 Chadwick, John Cassian, 1st ed., 151.
141 Stewart, Cassian the Monk, 85.
thinking of the psalms that [s/he] sings them…as if [s/he her/himself] had written them.”

Then, her/his insight into the word of God grows so profound that more sacred meanings and new understandings come to her/him. Unceasing prayer bears fruits like “the intimate awareness of the Bible…, the constant presence of the Word in meditation, the revelation of meaning even in sleep, the probing into the very marrow of the text—all these claims for spiritual knowledge.”

So, unceasing prayer and spiritual/scriptural knowledge go hand in hand.

2. 5. The Participants: The Experienced in Prayer

It is obvious that Cassian assumes that certain preparations are required for contemplative prayer. Although he does not strictly reserve unceasing prayer for a specific type of monk, there is no question that, for Cassian, the journey of prayer and spirituality is basically progressive and unceasing prayer as a method of contemplative prayer is a higher type of prayer that is achieved only after much practice. It is not surprising that Stewart writes “Abba Isaac saves the rudimentary formula for those who are actually well experienced in prayer.”

142 Luibheid, trans., John Cassian: Conferences, 137 (10.11.4).

143 Stewart, Cassian the Monk, 94.

144 It is worth noting that The Institutes and The Conferences are intentionally written for monks, and Cassian believes that anyone who desires to pursue Christian perfection must become a monastic (McGinn, The Foundation of Mysticism, 218).

145 Unlike the author of The Cloud, Cassian does not believe that there are certain people who are specially called to the contemplative life. Rather he believes that all are called to the contemplative life through the practical life.

Cassian makes clear indication that unceasing prayer is not for the inexperienced in prayer. First, the concrete method of contemplative prayer is held back intentionally and presented at the very end of his initial monastic literary project. As mentioned earlier, Conferences 9 and 10 are “the climax of his literary endeavor and the pinnacle of his spiritual theology.”\textsuperscript{147} In \textit{The Institutes}, addressing the manner of canonical prayers, Cassian expressed his hope to explore the commands of the Apostle, “Pray without ceasing,” in his next work, \textit{The Conferences}.\textsuperscript{148} Having eventually arrived at the topic, he began Conference 9, by saying, “With the Lord’s help the [ninth and tenth] conferences…will fulfill the promise made in the second book of \textit{The Institutes} about the perpetual and unceasing continuity of prayer.”\textsuperscript{149} The reason Cassian keeps this topic back is that he believed that one should be prepared for this contemplative method by having advanced in virtues and the practical life.

Second, even in these two crucial Conferences, Cassian does not introduce the instructions for unceasing prayer until he first addresses the general nature and issues of prayer. In particular, Cassian distinguishes between four kinds of prayer: supplication (petition made on account of sin), prayer (promise of renunciation and commitments), intercession (petition made for others and the world), and thanksgiving (contemplation of God’s greatness, goodness, and loving-kindness).\textsuperscript{150} For Cassian, although “these kinds…appear helpful and necessary to everyone,” depending on one’s circumstances, these

\textsuperscript{147} Harmless, \textit{Desert Christians}, 92.

\textsuperscript{148} Cassian, \textit{The Institutes}, 2.1.1.

\textsuperscript{149} Ramsey, trans., \textit{John Cassian: The Conferences}, 329 (9.1).

\textsuperscript{150} Cassian, \textit{The Conferences}, 9.9-15.
four kinds of prayer are understood as a step-by-step journey. They are concerned with attitudes and dispositions. Growing in inner dispositions, one’s prayer progresses “from prayer focused on self to prayer focused on others,” from prayer of repentance of one’s sin to prayer of contemplation on God’s kindness and mercy, and prayer of words to wordless prayer. He seems to expect that one must experience the positive effects if these different kinds of prayer, at least the first three, before being instructed with and becoming proficient in unceasing prayer. One needs to be grounded in a virtuous tranquility before unceasing prayer is really even possible. Until then, when one even attempts to practice this contemplative prayer one will only be distracted by one’s distorted emotions and senses.

Third, concerning the necessity of preparation for unceasing prayer, we hear more direct words from Abbot Isaac. In Conference 10, Abbot Isaac agrees to go further in his discussion of unceasing prayer only because Germanus has demonstrated that he has advanced significantly in this regard and is ready for the next step. He says, “I have no fear of being reproached for indiscretion or frivolity when I come to tell you what I left out of our earlier discussion of the perfection of prayer.” Moreover, Abbot Isaac speaks about the restricted accessibility to the method of unceasing prayer when he says, “Just as this was handed down to us by a few of the oldest fathers who were left, so also we pass it on to none

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151 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 338 (9.15.1).

152 Harmless, Desert Christians, 393.

153 Cassian, The Conferences, 10.9.

154 Luibheid, trans., John Cassian: Conferences, 132 (10.9.2). Abbot Isaac continues to say, “In my view you have reached the point where even without any word from me the grace of God would have made such things known to you” (Ibid).
but the most exceptional, who truly desire it.”

Although Cassian does not provide us with concrete criteria by which to measure one’s readiness for unceasing prayer, the above findings show that he anticipates a spiritual maturity in prayer life as a preparation for the instructions on unceasing prayer.

3. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored the theologies and practices of contemplative prayer in *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. The methods of contemplative prayer in these two classics are rooted in their unique theologies and understandings of contemplation. *The Cloud*’s author’s emphasis on the supremacy of love leads him to offer his student a contemplative prayer form which should be exercised with a vigorous impulse of love from the burning desire for God. In *The Conferences*, Cassian’s contemplative prayer method is “unceasing prayer” with a specific biblical formula, Psalm 70:1. As one journeys toward union with God, one must seek purity of heart in everyday life in order to practice unceasing prayer. Both authors agree that their contemplative prayer methods are not for beginners of prayer and require their practitioners to have advanced in ethical and spiritual virtues and disciplines. In the next chapter, we will analyze similarities and differences between what we have found and the theories and practices of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. It will allow us to see how Keating and Main appropriated their primary sources, *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*, in the process of creating their contemporary contemplative prayer forms.

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Chapter Two

Comparative Analysis of Theories and Practices of Contemporary Contemplative Prayer Forms and Those of Their Primary Christian Sources

This chapter examines the theories and practices of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation in comparison with the primary Christian sources discussed in the previous chapter. Under the same categories—theologies, theories, methods, processes, effects, and the appropriate participants, Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer will be compared with *The Cloud*, while John Main’s Christian Meditation will be compared with *The Conferences*. This analysis will disclose similarities and differences between present-day contemplative prayer forms and their Christian sources. We will focus more on the differences than the similarities; and this chapter will show significant differences and their roots, which will be further explored. These new findings will show that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are more than “re-discovered” Christian contemplative prayer forms from *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*, which are claims made by their originators.

1. Centering Prayer Compared with *The Cloud’s* Contemplative Prayer

1.1. Theories and Theologies: Prayer, Contemplation, Love, and Sin

Although it is often said that Centering Prayer is a form of contemplative prayer, according to Keating these activities are not the same. Traditionally, contemplation is understood as something which a human cannot do at will, but is a special gift given only to those who are called to this form of prayer by the Spirit of God. For this reason, he
distinguishes between Centering Prayer and contemplative prayer. For Keating, Centering Prayer is a useful method of “preparing for the gift of contemplation,” which is developed “under the more direct inspiration of the Spirit.”¹ Centering Prayer is “simply a method leading to contemplative prayer.”² Ernest E. Larkin, a practitioner of Centering Prayer and a Carmelite scholar, understands Centering Prayer as a bridge between meditation and contemplation, which supports Keating’s distinction.³

However, the differences between Centering Prayer and contemplative prayer are not that straightforward. In Keating’s Open Mind, Open Heart, the manual book for Centering Prayer, it is not clear at times whether he is speaking of Centering Prayer or contemplative prayer. In particular, as he describes the advanced experience of Centering Prayer, it seems to be a kind of contemplative prayer. If Centering Prayer is, as Keating says, the “first rung on the ladder of contemplative prayer, which rises step by step to union with God,” then Centering Prayer is not just a preparatory practice for contemplative prayer, but a form of contemplative prayer, the goal of which, like other contemplative prayer forms, is union with God.⁴

Keating takes the same theological stance as the author of The Cloud, in the sense that he claims apophatic contemplation is the path which leads one to know and unify with God.

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² Ibid., 5.


⁴ Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 34. Later Keating says, “We do not know when our prayer becomes contemplation in the strict sense. We only know that we are moving in this direction through our practice [of Centering Prayer], and that the Spirit is moving toward us” (Thomas Keating, Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003], 55).
as God is. Like *The Cloud’s* author, Keating stresses that God is not comprehensible to the natural faculties of a human being. Although he maintains that kataphatic and apophatic paths are not opposing methods but complementary to each other, Keating states that “Apophatic contemplation is a further stage”\(^5\) and “There is no greater way in which God can communicate with us than on the level of pure faith.”\(^6\) For Keating, pure faith means “Faith that is moving beyond the mental egoic level of discursive meditation and particular acts to the intuitive level of contemplation.”\(^7\) To experience God as God is, we have to go beyond conceptions and images that we attribute to Her/Him.

One of the major differences between Keating’s and *The Cloud’s* theologies lies in the place and role of love in contemplative work. Keating seems to agree with the author of *The Cloud*, that it is not knowledge, but love that allows us to know God. He says, “We cannot know Him with our mind; we can only know Him with our love.”\(^8\) Yet, in his whole contemplative theology, love is not a central element. Neither does love play a pivotal role in the dynamics of Centering Prayer. I do not mean that Keating does not pay attention to love at all. He often refers to God as Divine love, and he emphasizes how the love of God attracts and invites us to develop intimacy with Her/Him. Although he frequently mentions the act of the love of God, Keating does not address the role and importance of the love of the practitioner for God in contemplative prayer. This becomes clear when one reads the six-page long description of the “Essentials of the Centering Prayer Method” in *Open Mind*,

\(^{5}\) Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 42.

\(^{6}\) Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 83.

\(^{7}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{8}\) Ibid., 83.
Open Heart, in which love does not receive any special regard.\footnote{It is found in the Appendices of Open Mind, Open Heart, 138-143.} Especially, in the “Guidelines” of the Essentials, love is not mentioned at all, except as a suggested example for the sacred word which is equivalent to the prayer word.

What is the primary attitude or disposition with which the contemplative engages in contemplative practice, if it is not love? In Centering Prayer, it is the “intention to consent” to the presence and action of God within.\footnote{It is important to know that the term “consent” appears several times in The Cloud.} Consent signifies one’s receptive attitude toward God—who is “the ground in which our being is rooted, the Source from whom our life emerges at every moment.”\footnote{Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 36.} By consenting to the presence of God, we allow God to do what S/He intends to do for us. When it comes to practical terms, “consent” is translated into “surrender” and “let go.” Keating says, “Surrendering oneself to God is a more developed kind of consent.”\footnote{Ibid., 72.} For this reason, Cynthia Bourgeault, one of the most influential practitioners and scholars of Centering Prayer, calls it a “surrender method.” According to her, “The Power of this form of meditation” resides “entirely in the gesture of release itself.”\footnote{Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004), 21.}

Consent is also an important posture for the author of The Cloud. The contemplative’s consent is required to let God do Her/His work. However, it does not undermine the supreme role of the contemplative’s love toward God in the cloud of unknowing. Moreover, consent is understood as an active power of the will which is called
for loving God and letting God love the contemplative.\textsuperscript{14} As Vandenbroucke says, “When it is a question of going to God, it is love that counts…The contemplative life is ordered to love.”\textsuperscript{15}

Keating’s other significant theological difference from The Cloud is his relatively positive view of, and emphasis on, the “fundamental goodness of human nature.” For Keating, spiritual growth is essentially grounded in one’s faith in one’s own basic goodness.\textsuperscript{16} It is this “basic core of goodness” that is “capable of unlimited development; indeed, of becoming transformed into Christ and deified.” The core of human goodness is one’s “true Self,” the gift of being, and accepting it provides a “quantum leap in the spiritual journey.”\textsuperscript{17} Keating goes on to even say, “Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing.”\textsuperscript{18} In some ways, it seems to resonate with The Cloud’s author’s affirmation that “God is our being.”

However, there are significant differences between the two. In Open Mind, Open Heart, while bringing up the notion of sin or “sins” several times, Keating does not speak of it as a practical issue which the contemplative will face on the journey of Centering Prayer, except for saying, “The experience of being loved by the Ultimate Mystery…convinces us that all the mistakes we have made and all the sins we have committed are completely

\textsuperscript{14} James Walsh, ed., The Cloud of Unknowing (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 118-119 (chap 2). The Cloud’s author also says, “Will is a power by means of which we choose the good…. Through the will we love God, desire God, and finally come to rest in God with full liking and full consent” (Ibid., 245 [chap 64]).


\textsuperscript{16} Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 13.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 127.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
forgiven and forgotten.”\textsuperscript{19} He does address it very generally in his last chapter: “Guidelines for Christian Life, Growth and Transformation,” but this chapter does not directly speak of the practice of Centering Prayer. In contrast, in \textit{The Cloud}, the contemplative is expected to painfully recognize one’s sinfulness as s/he moves closer toward God.\textsuperscript{20} In Chapters 38, 39 and 40, \textit{The Cloud} speaks of how to overcome the heaviness of sin and the struggle of sensing one sinful nature in contemplative prayer. What is striking is that the author of \textit{The Cloud} asks the contemplative to use the word “sin” as a prayer word. He says, “Feel sin as a lump, never mind what it is, it is nothing else but yourself. Cry out spiritually, always with the same cry, ‘Sin, sin, sin.’”\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, it is not something that the contemplative exercises only occasionally but is a persevering element. The author of \textit{The Cloud} asserts, “Since you must always experience in some measure…this foul, stinking lump of sin, as it were joined to and congealed with the substance of your being, you must fix your intention on one of these two words alternatively, ‘sin’ and ‘God.’”\textsuperscript{22}

For Keating, it is the false self that separates oneself from God. According to him, the false self is one’s psychological programming. In his words, “The false self is a monumental illusion, a load of habitual thinking patterns and emotional routines that are stored in the brain and nervous system.”\textsuperscript{23} The “foundation of the false self” is the “constellation of prerational reactions” such as “all the self-serving habits,” “all the

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 87. In \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart}, the word “sin” or “sins” is used only nine times by Keating. Eight of these appear in the very last chapter which does not directly speak of the practice of Centering Prayer.

\textsuperscript{20} For the details, see “The Process and Effect” of \textit{The Cloud}’s contemplative prayer in Chapter One.

\textsuperscript{21} Walsh, \textit{The Cloud}, 197 (chap 40).

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 198 (chap 40).

\textsuperscript{23} Keating, \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart}, 16.
emotional damage,” and “all the harm” one has developed or experienced in childhood.\textsuperscript{24} The false self has developed by universal human condition of “coming to full reflective self-consciousness without the certitude of personal union with God.” Keating thinks of “original sin” as “a way of describing [this] human condition.”\textsuperscript{25}

To sum up, for Keating the false self is merely an illusion while the true Self has “inviolable goodness” and is “dynamic and tends to grow of itself.”\textsuperscript{26} So letting go of the illusions and emotional programming of the false self, through a process of gentle surrendering is central to the practice of Centering Prayer.

1.2. Methods: Receptive and Active Prayer

The most obvious differences between Keating’s Centering Prayer and \textit{The Cloud} are found in their methods. As we explained in Chapter One, in \textit{The Cloud} the contemplative maintains a two-dimensional strategy to move toward God, that is, first laboriously keeping all thoughts under the cloud of forgetting and second crying out to God with a sudden impulse of love in the cloud of unknowing. It will be interesting to see how this dual strategy of \textit{The Cloud} differs in Centering Prayer and in what sense we can say Centering Prayer adapted contemplative prayer from \textit{The Cloud}.

Keating broadly distinguishes the various forms of Christian contemplative prayer into two types: concentrative and receptive. He places contemplative prayer forms on a continuum between these two poles. On the scale, Centering Prayer is classified as the most

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 129.
receptive method. By receptive, Keating means that “Centering Prayer is not…an exercise of attention. It is an exercise of intention. It is our will, our faculty of choice, that we are cultivating.”27 With an “exercise of attention,” Keating refers to concentrative practice, which maintains a singular focal point by choosing a specific image or word and focusing undivided attention upon it. Keating’s examples are the rosary, visualizations, and affective prayer.28 In contrast, in Centering Prayer as an “exercise of intention,” Keating says, “You do not attend to any particular thought content. Rather, you intend to go to your inmost being, where you believe God dwells. You are opening to Him by pure faith, not by means of concepts or feelings.”29

The best way to understand the method of Centering Prayer and its receptive nature is to review its practical instructions. Four guidelines for practicing Centering Prayer are given by Keating. First, at the beginning of prayer, one is to choose, while being guided by the Spirit of God, a sacred word which expresses one’s intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. Second, with eyes closed one introduces the sacred word. And third, in response to arising thoughts, one continuously returns to the sacred word “as a way of reaffirming [one’s] original intention to consent to God’s presence and action within [oneself].”30 The fourth guideline is for one to remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes, to readjust to the external senses before returning to ordinary consciousness, at the end of the prayer. The heart of Centering Prayer is to continuously

28 Ibid.
maintain and, when necessary, renew one’s intention to consent to the presence and action within oneself, with help of the sacred word.

It will be helpful to compare the “sacred word” in Centering Prayer and the “little word” in The Cloud’s contemplative work, to appreciate their similarities and differences. Even though they seem similar at first glance, there are more differences than similarities between them. Both are very short—one single word is recommended—which expresses one’s intention.

However, the ways of employing the instrumental word during contemplative prayer are not alike. Concerning the sacred word, Keating says, “Your attention should not be directed to any particular thought, including the sacred word. The sacred word is only a means of re-establishing your intention of opening to the true Self and to God, who is at the center of it.”\(^{31}\) As you are distracted by thoughts, you “return to the sacred word as easily as possible;” or, “gently place the sacred word in your awareness.”\(^{32}\) In Centering Prayer, the role of the sacred word is only to maintain one’s intention to open oneself to God.\(^{33}\) In calling upon the sacred word, one neither cries vigorously “either verbally or in thought or desire” nor expresses one’s longing of love toward God, as instructed in The Cloud.\(^{34}\) On the contrary, the sacred word appears to be lacking in any loving affection—which might even inhibit the dynamic in that context. Furthermore, in contrast to The Cloud, the practitioner is

\(^{31}\) Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 42.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 40. Emphasis is mine.

\(^{33}\) For Keating, the “actual” meaning of the sacred word is insignificant. What is important is the meaning the practitioner gives to it as the expression of her/his intent. He says, “The sacred word is only a gesture, an expression of your intent; it has no meaning other than your intent. You should choose your word as a simple expression of that intent, not as a source of meaning or emotional attraction. The less the word means to you, the better off you are” [Ibid., 49].

\(^{34}\) Walsh, The Cloud, 196 (chap 39).
advised to think the sacred word “easily” and “gently.” From the formal guidelines, “We introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.”

Such ease and gentleness are foreign to The Cloud author, where the practitioner “bursts upon the ears of almighty God” with her/his prayer word. As if s/he were in extreme danger, s/he is admonished to cry out with the word, which surges from the depths of the spirit.

Another significant difference appears in the treatment of undesired thoughts arising in one’s mind during prayer. According to The Cloud, intruding thoughts have to do with the cloud of forgetting. In order to be free from thoughts and images and to remain in the cloud of unknowing, which is between God and oneself, one must fashion and place the cloud of forgetting between oneself and all created things including conceptual and emotional material. With help of the cloud of forgetting, one can keep all thoughts at bay. Yet, his language in handling thoughts is resolute and vigorous in nuance. For example, in Chapters 7 and 8, you are advised to “strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting” and “put down any…thought, and cover it up with the cloud of forgetting.” In Chapter 31, you are told to bravely “step above [a thought] with a fervent impulse of love, and tread it down under your feet. And try to cover them with a thick cloud of forgetting….In short, as often as they arise, as often put them down.” It is regarded even as a deadly sin, if one does not quickly repudiate an intruding thought.

35 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 140.
36 Walsh, The Cloud, 131-139 (chaps 7-8).
37 Ibid., 180 (chap 31).
38 Ibid., 142 (chap 10).
By contrast, in Centering Prayer, effortlessness and letting go are the primary tactics for intruding thoughts. The practitioner goes beyond the activities of ordinary consciousness to the innermost of oneself, “not by effort, but by letting go of whatever is there.”39 “Without effort, without trying, we sink into this Presence [of God], letting everything else go.”40 Keating says, “Centering Prayer is an exercise in letting go. That is all it is.”41 Since Centering Prayer assures its practitioner that having thoughts during prayer is “perfectly normal,” actively putting down or suppressing thoughts, as The Cloud author teaches, are considered unhealthy reactions to thoughts.42

The primary principle in practicing Centering Prayer is the consent of the will, not longing love. It is an exercise of intention—intention to open to, and receive, God. The practitioner moves toward God through the means of surrender. Through practice, “The will is developing the habit of surrender to God’s increasing presence and action.”43 In Centering Prayer, the role of the practitioner is an “extremely gentle one.”44 As one finds oneself thinking something else, one “ever-so gently” returns to the sacred word, the symbol of one’s intention. Gentleness, effortlessness and letting go are crucial attitudes in Centering Prayer.

1.3. Process and Effects: Three Levels of Consciousness

39 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 14.

40 Ibid., 137.

41 Ibid., 74.

42 Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 23. She claims that “letting go” is a “simple and elegant solution to the problem of monkey mind” (Ibid.).

43 Keating, Intimacy with God, 57.

44 Ibid., 55.
It is not an easy task to describe the developmental process and effects of Centering Prayer because Keating integrates processes and ideas from a variety of traditions and disciplines—Christianity, Eastern religions, and psychology—to explain what will happen when one undertakes the practice. So here I will briefly outline the spiritual journey that the practitioner of Centering Prayer may undergo.

The process of the spiritual journey led by Centering Prayer involves the development of “consciousness” or “awareness,” which are interchangeable to Keating. He defines awareness as the “act of being aware of a particular or general perception; another term for consciousness.”

Consciousness is the “participation God has given us in His own being.”

A human being has the “historical evolution of [her/his] nature from lower forms of consciousness” and “has the incredible potential to become divine.” According to Keating, the spiritual journey is a movement toward a higher level of consciousness in a reconstruction of it which “empowers one to perceive, relate and respond with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through, and beyond everything that exists.” The discipline of Centering Prayer leads the practitioner’s consciousness to awaken to the divine presence.

Keating claims there are three levels of awareness or consciousness—the ordinary level, the spiritual level, and the divine presence—and Centering Prayer helps move one


46 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 56.

47 Ibid., 95.

48 Ibid., 4. It is interesting to recognize that for Keating, the spiritual journey is one of developing consciousness, not intention, although he refers to Centering Prayer as an “exercise of intention.” In the following chapter, we will explore possible influences on the significance of consciousness in Keating’s contemplative theology.
from the ordinary level of awareness to the divine presence. To explain these different levels of awareness, Keating likens it to a river, what he calls the river of awareness. First, the ordinary psychological level of awareness is like the surface of the river. Like various boats and debris on the surface of the river, thoughts constantly come and go. It is important to keep in mind that “a thought in the context of this method is any perception that appears on the inner screen of consciousness.”

Many people live just on the ordinary level of awareness, where “sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries flow.” They are easily identified with the “ordinary flow of [their] thoughts” and do not recognize that there are deeper levels of consciousness.

Through practicing Centering Prayer, one begins to realize there is a deeper level of awareness, that is, a spiritual level of awareness beneath the ordinary psychological level. By not being caught up with fleeting thoughts on the surface of consciousness, one is able to gradually develop a spiritual attentiveness. In fact, thoughts and feelings on the ordinary level of awareness are resting on the “inner stream of consciousness, which is our participation in God’s being.” Keating says, “The river itself stands for the spiritual level of consciousness. By practicing a discipline of prayer like Centering Prayer, the mind is less dominated by external events and our emotional reaction to them.”

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49 Ibid., 35. Keating also says, “The term, ‘thoughts’ in our explanation of Centering Prayer includes not just concepts or images, but feelings, sense impressions from within and without, and even spiritual sensations. Every perception whatsoever goes under the umbrella of ‘thoughts’” (Intimacy with God, 69).

50 Keating, Intimacy with God, 62.

51 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 34-35.

52 Ibid., 40.

53 Ibid., 35.

54 Keating, Intimacy with God, 62.
level of awareness, we are capable to “see that we are not our thoughts. We have thoughts, but we are not our thoughts.”

In Bourgeault’s words, “spiritual awareness perceives through an intuitive grasp of the whole and an innate sense of belonging,” not “through self-reflexive consciousness.”

With the development of spiritual awareness at the second level, the practitioner sees her/himself as other than the thoughts on the surface, and traverses to a deeper level of awareness.

At the third level, the practitioner’s awareness is touched by the divine presence, as spiritual attentiveness deepens. Since we are not fundamentally separated from the presence of God, “our awareness of the divine presence begins to reawaken.”

Keating says, “As your sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of your being develops through the daily practice of this prayer, you may begin to find the awareness of God’s presence.”

For Keating, “the depth of the river [of awareness] stands for the True Self and the Divine Presence, the source from which our life emerges at every moment.”

It is when one discovers the third level of awareness that the effects of Centering Prayer are realized. Due to a deep sense of the divine presence, one comes to find true happiness and security, and then to reconnect with one’s true self. Drawing upon theories of developmental and transpersonal psychology, Keating asserts that, because of the human condition, in very early childhood we develop the “false self” or “full reflective self-consciousness…This gives rise to our intimate sense of incompleteness, dividedness, isolation, isolation, isolation.”

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55 Ibid., 69.
57 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 78.
58 Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 37.
and guilt.”

Although it was “necessary for survival during the fragile period of childhood,” as long as one clings to the false self, one’s life is conditioned by one’s “childish programs for happiness.” Consequently, losing contact with the divine presence, we live only on the ordinary psychological level of awareness and the false self comes to the fore to interact with the events and occurrences of life. Because the primary functioning of the false self is self-protectiveness and the repression of pain, when the false self copes with life situations, “we experience ourselves most of the time dominated by external events and our emotional reactions to them.”

What Keating calls “divine therapy” is activated within the practitioner by the awareness of divine presence. This is an interior purification. When one experiences the deep rest caused by a sense of the divine presence, while practicing Centering Prayer, the “defense mechanisms relax and the undigested emotional material of early life emerges from the unconscious” and is released. In the process of divine therapy, especially when the repressed emotional materials are unloaded from the unconscious, Keating claims that the practitioner is bombarded with difficult thoughts and feelings. In his theory, “Thoughts are not only inevitable, but an integral part of the process of healing and growth initiated by God.”

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60 Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 127. For Keating, the false self is an “emotional programs of early childhood” (Ibid, 75).

61 Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 40. It is not clear whether Keating’s notion of “false self” refers to “normal egoic consciousness,” which is necessary for us to function in the world. It appears to be characterized almost as a total negative, especially in *Open Mind, Open Heart*, manual for Centering Prayer.


63 Ibid., 76-78.

64 Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 113.
thoughts, it is critical not to resist thoughts or treat them as distractions.\textsuperscript{65} If one allows divine therapy to work, the false self comes to an end and the true self takes its place and “builds the new self with the motivating force of divine love.”\textsuperscript{66} Through divine therapy and by being freed from the old programmed false self, one approaches the abiding state of union with God.

Further, while regarding unwanted thoughts and feelings as a necessary and natural phenomenon in the practice of Centering Prayer, Keating claims that the proper understanding and handling of this material at each level of the development of consciousness are crucial. In fact, in \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart}, Keating distinguishes five types of thoughts which the practitioner may have during the prayer. He says, “The appropriate response to each one varies according to the thought.”\textsuperscript{67} In the next chapter, we will analyze more deeply Keating’s understanding of consciousness and the appropriate handling of different types of thoughts in Centering Prayer as we explore the possible influences of Eastern spirituality on them. However, even at this point it is clear that Keating’s view of thoughts in their relation to the development of consciousness does not resemble the author of \textit{The Cloud}.

\textbf{1.4. The participants: the Calling to Contemplative Prayer}

Centering Prayer is open to anyone who has a desire to learn. This makes Keating’s position different from that of \textit{The Cloud}, which claims that contemplative prayer is an

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{65} Keating, \textit{Intimacy with God}, 98-99. \\
\textsuperscript{66} Keating, \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart}, 129. \\
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 111.
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advanced form of prayer and should be restricted to those who are well prepared for it.

Keating insists that Centering Prayer is not reserved for religious or spiritual elites. He believes that Centering Prayer is appropriate for any Christian who wants to experience the divine presence in everyday life and grow in an intimate relationship with God in deep silence, while he says that some people who have learned and practiced it will give it up if they are not ready for it. In a recent interview, he said that even non-Christians can practice it, in the same way that Eastern meditation methods are open to all people. Keating thinks of contemplative prayer and life as anyone’s birthright. He dares to say, “You only have to be a human being to be eligible to become a contemplative” in response to the question: “Is it really possible for people who run around all day to be contemplative?”

Keating is aware of the criticism from traditional points of view that contemplative prayer is a special calling only for those who are led to it by the grace of God. As we saw in the previous chapter, the author of The Cloud claims that contemplative prayer should be taught to those who are prepared to receive it and are ready to live the contemplative life. According to John of the Cross, whose teachings have significantly impacted the contemporary understanding of contemplative spirituality, one cannot begin to practice contemplative prayer at her/his own will. It is only when one has genuinely and extensively practiced discursive meditation but desires more that it is time to move onto contemplative prayer. By acknowledging this traditional perspective, Keating tries to explain the role of Centering Prayer in relation to lectio divina. Believing lectio divina as the most traditional Christian spiritual practice, whose goal is to lead one from reflective meditation of a scripture


69 Keating, Open Mind and Open Heart, 41.
to wordless contemplative stillness, he maintains that Centering Prayer has a beneficial role to play in helping the practitioner make that transition. Keating asserts that Centering Prayer reduces the unwanted mental chatter and ideation that interfere with the transition from discursive meditation.  

Over his career, Keating seems to have come to a more affirmative stance regarding this matter. In *Open Mind, Open Heart*, his first book on Centering Prayer, he cautiously speaks of Centering Prayer as a method which “prepare[s] ourselves for the gift of contemplation instead of waiting for God to do everything.” In a later book, *Intimacy with God*, Keating asks the reader and himself, “Can we begin a life of prayer with Centering Prayer” without having practiced discursive meditation? This question is answered with another rhetorical question, “Why is it so hard to imagine a person, even an ‘inexperienced’ Christian, being moved by the contemplative gifts of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge while praying?” Because one’s desire to pray is the grace of the Holy Spirit, he concludes, if people come to learn Centering Prayer, “they must have been inspired by something.” For Keating, therefore, Centering Prayer is open to everyone who desires to do it, because the desire itself is a sign of being inspired by the Holy Spirit.

2. Christian Meditation Compared with the Contemplative Prayer of *The Conferences*.

70 Ibid., 28-29.
71 Ibid., 29.
73 Ibid., 122-123.
74 Ibid., 128.
2.1. Theories and Theologies: Simplicity of Mind and Heart

To begin, it should be noted that John Main’s writings consist largely of his talks or letters. His primary goal is to teach Christian Meditation and offer practical instruction, guidance, and encouragement to practitioners. His main audiences for these talks were participants of his weekly meditation groups. *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*, was a collection of three lectures on “Prayer in the tradition of John Cassian,” delivered to the Trappist monks of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Thus, Main’s works are more practical and encouraging than academic and systematic.

Generally speaking, both Cassian and Main believe that a deeper state of prayer brings one to wordless and imageless communion with God. Main emphasizes the necessity of going beyond images and ideas in meditation. He asserts, “we renounce thought, imagination, even self-consciousness itself; the matrix of language and reflection.” Laurence Freeman, a pupil and successor of Main, affirms this: “For [Main], [prayer] was pure attention, in which the searchlight of consciousness is turned completely away from its own streams of thought, feeling, or perception.”

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76 John Main, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks* (Tucson, AZ: Medio Media, 1999). The talks were given in November, 1976 and were first published in three consecutive issues of *Cistercian Studies* 12 (1977), 184-90, 272-81; 13 (1978), 75-83, under the title, “Prayer in the Tradition of John Cassian.” However, the collected work has been published with a new title, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*.

77 Main, *Christian Meditation*, 33.

“Simplicity,” or poverty—which is interchangeable with simplicity—is at the center of Main’s teaching and practice of contemplative prayer. Simplicity is what matters most—it is the most recurring theme in Main’s Christian Meditation teaching. Christian Meditation, a “simple” practice, is also a “simplifying” practice. “The venerable tradition” of Cassian’s contemplative prayer is, Main insists, “above all attributable to its utter simplicity.” He frequently refers to Cassian’s contemplative prayer as the “prayer of poverty” and the “way of poverty.” For Main, it is the “fidelity to the poverty,” and the “commitment to simplicity” that leads one to transcend the limitations of intellect and language. Through the simple practice of Christian Meditation, a person becomes “poor in spirit.” Main claims, “There is only one meditation—the one where we are faithful to the deepening of our poverty.”

Through careful observation of Main’s use of the term “simplicity,” we see that he uses it both as a means and an end. Simplicity is what one comes to experience as an outcome of meditation as well as what permits one to reach that experience of being simple. As an end, the regular practice of Christian Meditation leads one to become more simplified. In meditating, one eventually finds oneself “in a state of utter simplicity,” able to “enter the simplicity of God.” In Main’s words, “the process [of meditation] that leads us to

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79 Main, Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation, 29. He stresses that “The more we talk about meditation the more we need to remind ourselves of it as a way of simplicity” (Ibid., 26).

80 Main, Letters from the Heart, 14.

81 In his writings, “meditation is the way of simplicity” or similar statements are frequently repeated.

82 Main, Word into Silence, 53.

83 Main, Letters from the Heart, 12.

84 Main, Moment of Christ, 26.
simplicity, to silence, to awareness and to transcendence which is leaving ourselves behind, leaving our own thoughts behind, leaving our imagination and our own ideas behind.”

Through the practice of Christian Meditation, one comes “to surrender complexity, to surrender dividedness and stay with the divine oneness of God.” One eventually stills the processes of the mind and the senses. The “spirit of poverty” is the resultant experience to which one is led through meditation.

As a means, simplicity is a primary discipline practitioners must follow. According to Main, Christian Meditation is a practice and is the way of simplicity. He says, “To teach people how to meditate” is “a work that is largely taken up with persuading people of the simplicity of meditation.” Main and Lawrence agree that one challenge practitioners encounter in learning Christian Meditation is that it is too simple to be believed.

What most characterizes the practice of Christian Meditation as simple is its very straightforward instruction, especially its “radical simplicity of the mantra.” The commitment one makes during the practice of Christian Meditation is, Main stresses, “not to an abstract ideal or to an ideology but to simplicity, the simplicity that is required to sit down…, to close [one’s] eyes and to recite the one word [mantra] from beginning to end.” Above all, reciting a mantra for the entire period of meditation is the very core of Christian Meditation’s simplicity. As Main says, “I repeat this to re-emphasize what is essential and perhaps the only advice worth giving about meditation, which is simply: to say your

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85 Ibid., 3.
86 Main, The Heart of Creation, 58.
87 Main, Letters from the Heart, 17-18.
88 Main, Word into Silence, 30.
89 Main, Moment of Christ, 28.
mantra.” For him, “Learning to meditate is learning to say the mantra, and...it is as simple as this.”

However, Main’s appreciation of poverty in Conference 10 shows limitations. He understands Cassian’s teaching on poverty as a simplified state of consciousness. However, he overlooks Cassian’s other teaching on poverty—a disposition or attitude of being poor, powerless, and in need of God’s grace. According to Cassian, “one who realizes that [one] has no protection...who understands that [one’s] life and property are sustained at each and every moment by divine assistance, and who rightly professes that [one] is the Lord’s true beggar” has “greater or holier” poverty. It is poverty that leads the human to “cry out humbly” to God for help. It concerns humility—the opposite of pride. By reciting the biblical formula of Psalm 70:1, one not only simplifies one’s mind, but also humbly expresses one’s fundamental human need for God’s grace. Cassian’s teaching of poverty has to do with powerlessness and humility, and this is missing in Main’s understanding. (In the following section, we will explore practical aspects of poverty and simplicity in Christian Meditation.)

In regarding simplicity as Cassian’s central teaching on prayer, Main does not give sufficient attention to Cassian’s “purity of heart,” the centerpiece of Cassian’s theology. Although Main occasionally uses the term, it is not considered to be an essential preparatory

90 Main, *Word into Silence*, 56-57.
91 Ibid., 54.
94 Ibid.
element for contemplative prayer, but to be the outcome of it. For him, “meditation is the way to purity of heart, leaving behind all fear and all limitation.”\textsuperscript{95} In \textit{Word into Silence}, he says, “The way to purity of heart, to full and clear awareness, is the way of the poverty…of the mantra.”\textsuperscript{96} It is different from Cassian’s position, since, for him, purity of heart is affected by contemplative prayer, but also a prerequisite for it. A certain degree of purity of heart is the fundamental groundwork for undertaking Cassian’s unceasing prayer. Main’s limited understanding of Cassian’s purity of heart will become more apparent in his understanding of appropriate participants of contemplative prayer.

\subsection*{2.2. Methods: Crying Out to God and Listening to the Sound of the Mantra}

In the previous chapter, we learned that Cassian’s contemplative prayer is deeply rooted in a scriptural verse: “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue” (Psalm 70:1). This formula is applied as an “ejaculatory prayer” as well as “antirrhetic prayer.”\textsuperscript{97} To put it another way, one is told to use this formula to overcome every temptation and to cry out to God for help, whatever situation one finds oneself. It should be repeated in every situation, because there is no time in which one is not in need of divine help and is free from temptation. Cassian’s contemplative prayer requires great humility and utter dependence on divine grace. Keeping this in mind, let us explore the practical aspects of Christian Meditation.

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\textsuperscript{95} Main, \textit{Moment of Christ}, 29.

\textsuperscript{96} Main, \textit{Word into Silence}, 64. Main speaks of “purity of heart” as the “clarity,” to which “meditation brings us” (Ibid., \textit{Fully Alive}, 21).

\textsuperscript{97} See the previous chapter for the “method” of Cassian’s contemplative prayer.
Christian Meditation is a mantra prayer. Main does not shy away from using the Hindu term “mantra” for the prayer-word or phrase that is silently repeated during a period of meditation.\textsuperscript{98} Main and Freeman call Christian Meditation’s formal instruction “How to Meditate.” The theological simplicity of Christian Meditation is fully apparent in its practice. It is so simple that its description is less than ninety words.\textsuperscript{99} In Christian Meditation, one is taught to sit upright, close the eyes, and interiorly repeat a mantra. One should “not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word.”\textsuperscript{100} The mantra that Main recommends is maranatha, which means “Come Lord.”\textsuperscript{101} The reason John Main recommends maranatha as a mantra is that it is Aramaic, Jesus’ language, and “one of the earliest recorded Christian prayers.”\textsuperscript{102} However, one should not think, or ponder about, the meaning of it, but simply recite it inwardly.

Cassian’s contemplative prayer and Christian Meditation both use a brief biblical verse or phrase and require the practitioners to recite it uninterruptedly throughout the prayer. Cassian and Main both stress the importance of the recitation of the prayer-word.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to recognize practical differences between the two prayer forms. Christian Meditation’s manner of repeating a prayer formula is different from

\textsuperscript{98} In this aspect, Main is different from Keating, who seems to be reluctant to call the prayer-word mantra.

\textsuperscript{99} It is found in a convenient place so that readers can find it easily.

\textsuperscript{100} Main, \textit{The Heart of Creation}, ix.

\textsuperscript{101} This phrase is found in two places in the New Testament: Revelation 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 16:22. Main believes that the best way to find one’s mantra is with a help of one’s meditation teacher.

Cassian’s. First, Main teaches the practitioners to say the mantra as four syllables of equal length: ma-ra-na-tha. Although it is not essential, he suggests that the mantra can be associated with breathing. He believes that it is best to say the mantra on the in-breath and breathe out in silence.¹⁰³ By doing so, the practitioners find their own rhythm and speed for reciting the mantra. According to Paul Harris, another advocate of Christian Meditation, it is “important to come to a comfortable rhythmic pattern reciting the mantra in conjunction with one’s breathing and build this discipline into one’s meditative practice.”¹⁰⁴ The rhythm of saying the mantra is to become natural to each practitioner.

Second, for Main, Christian Meditation is a way of great gentleness. Gentleness is an important attitude in practice. Main advises his practitioners to “use all your energy to say your mantra with absolute gentleness.”¹⁰⁵ One should recite a mantra “calmly, peacefully, and with complete simplicity.”¹⁰⁶ In spite of having undesired thoughts in mind, one is instructed to say a mantra “very gently” and to let go of thoughts “without force.”¹⁰⁷ One should not fight against thoughts as if one were to “attempt to hit the other thoughts over the head so as to banish them,”¹⁰⁸ but rather one ought to repeat the mantra in a relaxed way.¹⁰⁹ Maintaining a gentle inner posture is a crucial characteristic of Christian Meditation.


¹⁰⁶ Main, Word into Silence, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Main and Freeman, “John Main & Laurence Freeman Respond to Questions on Meditation,” 18.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 18.
Third, it is interesting to learn that not only saying a mantra but also listening to it is an essential part of the practice. Their instruction, “How to Meditate,” directs one to “listen to it as you say it.”

To listen to the mantra means that you say it as a word and as a sound. What one listens to is not the meaning, but the sound of the mantra. In his talk to the Trappist monks at Gethsemani Abbey, Main says, “The essence, the art of saying the mantra is: to say it, to sound it, to listen to it and just to ignore the distractions.”

“The mantra is just like a harmonic,” so by listening to it, you come to “listen to that harmonic sounding in [your] own heart.” Main believes that the mantra sounds by itself with a certain power. He says, “Let the mantra sound in your heart and mind, rooting you gently in the center….Let the constantly sounding mantra gently lead you to a depth beyond words and thoughts and images.” For Main, to learn to meditate means to learn to listen to the mantra as “the profoundest and most supreme sound in your being.”

These three pivotal practical elements are absent in, and foreign to, Cassian’s teachings on contemplative prayer. Although it might occasionally happen for the practitioner to repeat the prayer-phrase gently and peacefully, this is not his/her primary attitude. In Cassian’s understanding, the practitioners are not able to “control [their]

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109 Main, Moment of Christ, 17.
110 Main, Heart of Creation, ix.
111 Ibid., 92.
112 Main, Christian Meditation, 45.
114 Main, The Way of Unknowing, 22.
115 Main and Freeman, “John Main & Laurence Freeman Respond to Questions on Meditation,” 19.
wandering thoughts” and to “even pour our [their] prayer” by themselves.\textsuperscript{116} Also, undesired thoughts are even viewed as possibly being demonic passions and from the eight vices.\textsuperscript{117} In this context, Psalm 70:1, “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue,” is a powerful weapon which defeats all kinds of unwanted thoughts. If a person is “unable to control [his/her] wandering thoughts,” s/he is not told to repeat the prayer-phrase in a gentle manner, but is instructed to “cry out in [her/his] need.”\textsuperscript{118} In this way, Psalm 70:1 plays a significant role as an “unassailable wall…for all those who labor under the attack of demons.”\textsuperscript{119} Thus, the practitioner says it to reject undesired thoughts.

Directions to repeat the prayer-phrase rhythmically, possibly in conjunction with one’s breathing, and listening to the sound of it, are also not present in Cassian’s instruction on unceasing prayer. While believing that these two practical guidelines help practitioners to move towards the center of the self where God dwells, Main asks them not to ponder upon the meaning of the prayer-word. He thinks that engaging with its meaning generates thoughts and images in the mind, so they should not think of the meaning.\textsuperscript{120} However, paying no attention to the meaning of the prayer-phrase during the time of prayer is incompatible with Cassian’s teaching on contemplative prayer. Rather, he encourages his

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{116} Ramsey, trans., \textit{John Cassian: The Conferences}, 381 (10.10.10).
\item \textsuperscript{117} It is important to recognize that, for Cassian, not all thoughts in contemplative prayer are negative and to be avoided. There are “spiritual thoughts” revealed to the contemplative, “due to a sudden illumination from the Lord.” “To abide in these [thoughts],” s/he “should frequently and anxiously cry: ‘O God, incline unto my aid, O Lord, make haste to help me’” (Ibid., [10.10.12]). Cassian distinguishes “three sources of [the] thoughts”—“from God, from the devil, and from ourselves.” Spiritual thoughts are granted to the contemplatives by “the illumination of the Holy Spirit” (Ibid., [1.19.1]).
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ramsey, trans., \textit{John Cassian: The Conferences}, 381-2 (10.10.12).
\item \textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 379-380 (10.10.5).
\item \textsuperscript{120} In his words, “If you start thinking of the meaning, then you are immediately likely to drift off into images of what you’re thinking about or of yourself in relation to it. The essence of meditating is to have no thoughts, no images” (Main, \textit{Heart of Creation}, 92).
\end{footnotes}
monks to ponder upon the scriptural verse. For Cassian, not only the simplicity, but also the very meaning, of the pray-phrase is crucial. Psalm 70:1 shows the attitude of contemplative prayer, as it reflects the practitioner’s humility, desperate need of God’s help, and sincere invocation for divine grace. According to Cassian, the practitioner has to meditate upon the verse with “all the dispositions” expressed in the psalm. So, “the power of what is said” in the prayer-phrase cannot be put aside, but should be fully taken in.

2.3. Process and Effects: Self, Other, and Stages

Here we are challenged by Main’s lack of interest in elaborating the process of his contemplative practice. His writings are almost exclusively geared to providing practical instruction and encouragement for those who practice it. Freeman clearly points this out: “John Main’s essential concern is to help people get started. He is therefore reluctant to describe in detail more ‘advanced’ stages of the practice of meditation as this could easily pander to mere curiosity, while what people need is to jump in and to learn from their own experience.”

For Main, contemplative prayer is a journey from one’s false self to one’s true self and to God. The initial step is to find one’s true self. To do so, we have to leave behind “all the illusions about ourselves..., which we have either created for ourselves or received from the past.” We have false ideas and images about ourselves such as what we think we have been, what we should be, or what we need to become. Due to the lack of true self-knowledge,

121 Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 384 (10.11.4).


123 Ibid., *Word into Silence*, 23.
we are so self-conscious and self-preoccupied that we remain not “conscious of the Spirit within us, alive and active in our inmost centers.”124 In this first step, Christian Meditation works as a way to “a discovery of self that takes us far beyond narrow self-consciousness.”125

Finding one’s true self means entering into one’s own heart, the center of one’s being. Main uses the analogy that one has to “set [one’s] own house in order” so as to “find,” “enter into,” and “dwell within” oneself.126 He makes it clear that the way to one’s own center is not a process of self-rejection, but rather self-affirmation.127 Yet, one can affirm one’s true self by renouncing that with which one has mistakenly identified. Main says, “In prayer we divest ourselves of the illusion of the isolating ego: we do so in a sustained act of Faith by concentrating our entire self away from the idea of ourselves, by concentrating on our real Self, created by God, redeemed by Jesus, a temple of the Holy Spirit.”128 By giving up illusory thoughts and images about oneself, one discovers one’s “irreducible selfhood.”129 This is the experience of one’s own “personal and infinite capacity to be loved.”130

However, the discovery of one’s true self is, though essential, merely a first step. Main believes that awakening to, and experiencing, the true self is the “essential

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124 Main, Letter from the Heart, 94.
125 Main, Word into Silence, 20-22.
126 Ibid., 20-22.
127 Ibid., 4.
128 Main, Christian Meditation, 32.
129 Ibid., 59.
130 Main, Christian Meditation, 32.
‘steppingstone’ through which one moves toward God.\textsuperscript{131} Once awakened to the true self, a person has come to have the “confidence necessary to take the next step,” that is, “to stop looking at our new-found self, to turn the searchlight off ourselves and onto the Other.”\textsuperscript{132} At this point, one’s contemplative prayer becomes “self-surrendering” and “self-emptying.”\textsuperscript{133} One must radically surrender everything one has and knows. This is the act of faith and courage, “because we leave ourselves behind before the Other appears, and with no pre-packaged guarantee that [God] will appear.”\textsuperscript{134} According to Main, this is what Jesus meant when he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”\textsuperscript{135}

Through this bold act of self-impoverishment and self-emptiness, one eventually comes to find God at the center of one’s being.\textsuperscript{136} This experience brings forth a fundamental shift in one’s relationship with everything. One enters into a profound harmony with oneself, the whole of creation, and God. It becomes possible because one realizes “that there is only one center, that that center is everywhere and that meditation is the way of being linked to it in our own center. Because we are then rooted in ourselves we find our place in

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 32-33. Here Main admits that he relies on St. Augustine, who says, “Man must first be restored to himself, that, making in himself as it were a stepping-stone, he may rise thence and be borne up to God” (Ibid., 16).

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 32-33.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 32.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{135} Mark 8:34 (NRSV).

\textsuperscript{136} It is clear that Main is familiar with St. Teresa’s expression, “God is the centre of the soul” (\textit{Word into Silence}, 66).
the universe and so we find the center of the universe.”¹³⁷ Main claims that this unitive experience is not static, but “a continuous and continually more radical experience.”¹³⁸

It is important to mention that the advancement of Christian Meditation is also described in terms of the place (and absence) of the mantra in one’s consciousness. A clear understanding of the process of saying the mantra is significant in Main’s teaching. It is understandable, because the mantra is at the heart of the practice of Christian Meditation. For Main, on the journey of meditation, “We must grow in our fidelity to the mantra and in the same proportion the mantra will grow more and more deeply rooted in us.”¹³⁹

There are three stages concerning one’s manner of saying and engaging with the mantra. At the initial stage, it feels as if one is “speaking it with [one’s] mind…somewhere in [one’s] head.”¹⁴⁰ In an attempt to repeat the mantra without ceasing, one is constantly distracted by thoughts. At this stage, repeating the mantra requires a huge effort, and one suffers from a sense of failure, as if no progress is being made. However, persevering with the mantra leads one to feel as if the mantra “begins, as it were, to sound in the heart.”¹⁴¹ Main describes this stage as “the mantra becoming rooted in [one’s] heart.”¹⁴² With a slight effort to say the mantra, one experiences a “calm, steady rhythm” of sounding the mantra at a

¹³⁷ Main, *Moment of Christ*, 95-96. In *Word into Silence*, he describes it in a slightly different way, “We are literally made new in the fact of entering into the ever-deeper centers of being, and of knowing ever more fully the harmony of all our qualities and energies in that ultimate center of our being which is the center and source of all being, the center of the Trinitarian love” (*Word into Silence*, 32-33). He asserts that “to be in our own centre is to be in God” and this is the fundamental teaching of Christianity as well as many Eastern religions (Main, *Moment of Christ*, 2).

¹³⁸ Main, *Christian Meditation*, 33.

¹³⁹ Main, *Word into Silence*, 54.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Main, *Christian Meditation*, 42.

¹⁴² Main, *Word into Silence*, 54.
central level of one’s being. The third stage is when one comes “to listen to it, wrapped in every deepening attention.” Main claims that at this point—beginning to listen to the mantra, one’s “meditation is really beginning.” The deeper one’s meditation goes, the more attentively one has to listen to the mantra, because it becomes subtler. Eventually, one enters into total silence where one can no longer hear the mantra. Main speaks of this experience as being “lost in the eternal silence of God.” The period of total silence becomes longer, as one grows in simplicity and fidelity to the mantra.

2.4. The Participants: Exclusivism and Inclusivism

Regarding participants, Christian Meditation is far more open than Cassian’s unceasing prayer. In the previous chapter, we learned that, although Cassian’s contemplative prayer is not strictly designated for a specific group of people, he expects the participants to have been advanced in their prayer life.

In contrast, for Main, contemplation is a universal call for all. Direct experience of God through contemplative prayer is the “call of the Absolute…made to each of us and it is only this call that gives us ultimate meaning.” He believes that it is “obstinate false

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143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
146 Main, Christian Meditation, 42.
147 Main, Moment of Christ, xi-xii.
148 Main, Word into Silence, viii.
“humility” to think of stillness and silence as being reserved only for “specialists in prayer.”

What is required for the practice of Christian Meditation is not “special talent or gift” but “serious intent and the courage to persevere.”

Main is aware of the traditional distinction between the active and the contemplative. From his understanding, this perspective does not correspond with the teachings of the gospel—rather it distorts it. He writes:

As active we were among the vast majority whose spiritual life rested on the devotional, or the intellectual, and who made no presumptuous claim to a personal experience of God. As a contemplative, we were part of a small, privileged minority, separated from the main body not only by high walls and strange customs but often by specialized vocabularies or even total non-communication….The conclusion drawn from the false understanding of the Church’s contemplative dimension distorted the explicit teaching of the New Testament, namely, that the call to sanctity is universal.

Main insists that this very “polarization of the active and contemplative life” has been one of the most fundamental of the Christian dualities. For Main, to label people either “‘active’ or ‘contemplative’ is ludicrous.” The dualistic thinking of “either-or” on the active or the contemplative “has been to alienate the majority of Christians from that same deep prayer which transcends complexity and restores unity.” This is the “most harmful effect” of a strict dichotomy between the active and the contemplative.

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149 Ibid., 51.

150 Ibid., 51-52.

151 Ibid., viii.

152 Ibid., xii.

153 Ibid., viii. Almost the entire Preface of the book, *Word into Silence*, which is the primary manual for Christian Meditation, focuses on the unhealthy division between the active and the contemplative.
For Main, it is critical to overcome this unhealthy dualism.\textsuperscript{154} In fact, he dedicated the last years of his life to this mission, that is, to teach Christian Meditation as a form of contemplative prayer to all people who desire to learn it. Having taught Christian Meditation, he observed that “the majority of those coming to stay with us as guests or to meditate with us at our communal times of prayer, are people with families, careers, the normal and demanding responsibilities of life.”\textsuperscript{155} He also witnessed how “meditation has spoken to them, created a space of silence in their lives each morning and each evening and provided them with structure and discipline in their search for depth and rootedness in Christ.”\textsuperscript{156} Main’s vision for his community is “to communicate and share our tradition with whoever wishes to be open to it.”\textsuperscript{157}

It is clear that for Main the dualistic understanding of Christian contemplation has “distorted the explicit teaching of the New Testament, namely, that the call to sanctity is universal.”\textsuperscript{158} Because the gift of contemplation is available to all men and women, not the chosen few, Christian Meditation should not be regarded as a form of prayer restricted to spiritual experts, but one open to any person who wants to begin “a journey into the endless depths of God’s love.”\textsuperscript{159} The current popularity of Christian Meditation has made Main’s vision become true.

\textsuperscript{154} Main, \textit{Letter from the Heart}, 99.

\textsuperscript{155} Main, \textit{Word into Silence}, xii.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid. Now the World Community for Christian Meditation carries over this task as its mission.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., viii.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
3. Concluding Remarks

Comparative analysis of this chapter makes it clear that, despite certain similarities—the use of a short sentence, phrase, or word as a prayer tool and simple repetition of it; their recognition of the necessity of, and the difficulty of, going beyond thoughts and images; and union with God as the goal of contemplative prayer—the two present-day contemplative prayer forms contain features that differ from the traditional contemplative prayer forms found in *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. The differences are: their availability to anyone and the absence of prerequisites for practice; the gentle handling of distracting thoughts; the insignificance of the meaning of the prayer-word (or mantra); an absence or minimization of affection and emotional attitude in practice; and the inclusion of novel elements, such as the role and levels of consciousness in Centering Prayer and the significance of rhythm and harmonic sound of the mantra (prayer-word) in Christian Meditation. In the following chapter, we will explore and illustrate correspondences between both Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer as well as Hindu mantra repetition meditation and John Main’s Christian Meditation, within the context of these differences.
Chapter Three

The possible influence of Eastern Meditation Traditions

In the previous chapter, we recognized obvious differences in the theories and practices of the traditional contemplative prayer forms in *The Cloud* and *The Conferences* and the contemporary forms of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. This chapter will explore the parallels between the two present-day contemplative prayer forms and Eastern meditative disciplines. Although there may be other spiritual traditions which influence Keating and Main, we will limit our study to comparisons between Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Centering Prayer, and between Hindu mantra repetition meditation and Christian Meditation. The parallels and possible influences of Eastern meditative spiritualities will be analyzed under three categories: initial, theoretical, and methodological.

1. Centering Prayer and Transcendental Meditation/Zen Buddhism

1.1. Initial Influences: Challenges from Popular Hindu and Buddhist Meditations

Keating and other leaders of Centering Prayer acknowledge that Eastern spirituality and meditative practices played a significant role initially in rediscovering the rich tradition of Christian contemplation and the development of Centering Prayer. In the 1960s and 1970s, many people were turning to Eastern spirituality. In fact, Keating met many people, especially young Christians, who learned and practiced Eastern contemplative methods, but who did not know that there was a contemplative tradition in Christianity.
The modern turn to Eastern methods of contemplation had to do with practical concerns. Larkin, a Carmelite scholar, says, “The West has been long on philosophical treatises on contemplation, on stages and passages, even on ladders of perfection. But there has been little instruction on how to get on the ladder.”¹ He claims that many Christians who wanted to know “how to pray contemplatively” were “looking for methods like those available in the Eastern religions.”² The very accessibility of the Eastern meditative methods simply underlined the fact that there was no such accessible method within Christianity. For Keating, “The popularity of meditative disciplines from the East [in the latter 20th century] is proof enough that some such method is essential today.”³ He was inspired by many Christians’ fervent responses to Eastern meditative disciplines. Keating wanted to renew the Christian contemplative tradition in a way that would meet modern people’s spiritual hunger.

Having been exposed to the Eastern meditative practices, Keating was challenged to give a modern form to Christian contemplative prayer. As Keating admits, his own “exposure to Eastern methods of meditation began in the 1960s.”⁴ While he was abbot at St. Joseph’s Abbey, he had the opportunity to encounter, and learn from, spiritual teachers from Eastern religious traditions. Specifically, he participated in several week-long intensive Zen retreats, called sesshin, with a Zen master, Joshu Sasaki Roshi of Mount Baldy in Los Angeles. The


³ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 34.

Roshi came to St. Joseph Abbey almost twice a year for about ten years. Insight (vipassana) Meditation teachers from a nearby Buddhist meditation center often visited Keating and his monks. They also learned Transcendental Meditation, which has been the most influential Hindu meditation method in the West, from “a Maharishi-trained teacher named Paul Marechal, who had been a Trappist novice.” Along with Marechal, Keating invited other teachers of Transcendental Meditation. He remembered being embarrassed when these Eastern spiritual leaders came to teach their meditation to the monks of St. Joseph’s Abbey and then waited in vain to learn an equivalent Christian method.

His own exposure to, and the popularity of, Eastern meditation practices, motivated him to renew the Christian contemplative heritage in a way that would fulfill contemporary Christians’ longing for such practice. Keating recognized the need for a Christian contemplative prayer method explained in a “how-to” fashion. This led Keating to raise a question which led him, Meninger and Pennington to formulate Centering Prayer: “Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people in the active ministry today and to young people who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and

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6 Miles-Yepez, “Paradigms of Ecumenism as a Spiritual Practice,” 76.


9 Miles-Yepez, “Paradigms of Ecumenism as a Spiritual Practice,” 76.
might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?”

Being exposed to Eastern contemplative practices and meeting Christians who benefited from them, Keating began to try “to harmonize the wisdom of the East with the contemplative tradition of Christianity.”

1.2 Theoretical Influences: Openness, Pure Consciousness, and Thoughts as a Natural Element

In the late 1970s, after Centering Prayer had begun to be taught to the public, Thomas E. Clarke wrote, “One of the exercises of interiority which has come into favor in the past few years in the United States has been termed the ‘centering prayer.’” Like other recent approaches to prayer, most of which have been influenced by Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation or other currents of eastern spirituality, it directs the focus of mind and spirit inward, toward the self, the center, the still-point. Non-discursive in character, these approaches yield not a new rational understanding so much as a certain stillness, peace, joy, freedom, awareness.” Clark actually referred to Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer. Clarke’s comment suggests that the teachings of the Eastern meditative disciplines of Transcendental Meditation and Zen Buddhism could have influenced Centering Prayer. But, he did not explore possible concrete influences of Eastern meditation traditions on this modern form of Western contemplation.

As seen above, Keating’s knowledge and appreciation of Eastern traditions preceded his search for the contemplative method in The Cloud. Influenced by this experience,

10 Keating, Intimacy with God, 15.
11 Ibid., 12.
Keating had a preconceived idea of what contemplative prayer should look like for contemporary spiritual seekers before he identified it in *The Cloud*. It seems that, at least in part, *The Cloud*’s contemplative exercise fits in with his Eastern influenced concept of contemplative prayer.

There are concrete theoretical parallels between Centering Prayer and Zen Buddhism/Transcendental Meditation, which are discordant with the theology of *The Cloud*.

First, Keating claims that one can practice Centering Prayer, which is a form of apophatic contemplative prayer, without having practiced the traditional spiritual disciplines of the Church. For him, apophatic prayer can be practiced by a practitioner who has not been prepared by kataphatic prayer forms, such as the first three steps of *lectio divina*—reading, reflecting, and praying—and devotional practices. As seen in Chapter One, in contrast, *The Cloud*’s author insists that one should have practiced scriptural reading, reflecting, and praying as preliminary steps for contemplative prayer. Although Keating stresses the importance of the first three steps of *lectio divina* as a kataphatic approach to God, they are not a necessary preparation for moving toward an apophatic approach to God. Keating believes that one who has not practiced discursive meditation is led to Centering Prayer by the Holy Spirit and can begin one’s prayer life with this apophatic form of prayer—quite a contrast from the teaching found in *The Cloud*.

Instruction in Zen meditation and Transcendental Meditation is offered to anyone who wants to learn. To practice, a person does not need to be a Buddhist or Hindu, and, unlike traditional Christian contemplative traditions, there are no pre-requisite spiritual

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exercises to practice these non-discursive meditations. These practices claim that a person can reach a higher mystical state without a Christian sense of meditation which, as we saw in Chapter Two, involves various human faculties, such as feeling, affection, imagination, and thinking. In traditional terms of Christian contemplation, Zen meditation and Transcendental Meditation are analogous to an apophatic approach to God.

It is possible that the experiences of these Eastern meditations led Keating to become open to the possibility that a person can begin practicing Centering Prayer as an apophatic form of prayer without previous experience of kataphatic spiritual exercises. Keating quotes Dan O’Hanlon in making this point: “[O’Hanlon writes] ‘I made the discovery, through contact with Asian practice, that one can move toward the goal of prayer beyond words and concepts without necessarily beginning with words and concepts.’ That, I think, is a challenge and an insight from the East that we should seriously take to heart.”

Keating, indeed, took this challenge from the East seriously. He claimed that Eastern meditation equals “what we Christians mean by contemplation, that is, a way of disregarding the usual flow of thoughts” to go deeper into stillness. Just as people can learn Eastern meditation methods anytime regardless of their spiritual maturity, he came to believe, so Christians can begin their prayer life with an apophatic form of prayer. Keating was convinced that Centering Prayer should be introduced as an apophatic prayer form to contemporary Christians who want to experience God “at a deeper level than our thoughts and feelings.”

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14 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 125. O’Hanlon was a Jesuit priest who was actively involved in interreligious dialogue.

15 Ibid., 117.

16 Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 42.
Second, the teachings of Centering Prayer accentuate the inherent spiritual nature of human beings more than the teachings found in *The Cloud*. Keating has a highly positive view of the spiritual essence of human beings, which he calls the “true Self.” He spells Self with a capital “S” to indicate his emphasis. Keating dares to say, “God and our true Self are the same thing,” though “we are not God.” although *The Cloud*’s author also speaks of God as one’s own being, the final step of *The Cloud*’s contemplative work requires one to relinquish the very sense of one’s own self. At that point, in the unitive state, one comes to attain total self-forgetfulness. In contrast, the spiritual journey led by Centering Prayer is from the false self to the true Self. The sacred word used in Centering Prayer helps reestablish one’s intention of opening not only to God but also to the true Self. The notions of Keating’s “true Self” and the *Cloud*’s “one’s own being” may not correspond precisely, even if they stand for something related to the core of a human being, Keating values it far more than *The Cloud*’s author does.

Keating’s belief in human goodness becomes more obvious in his “Guidelines for Christian Life, Growth and Transformation,” which are provided as a “conceptual background for the practice of Centering Prayer.” The first guideline is “the fundamental goodness of human nature, like the mystery of the Trinity, Grace, and the Incarnation, is an essential element of Christian faith.” Keating continues, “This basic core of goodness is capable of unlimited development; indeed, of becoming transformed into Christ and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{17}}\text{Keating, \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart}, 127. He does not expand on this provocative claim here that “God and our true Self are the same thing.”}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\text{Ibid., 42.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{19}It is Chapter 13 of Keating’s \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart}.}\]
deified.”

For him, this core of goodness refers to one’s true Self. It is significant that Keating chose as the very first of the forty two guidelines “the fundamental goodness of human nature”—not the presence of God, divine grace or love, or the action of Christ. Moreover, the first three “Guidelines” address the importance of understanding basic human goodness. Keating asserts, “The acceptance of our basic goodness is a quantum leap in the spiritual journey.”

It is difficult to ascertain what led Keating, in his spiritual guidelines for the practice of Centering Prayer, to stress basic human goodness more strongly than *The Cloud*’s author does. However, his emphasis on human goodness and the true Self corresponds to the teachings of Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation. The theories and practices of these two traditions are grounded in the teaching of the unborn self, or nature. Both assert that the human essence is not different from the Ultimate Reality.

Zen Buddhism speaks of it as “Buddha nature,” “Buddha mind,” or “big mind.” It is not something to be acquired or developed, but discovered because, as a well-known Zen teacher, Shunryu Suzuki says, it is “something which is always with you, always on your side…. The mind which is always on your side is not just your mind, it is universal mind,

20 Ibid., 127.
21 Ibid. He says, “Our basic core of goodness is our true Self.”
22 Ibid. 127.
23 Ibid.
24 I am aware that a positive view on human nature is a basic tenet for many Christian mystics, for example Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and Thomas Merton. What I am pointing out here is not simply Keating’s emphasis on basic human goodness, but that he stresses human goodness far more than *The Cloud*’s author does.
always the same, not different from another’s mind.” In the words of Joshu Sasaki, with whom Keating had met several times in *sesshin*, “Any cat or dog manifests Buddha nature, Shakyamuni said…. Everything manifests Buddha nature.” He also says, “You too are illuminating Buddha nature. All of you have it. If you lose the spiritual energy which sustains your Buddha nature, you’ll die.” Similar teachings are found in the works of Maharishi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation. As a Hindu, Maharishi claims that the “kernel of the Vedic teachings” is “I am That [Reality], thou are That and all this is That,” from *The Upanishads*. Using the term “Being” to refer to what is essential to the human being and the universe, he says, “The great words of enlightenment found in the Vedas express Being as the ultimate reality and find It within [human] and [her/his] own inseparable Self.”

This fundamental principle on the innate nature of the human being is at the core of Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation and plays a pivotal role in their spiritual practices. Although it is impossible to know how much the notion of Centering Prayer’s


26 Joshu Sasaki Roshi, *Buddha is the Center of Gravity* (San Cristobal, NM: Lama Foundation, 1974), 23.

27 Ibid., 33.


true Self has been influenced by these two Eastern disciplines, it is more closely related to Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation than to *The Cloud.*

Third, the notion of consciousness or awareness is an essential element of Keating’s explanatory framework. In the previous chapter, we saw Centering Prayer’s contemplative journey described as representing three levels of consciousness. In his work, *Invitation to Love,* Keating introduces another model for the development of spiritual consciousness. Here, following Ken Wilber’s theory on transpersonal psychology, Keating classifies the Christian spiritual journey as four levels of consciousness—mental egoic, intuitive, unitive, and unity.

According to Keating, the book is an attempt to explain the stages of Centering Prayer using the framework for the development of consciousness.

In *Open Mind, Open Heart,* the primary manual for Centering Prayer, Keating refers to divine union as “pure consciousness.” This state of consciousness is explained in terms of awareness and its content. Keating says, “If you are aware of no thoughts, you are aware of something and that is a thought. If at that point you can lose the awareness that you are

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30 In *The Cloud,* true self-knowledge and experience is that “you are, a wretch, filter, far worse than nothing. This knowing and experience is humility. This humility merits have God [her/himself] coming down in [her/his] power…to take you up, to cherish you” (Walsh, *The Cloud,* 18 [chap 32]).


32 Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1998), 142. There are three additional primitive levels of consciousness: reptilian, typhonic, and mythic membership. However, Keating believes, “the mental egoic is the era we live in now, and the level of consciousness that we attain in the normal course of our human development after about eight years of age” (Ibid., 29).
aware of no thoughts, you will move into pure consciousness.”

Then, using the well-known terminology of Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation, he continues:

It is important to realize that the place to which we are going [in full union] is one in which the knower, the knowing, and that which is known are all one. Awareness alone remains. The one who is aware disappears along with whatever was the object of consciousness. This is what divine union is.

For Keating “pure consciousness” is divine union itself, not a mere aspect of it. As he understands consciousness as the “inner screen” of perception, “pure consciousness” could merely refer to content-less awareness. Nevertheless, Keating describes “full union” as the moment of “no thought” in consciousness.

The notion of consciousness or awareness is more essential in Transcendental Meditation than in Zen Buddhism. The purpose of Transcendental Meditation is to transcend the three ordinary states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and sleeping; unfolding a higher state of consciousness which culminates in unity consciousness, the highest state.

Maharishi says, “During Transcendental Meditation…the mind has transcended all limits of the experience of thought and it is left by itself in the state of pure consciousness. This state of pure consciousness, or state of absolute pure Being, is called Self-consciousness.”

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33 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 73-74. For Keating, pure consciousness is also an “intuition into [one’s] true Self” (Ibid., 51).

34 Ibid., 74. In his well-known book, The Way of Zen, Alan Watts writes, zazen (sitting meditation) “is simply a quiet awareness, without comment….This awareness is attended by the most vivid sensation of ‘nondifference’ between oneself and the external world, between the mind and its contents—the various sounds, sights, and other impressions of the surrounding environment” (Alan Watts, The Way of Zen [New York: Vintage Books, 1989], 155-156).

35 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 35.

36 Ibid., 74.

37 Maharishi, Science of Being and Art of Living, 245. Emphasis is mine. According to Maharishi, there are three more states of consciousness beyond pure consciousness—cosmic consciousness, God consciousness, and Unity consciousness. Although Keating’s system of consciousness-levels does not exactly
Hindu spirituality, it is traditionally called *turiya*, literally meaning the fourth [state of consciousness], which is pure consciousness, consciousness itself without any content.

In the experience of Transcendental Meditation, pure consciousness is highlighted. For example, Jack Forem, who learned Transcendental Meditation from Maharishi and served as head of the New York Center of the Students International Meditation Society, writes, “Through the process of Transcendental Meditation, the individual learns to reduce an object of knowledge systematically until the subject, the experiencer…comes to full [pure] awareness.”

Using the analogy of an ocean, David Lynch, another well-know Transcendental Meditation advocate, describes the process of meditation, “Inside every human being is an ocean of pure, vibrant consciousness. When you ‘transcend’ in Transcendental Meditation, you dive down into that ocean of pure consciousness,” where bubbles of thought are not present.

As with Centering Prayer’s divine union, the culminating experience in Transcendental Meditation is described as “pure consciousness.”

However, the notion of consciousness or awareness as a spiritual capacity is not shared by *The Cloud*’s author. Keating insists that the will, the consent, is the real working-faculty in practicing Centering Prayer, and that makes it different from Eastern meditative practices. However, he explains spiritual progression according to the different levels of consciousness. The stages of consciousness, not the degrees of consent or love, become an essential indicator with which one knows where one is on one’s spiritual journey. In

match Maharishi’s, the developmental characteristics along the spiritual journey are very similar. Briefly speaking, beyond having pure consciousness as occasional events, the experience of it becomes an integral dimension of one’s day-to-day life. Divine union or presence is perceived to be always present in oneself and one’s life.


Centering Prayer, consciousness takes the central place; this is a new addition to the teachings of traditional Christian contemplation, which possibly shows Eastern influence.

Lastly, thought or thinking receives enormous attention and has a significant place in the practice of Centering Prayer.⁴⁰ Appropriate understanding and handling of thoughts are crucial to Keating. It is an inevitable outcome for adopting the notion of consciousness as a fundamental part of the theology of Centering Prayer. Since thoughts are what appear on the inner screen of consciousness and hinder us from coming to realize pure consciousness and divine union, thoughts are an unavoidable element and need to be dealt with appropriately.

For Keating, the central spiritual problem is that we are lost in a world of fleeting thoughts. He stresses, “Many people are so identified with the ordinary flow of their thoughts and feelings that they are not aware of the source from which these mental objects are emerging.”⁴¹ The false self which drives one’s life, is a “monumental illusion, a load of habitual thinking patterns and emotional routines that are stored in the brain and nervous system.”⁴² Keating attributes the cause of suffering to the fact that “[people] think that they are their thoughts and if their thoughts are upsetting, distressing, or evil, they are stuck with them.”⁴³ Centering Prayer helps one stop identifying oneself with one’s thoughts and to discover the presence of consciousness on which thoughts come and go.

In *Open Mind, Open Heart*, after presenting initial instructions, Keating elucidates the entire process of Centering Prayer based on how to cope with different kinds of thoughts

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⁴⁰ In this discipline, “the term ‘thoughts’…includes not just concepts or images, but feelings, sense impression from within and without, and even spiritual sensations. Every perception whatsoever goes under the umbrella of ‘thoughts’” (Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 69).

⁴¹ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 34.

⁴² Ibid., 16.

which may occur during the practice." Bourgeault confirms: "Introductory workshops in Centering Prayer spend a good deal of time going over the types of thoughts that typically present themselves for thinking during a prayer period." Practitioners of Centering Prayer should have proper understanding of thoughts that arise in their practice.

Keating distinguishes five different kinds of thoughts which come into one’s stream of consciousness. According to one’s progression in Centering Prayer, dominant and noticeable types of thoughts change and appropriate responses to them are required. The first type are “ordinary thoughts,” or, in Keating’s phrase, the “woolgathering of the imagination.” They are hazy, superficial, and wandering thoughts that pop into one’s mind. The next category includes emotionally-charged thoughts which usually cause feelings of attraction or repulsion. As one’s mind begins to calm and quiet, a third kind of thought occurs. These are spiritual and psychological insights. They look brilliant, meaningful, and significant, but they are just thoughts in this discipline. The fourth kind is self-reflection. As one rests in deep stillness without idle thoughts, a “desire to reflect on what is happening may arise.” This is a mental reaction to the moment of deep peace or pure awareness. The last kind of thought is generated by the “unloading of the unconscious” in Centering Prayer. According to Keating, deep rest of the body and mind during practice leads to the release of unresolved emotional material from the unconscious. As seen before, having these thoughts is the

\[44\] In Open Mind, Open Heart, Keating does not speak of the three levels of consciousness in detail, although he refers to the journey of Centering Prayer as the reconstructing of consciousness.

\[45\] Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 36.

\[46\] Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 112.
natural process of divine therapy, or interior purification. For Keating, “Thoughts are not only inevitable, but an integral part of the process of healing.”

In *The Cloud*, thoughts are not treated as something which should be understood and dealt with systematically. Rather, thoughts are simply that which must be trodden down under the cloud of forgetting. Categorized understandings of thoughts are not found within the scope of *The Cloud*’s contemplative prayer.

In contrast, Zen Meditation and Transcendental Meditation aim to help their practitioners recognize the source of thoughts, which is called pure consciousness or the Buddha mind, and to live a life without being misled by those passing thoughts. Zen Buddhism regards transitory thoughts and fixed concepts like “ideologies, beliefs, opinions, and points of view, not to mention the factual knowledge accumulated since birth (to which we attach ourselves) [as] the shadows which obscure the light of truth.” In a Buddhist analogy, the mind is still water which can clearly and fully reflect the moon of truth, but the “winds of thought continue to disturb the water of our Self-nature.” Many people’s minds are “constantly being churned by the gales of delusive thought.” To still the waves of the mind, “we must empty our minds of…‘conceptual thought.’” As the winds of thought subside, a person is able to perceive the unchanging nature of the Buddha mind.

Similarly, Transcendental Meditation is concerned with proper understanding of thoughts and the process of going beyond them. “Receiv[ing] a simple but essential

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47 Ibid., 113.


49 Ibid., 20-30.
explanation of the role of thoughts” is part of learning Transcendental Meditation.\textsuperscript{50} Maharishi insists “Being [pure consciousness] is…the source of all thinking.”\textsuperscript{51} However, ordinary people rarely experience this pure consciousness as the basis of their mental activities. “The reason why the process of thinking becomes a challenge to the state of Being” is, Maharishi explains, “the ingrained habit of the mind to remain mostly in the field of [ordinary] thinking.”\textsuperscript{52} In the practice of Transcendental Meditation the “meditator begins on the surface level of ordinary thought and follows the thought through finer and finer stages to its source [pure consciousness].”\textsuperscript{53} The mind of the meditator eventually becomes capable of experiencing pure consciousness and the process of thinking simultaneously.\textsuperscript{54}

It is striking to find that there is a very similar theory in Transcendental Meditation to the process of the “unloading of the unconscious” in Centering Prayer. It is commonly called the \textit{process of normalization}: “normalization through the natural release of stress.”\textsuperscript{55} According to Harold H. Bloomfield and his colleagues, “During each meditation a meditator gains a particular amount of deep rest; if that amount of rest is adequate for the release of some portion of one or several stresses, then that stress will be eliminated.”\textsuperscript{56} This stress

\textsuperscript{50} Harold H. Bloomfield, Michael Peter Cain, and Dennis T. Jaffe, \textit{TM*: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress} (New York: Delacorte Press), 23.

\textsuperscript{51} Maharishi, \textit{Science of Being and Art of Living}, 4.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 89.


\textsuperscript{54} Maharishi, \textit{Science of Being and Art of Living}, 89.

\textsuperscript{55} Bloomfield, Cain, and Jaffe, \textit{TM*}, 23. Also see, Denise Denniston and Peter McWilliams, \textit{The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life} (Allen Park, MI: Three Rivers, 1975), 124.

\textsuperscript{56} Bloomfield, Cain, and Jaffe, \textit{TM*}, 25. In Transcendental Meditation the term “stress” refers to physiology, not psychology. However, although stress means “excessive wear and tear upon the body,”
releasing process triggered by deep rest naturally generates thoughts during meditation, just as the “unloading of the unconscious” involves releasing deep rooted tension in the form of thoughts during Centering Prayer. For this reason, “An all-important procedure in Transcendental Meditation is simply not to bother about thoughts, never interrupt the ongoing process of meditation by analyzing thoughts which arise during the practice.”\textsuperscript{57} This manner of handling thoughts in Transcendental Meditation is also almost identical with that of Centering Prayer. Both consider having thoughts after deep rest to be a natural process and allow it to happen without interruption. Concerning the place and role of thoughts, these remarkable resemblances between Centering Prayer and the Eastern meditative disciplines suggest their possible influences on Keating.

1.3. Methodological Influences: Gentleness, Effortlessness, and Not Trying Hard

Parallels between Zen Buddhism/Transcendental Meditation and Centering Prayer are more discernible in methodology than theory. By exploring the similarities between Centering Prayer and the two Eastern meditations, we will recognize that the method of Centering Prayer appears to be far closer to Zen meditation and Transcendental Meditation than the contemplative work found in \textit{The Cloud}. In Chapter Two, we saw that the practical instructions for Centering Prayer are very different from those of \textit{The Cloud}’s contemplative prayer. Very briefly speaking, while \textit{The Cloud} instructs the contemplatives to cry out to God with a sharp dart of longing love with the help of a prayer word like “God,” Centering

\textsuperscript{57} Bloomfield, Cain, and Jaffe, \textit{TM*}, 25-26.
Prayer teaches the practitioners to recite a sacred word in silence gently and effortlessly. Hoping to illustrate Eastern influences on Centering Prayer, we will explore the practices of Zen meditation and Transcendental Meditation and compare those with the instructions for Centering Prayer.

Keating emphasizes that Centering Prayer is an “exercise of intention,” intention to consent to the Divine presence and action within. This intention is maintained and expressed by thinking a sacred word without effort and by gently returning to it. Keating also stresses that Centering Prayer is a receptive method which does not require focused attention or concentration. The activity required on the side of the practitioner is very minimal compared to concentrative methods. According to Keating, these two features make Centering Prayer unique and different from Eastern meditation methods. He classifies Zen meditation and general mantra meditations (like Transcendental Meditation—though he doesn’t specifically name it) as concentrative method. However, we will see whether these two key features distinguish Centering Prayer from these two Eastern meditative methods, and whether there are other significant similarities between them, which are not found in the contemplative work of *The Cloud*.

Zen Meditation

There are many traditions in Zen Buddhism and so there is no set of common guidelines, as Centering Prayer has, in Zen Meditation. However, within this diversity there are undeniable common threads regarding instruction for meditation. Unfortunately, there is no written material on meditation by Sasaki, with whom Keating had several intensive Zen
sesshin. So we will use as reference *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* of Shunryu Suzuki, one of the most influential Zen teachers in North America in the 1970s.

It is fair to say that Zen meditation is more concentrative than Centering Prayer. However, that is not the full story; categorizing it as a concentrative method can only be fully understood within the context of its whole instruction. In Zen meditation, the beginner is taught to keep her/his mind on her/his breathing. Counting one’s breaths or concentrating on one’s inhaling and exhaling is often recommended to the beginner.

How much effort is required to concentrate on one’s breathing? Does the meditator concentrate on breathing to exclude undesired thoughts from one’s mind? In general usage, the term *concentration* is associated with exerting arduous effort to focus one’s mind. Yet, this kind of concentration is not the right-minded concentration of Zen meditation. The words of Suzuki make it clear:

Concentration is not to try hard to watch something. In zazen [sitting meditation] if you try to look at one spot you will be tired in about five minutes. This is not concentration. Concentration means freedom. So your effort should be directed at nothing. You should be concentrated on nothing. In zazen practice we say your mind should be concentrated on your breathing, but the way to keep your mind on your breathing is to forget all about yourself and just to sit and feel your breathing….So actually there is no need to try too hard to be concentrated on your breathing.\(^{58}\)

Suzuki knows that any effort exerted during meditation “creates waves in [one’s] mind.”\(^{59}\)

In this sense, concentrating on one’s breathing in Zen practice rather means being aware of one’s inhaling and exhaling and feeling them without exerting hard and strenuous effort.

The true meaning of concentration in Zen practice becomes evident as the attitude toward fleeting thoughts during meditation is understood. The word *concentration* often

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., 37.
gives an unnecessary implication that the meditator concentrates in order to protect one’s mind from intruding thoughts. This is not the case in Zen meditation. Rather, “When you are practicing zazen,” Suzuki says, “do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop by itself. If something comes into your mind, let it come in, and let it go out….When you try to stop your thinking, it means you are bothered by it.” His following instruction makes it even more clear:

If you try to stop your mind or try to go beyond your conscious activity, that will only be another burden for you. ‘I have to stop my mind in my practice, but I cannot. My practice is not so good.’ This kind of idea is also the wrong way of practice. Do not try to stop your mind, but leave everything as it is. Then things will not stay in your mind so long. Things will come as they come and go as they go.

As shown in the citation, while being aware of one’s breathing, one keeps one’s mind open to whatever comes. The key discipline of Zen meditation is not to try to stop thinking or to push away thoughts, but rather to let thoughts come and go by themselves, by simply keeping one’s mind on one’s breathing without vigorous effort.

The overall posture of Zen meditation echoes that of Centering Prayer, although Keating categorizes the former as a concentrative method and the latter, a receptive method. As a Zen meditator keeps her/his mind on her/his breathing without trying hard, a Centering Prayer practitioner thinks a sacred word without effort. The instructions of Zen meditation on passing thoughts also significantly resonate with those of Centering Prayer—but are very different from those of The Cloud’s contemplative prayer, which urges the practitioners to “strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting.” Keating advises the

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60 Ibid., 34.
61 Ibid., 128.
62 Walsh, The Cloud, 131-139 (chaps 7-8).
practitioner not to be annoyed by, or anxious about, them, but rather to “accept the fact that thoughts are certain to come.” He says, “Let the thoughts come and go. The basic principle for handling thoughts in this prayer is this: Resist no thought, hang on to no thought, react emotionally to no thought.” But this approach to transient thoughts is not found in the teachings of The Cloud. It seems possible that Keating’s experience of Zen Meditation has influenced the manner in which he handles unwanted thoughts in contemplative prayer.

Transcendental Meditation

Concerning the method itself, Centering Prayer resembles Transcendental Meditation far more than Zen meditation. In both, a word or phrase is used as a mental device for meditation; whether called a mantra or a sacred word, it is used to go beyond the mental activities of the mind. It may be not a coincidence that Centering Prayer is sometimes referred to as a “Christian TM.”

Regarding the method of Transcendental Meditation, there is a common misunderstanding for those who are not acquainted with it. That is, it is viewed as a concentrative method just because it is a mantra repetition meditation. For example, Bourgeault places Transcendental Meditation into the category of concentrative method. She says, “Whatever the method, the mantra provides a touchstone for the attention. Rather than allowing the mind to wander, it is anchored steadily and constantly in the simple repetition of

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61 Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 55.

64 Ibid., 114.

65 This is not my conviction. There are unique features in Centering Prayer which are not found in Transcendental Meditation. My argument is not that Centering Prayer is just a kind of Christian Transcendental Meditation, but that Keating’s exposure to it helped him enrich the Christian contemplative tradition.
the task."\(^{66}\) It seems for her that any kind of meditation, if it utilizes a mantra, is a concentrative method.

This misunderstanding is so prevalent that the authorities of Transcendental Meditation continue to correct this mistaken view. The official website of the Transcendental Meditation Program plainly states, “Unlike other techniques, the TM technique involves no concentration, contemplation or control of your mind.”\(^{67}\) The authors of *TM*: *Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress* point out that scholars often indiscriminately categorize Transcendental Meditation as a form of concentration.\(^{68}\) Moreover, they claim that “concentration interrupts the natural continuous flow of attention….To somehow interrupt the indomitable flow of attention, a person must expend considerable energy.”\(^{69}\)

On its official webpage, Transcendental Meditation is described as “a simple, natural, effortless procedure.”\(^{70}\) With exactly the same adjectives, the authors of *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life* also speak of it as “a simple, natural, effortless process that allows the mind to experience subtler and subtler levels of the thinking process until thinking is transcended.”\(^{71}\) Herbert Benson, MD, who researched the physiological effects of Transcendental Meditation at The Harvard Medical School in the early 1970s, also confirms that Maharishi’s “methods do not require intense concentration or any form of rigorous

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\(^{66}\) Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 20.

\(^{67}\) http://www.tm.org/tm-is-different (accessed May 15, 2017).

\(^{68}\) Bloomfield, Cain, and Jaffe, *TM*, 20.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 21.


\(^{71}\) Denniston and McWilliams, *The TM Book*, 35.
mental or physical control. As a result, practically all initiates can easily ‘meditate’ after a short training course.”

He refers to Transcendental Meditation as a “surprisingly simple technique.”

Generally speaking, Transcendental Meditation is a mantra repetition meditation. Maharishi defines mantra as “a specific sound, the effects of which are known.” The mantra has “no meaning to the meditator, but the sound quality is conducive to producing the deep and refined awareness.” Unlike the sacred word used in Centering Prayer, the mantra should be chosen and given by a certified teacher, who is trained to select an appropriate mantra for a particular meditator. The mantras which are used in Transcendental Meditation are unknown to the public. Despite this lack of the information, it is not difficult to find out “how to do” it. The two most important elements are how to recite or think the mantra and how to respond to passing thoughts during meditation.

Based on his research into transcendental Meditation, Benson provides a brief description of its method. According to him, after receiving a mantra from a trained instructor, the meditator “repeats it mentally over and over again while sitting in a comfortable position….The meditators are told to assume a passive attitude and if other thoughts come into mind to disregard them, going back to the mantra.” He believes that the

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73 Ibid., 85.

74 Forem, *Transcendental Meditation*, 40.

75 Ibid.

passive attitude could be the most important element in what he learned from Transcendental Meditation. When distracting thoughts occur, they are to be disregarded and attention redirected to the repetition…; you should not worry about how well you are performing the technique….Distracting thoughts will occur. Do not worry about them. When these thoughts do present themselves and you become aware of them, simply return to the repetition of the mental device [mantra]. These other thoughts do not mean you are performing the technique incorrectly. They are to be expected.

Benson describes how practitioners of Transcendental Meditation handle unwanted thoughts during their practice. The meditator is advised to expect thoughts to come to mind, and yet not to worry about them. Once the meditator is aware of thoughts, s/he needs to simply return to the mantra.

In his book, Everything You Want to Know About TM, John White, who is the director of Education for The Institute of Noetic Sciences, describes the instruction of Transcendental Meditation, as he learned it from a certified teacher. Without breaking the secrecy of the mantra that he received, he tries to offer a “simulated TM experience” as close as possible:

Just keep saying [the mantra] silently in your mind over and over. If your attention wanders away from saying your mantra…that’s okay. That’s part of the meditation process, according to TM. But as soon as you become aware that you have stopped saying your mantra, you should gently and effortlessly come back to it. Start repeating [your mantra]….During the time that your attention is off the mantra, all sorts of interesting thoughts and feelings and images may come into your mind. That’s okay too. Don’t try to stop them forcefully. Carefully but causally observe

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77 Ibid., 160.

78 Ibid., 160. It is interesting to recognize that, in this book—which was published in 1975 and was a bestseller—Benson introduces The Cloud’s contemplative prayer method as a Christian example which corresponds to his Relaxation Response method of meditation. He characterizes The Cloud’s contemplative prayer method as a “passive attitude.”


80 Ibid., 45. He calls his instruction a “simulated TM experience” because he is not a formally trained teacher of Transcendental Meditation and so he cannot give an appropriate mantra to each of his readers.
them, without becoming entangled in them or attached to them….When you become aware that you’re not saying the mantra, gently let those thoughts go and begin to repeat the mantra again.\textsuperscript{81}

White’s description makes it clear that Transcendental Meditation is not a concentrative method. It is surprising that the wandering of the mind and having all sorts of thoughts are considered to be “okay.” For this reason, one does not stop thinking by force; one is instructed to return to the mantra “gently” and “effortlessly.” This resonates with what Benson calls a \textit{passive attitude}. The other resource is \textit{Natural Stress Relief Manual}, which uses a very similar method to Transcendental Meditation.\textsuperscript{82} Here, we can learn how to repeat the mantra, which is missing in the previous two resources. According to the manual, one should repeat the mantra “with no effort, with no worry, and letting the mind be free.”\textsuperscript{83} One needs to “think [the mantra] with calm and innocence, with no special effort and without trying to control the mind.”\textsuperscript{84} It is clear that when reciting the mantra, the same attitude of \textit{effortlessness} should be maintained. This primary attitude is stressed over and over again in the instruction.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 48. The emphases are mine.

\textsuperscript{82} Natural Stress Relief Meditation Team, \textit{Natural Stress Relief Meditation Manual} (MA: NSR Meditation, 2009). The creator of the Nature Stress Relief technique, Raymond Harrison, is a trained, former Transcendental Meditation teacher. On its website, it says, “The Nature Stress Relief technique is somewhat different from TM: it is a single-mantra-for-all meditation but it seems to achieve remarkable results as TM does.” It seems that they claim that the Natural Stress Relief technique is very similar to Transcendental Meditation except for giving a personal mantra to the meditators. This is supported by the team, as they quote Maharishi’s words on their webpage: “30 or 40 thousand teachers of TM I have trained, and many of them have gone on their own, and they may not call it Maharishi’s TM, but they are teaching it in some different name here and there…doesn’t matter, as long as the man is getting something useful to make his life better, we are satisfied” (accessed May 22, 2017, http://www.natural-stress-relief.com/stress/faq.htm).

\textsuperscript{83} Natural Stress Relief Meditation Team, \textit{Natural Stress Relief Meditation Manual}, 14.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
Further, it says, “Trying is forbidden. Anytime you feel that it takes effort to think the [mantra], just stop thinking the [mantra] for a short time.”

Here again, having unwanted thoughts is regarded as natural and normal. The meditator is assured that “Of course some thoughts will probably come into your mind, and you may be doubtful whether you are doing it correctly, but do not worry about these thoughts or doubts.” Because it is considered natural, recognizing that the mind has wandered from the mantra, the meditator simply returns to it “with no effort.” As thoughts come to mind, the meditator should “not make an effort to avoid or stop them: just ignore them, without a special effort, as you would if you were walking along and were joined by a friend for awhile.”

It is very clear in these three different resources that neither concentration on the mantra nor the forceful resistance to passing thoughts is necessary in the practice of Transcendental Meditation. Rather, one is instructed to keep the posture of effortlessness and gentleness throughout the period of meditation. As seen in the possible theoretical influences, due to “normalization through the natural release of stress,” the state of deep rest causes a corresponding mental activity, the release of stress, which happens through having thoughts, sensations, or feelings in the mind. Because having these involuntary thoughts

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85 Ibid., 16.
86 Ibid., 16.
87 Ibid., 16. It is interesting that the instruction summary for the first meditation consists of only nine sentences; yet it advises practitioners to recite, and return to, the mantra with no effort “four times.”
88 Ibid., 18.
89 Ibid., 23.
after deep rest is an essential part of the process, one should flow with the process by maintaining what Benson refers to as a *passive attitude*.

There are unquestionable similarities between Centering Prayer and Transcendental Meditation, from thinking the sacred word or mantra to handling fleeting thoughts during practice. As Transcendental Meditation instructs the meditator to think the mantra with no effort and innocence, Keating asks the practitioner to “think the sacred word…gently and without effort.” In both disciplines, the practitioner is instructed not to concentrate on the sacred word or mantra and not to make any effort thinking it. While *The Cloud*’s author teaches his student to utter the prayer word with a sense of urgency and burning desire—as if he were in life-threatening danger and asking for immediate help, Centering Prayer and Transcendental Meditation teach their practitioners to go gently and without effort. Keating and Maharishi insist that trying to suppress thoughts is an unhealthy reaction since having thoughts is normal and even profitable during practice. If we remember the principal strategy found in *The Cloud* for dealing with thoughts, that is: trying to forget thoughts—covering them under the cloud of forgetting—trampling them quickly under one’s feet, the similarity of handling intruding thoughts between Centering Prayer and Transcendental Meditation is significant.

It is clear that there are many similarities in the methodology between Centering Prayer and the two Eastern meditations, which can be seen as the possible influences of the latter on the former. Keating emphasizes intention against attention, and being receptive against being concentrative; these two primary elements of Centering Prayer do not appear to distinguish it from those of Zen meditation and Transcendental Meditation. In all three

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methods, rather, there are more commonalities than differences regarding the overall attitude, breathing, the sacred word or the mantra, and passing thoughts. They all stress the attitude of not trying hard, not controlling, making no considerable effort, and accepting whatever comes to mind during the time of meditation.

2. Christian Meditation and Hindu Mantra Meditation

2.1. Initial Influences: Initiation into Hindu Mantra Meditation

Main’s entering into the world of contemplative prayer clearly shows Eastern influence. There is no secret that John Main learned meditation from a Hindu monk, Swami Satyananda. In 1955, while serving in the British Colonial Service in Malaya (before joining his religious order), Main met Satyananda in Kuala Lumpur, who initiated him into a Hindu mantra meditation.

As a colonial officer, one afternoon Main visited the monk to thank him for his social service. The Swami was the founder of the “Pure Life Society,” a community where people from different backgrounds could live together, which included an orphanage, a school, a library, a dispensary, and a printing press. In this visit, Main was moved by the Swami’s peacefulness and holiness. Soon he found himself having a conversation on meditation with him. The Swami asked Main if he practiced meditation. Main answered that he tried to do a kind of discursive meditation, now “known as the Ignatian method of meditation.” The Swami replied “that his own tradition of meditation was quite different….The aim of

91 It is now known as Peninsular Malaysia.


93 Main, Christian Meditation, 13.
meditation was the coming to awareness of the Spirit of the universe who dwells in our hearts.”94 Being deeply impressed by the Swami’s words and wisdom, Main asked him if as a Christian he could learn meditation and “if he would accept [him] as a pupil to teach [him] how to meditate in his way.”95 The Swami suggested that Main come to his place to practice meditation with him once a week, and Main agreed.

Main returned each week to learn and practice meditation with the Hindu monk. On his first visit, the Swami introduced him to a mantra meditation. Main says, “Every week for about 18 months, I went out to this holy man of God, sat down beside him and meditated with him for half an hour.”96 During this period, at each meditation meeting, the Swami gave a few lessons on meditation and Main was able to ask questions arising from his daily practice. This is the discipline of meditation that “He first learned from the Swami and incorporated into his own teaching on Christian Meditation.”97

Ironically, Main was forced to give up this mantra meditation when he became a Benedictine novice. His novice master prevented him from practicing the Eastern meditation, which he thought of as a “foreign import, alien to the Christian tradition,”98 and gave him another method of meditation or discursive mental prayer, which comprised of “acts of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication.”99 In obedience, during this period of time Main did not meditate in the way he learned from his Hindu Swami in Malaya. He

94 Ibid., 13.
95 Ibid., 13.
96 Ibid., 14.
97 McKenty, In the Stillness Dancing, 52.
98 Laurence Freeman, John Main, 21.
99 Main, Christian Meditation, 16.
described this painful experience as “wandering in the wilderness,” as the discursive mental prayer was “becoming more and more unsatisfactory.”

In spite of not practicing it for over a decade, Main never forgot the mantra meditation. Rather, his experience of Hindu mantra meditation led him to discover “the practice of using a single short phrase to achieve the stillness” from *The Conferences* of John Cassian. When Main found the instructions for the method of unceasing prayer in the Tenth Conference, he remarked, “I was arrived home once more and returned to the practice of the mantra.” Regarding Main’s experience, McKenty writes:

It had confirmed John Main’s intuitive discovery that the simple practice of a prayer formula or mantra, first learned from a Hindu swami, had Benedictine and Christian roots going back…to John Cassian in the fourth century and beyond. Exhilarated by his rediscovery of a Christian prayer from the East that had been virtually lost to the West, John Main was now able to reconcile his experience of Eastern meditation with his own Benedictine tradition.

In his homage to John Main, “From John Cassian to John Main,” Adalbert de Vogüë asserts, “It was thanks to a page of the Conferences that…he was finally able to fuse the two elements which made up his personal spirituality and which had until then been unintegrated.” In the following, we will explore how Main integrated Hindu mantra meditation with Cassian’s unceasing prayer, looking to identify possible influences from the Hindu meditative discipline on Christian Meditation.

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100 Ibid.

101 Ibid., 17-18.

102 Ibid., 18. It was the late summer of 1974.

103 De Vogüé, “From John Cassian to John Main,” 98.
2. 2. Theoretical Influences: Sound, Vibration, and Simplicity of Mantra

It is clear that Main’s initial understanding and practice of meditation originates from his encounter with and learning from the Hindu monk, Satyananda. The Swami’s teaching basically shaped his original concept of meditation, which was a mantra repetition meditation. Main was surprised to discover Cassian’s unceasing prayer with a brief formula in *The Conferences*, specifically Conferences 9 and 10.

However, in the previous chapter, we learned that there are significant differences between Cassian’s contemplative prayer and Main’s Christian Meditation. For example, (i) Main does not place importance on the meaning of mantra; (ii) he minimizes the role of affection and emotion in practice; (iii) he creates no prerequisites for practice; and (iv) he includes new elements in Christian Meditation which are not found in Cassian’s teachings, such as the significance of rhythm and sound of the mantra (prayer word). Although he calls it Christian Meditation, there are some elements which are foreign to Cassian’s unceasing prayer, but more resonant with Hindu mantra meditation. Indeed, according to an article by Amir Farid Dato’ Isahak in *Dharma*, the periodical of the “Pure Life Society”:

Swamiji’s legacy continues in over 100 countries through the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM). Father John Main was a Benedictine monk who learnt meditation from Swamiji while serving here as part of the British Civil Service. He taught Swamiji’s meditation method to thousands of Christians worldwide, and established WCCM….Now it is Father Laurence Freeman who is the most ardent Christian teacher and promoter of the meditative/contemplative prayer method taught by Swamiji.104

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By exploring possible influences of Hindu mantra meditation, in particular, that of Swami Satyananda, we will see that this bold statement from Isahak has some truth.

First, Main affirms that Christian Meditation is open to every person. In the former chapter, we saw that Main believes that direct experience of God through contemplative prayer is a universal call for anyone who searches for ultimate meaning. For Main, who claims that “contemplative prayer is an invitation to experience ‘God’s love,” Christian Meditation is a tradition to be shared with whoever wishes to learn it. ¹⁰⁵ This is quite different from Cassian, who expects the participants of contemplative prayer to be advanced in their prayer life. ¹⁰⁶

Christian Meditation’s openness is similar to the openness of the Hindu meditation Main learned from the Swami, who initiated him into meditation without regard to his religious and spiritual background and maturity. When Main asked him if he “as a Christian” could learn to meditate, the Swami replied that “it would only make him a better Christian” and required only one condition, serious commitment to the practice. ¹⁰⁷ That is “setting aside two periods at the beginning and end of the day, every day.” ¹⁰⁸ McKenty also points out the link between the openness of Main’s Christian Meditation and that of the Swami’s mantra meditation:

Douglas Main never forgot the friendship and openness of this remarkable Hindu monk who accepted him as a Christian disciple and taught him to meditate. From this

¹⁰⁵ Main, Word into Silence, xii.
¹⁰⁶ For more information, see the section “Participants” in Chapter One.
¹⁰⁷ Freeman, John Main, 18.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 18.
experience there emerged Douglas Main’s openness to Eastern religions and to teaching meditation to “all those whom come to pray with us.”

It is possible that Satyananda’s open teaching of mantra meditation contributed to Main’s openness of his contemplative prayer form to all who desire to learn it.

It should be noted that there were other Eastern meditation traditions being practiced in the West by the time Main started teaching Christian Meditation. Although he learned mantra meditation in the 1950s’ in Malaya, it was not until the mid 1970s that he began to speak of it and share it with others, forming a lay meditation community. In his talks to the Benedictine monks in Gethsemani, Main appeared to be familiar with Transcendental Meditation and Ramakrishna Order’s mantra meditation—as he had a friend who was a Ramakrishna monk. Main also met some new comers who had already learned and practiced Transcendental Meditation when they came to his meditation gatherings at the Benedictine Priory of Montreal. Both of these two additional Hindu mantra meditations are also accessible and open to anyone regardless of his/her spiritual background. Although it is hard to know to what extent Eastern mantra meditation traditions have influenced Main’s radical opening of Christian Meditation to any person, the parallel between them is obvious.

Second, the simplicity of the mantra becomes central in Christian Meditation. In Main’s contemplative prayer, Cassian’s scriptural formula, Psalm 71:1 is replaced with a single word mantra. Main is not interested in this particular verse: “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue.” The content of this biblical formula appears to have no

109 McKenty, In the Stillness Dancing, 52.

110 Main, Christian Meditation, 41.

111 Main, Letters from the Heart, 42 and 68. By an invitation from the archbishop of Montreal, in 1977, Main founded the Benedictine Priory of Montreal where he taught Christian Meditation to the laity and the religious.
substantial value in Main’s Christian Meditation. For Cassian, however, there are clear reasons why this particular verse has been chosen from the entire body of Scripture. Even though this verse has twenty-five syllables, which exceeds the limits recommended by the Desert Christians’ traditional recommendation of one to fifteen syllables, Cassian has intentionally selected it because he sees its special merits. He believes that it fully expresses human nature and conditions, such as “a burning love and charity [to God], awareness of traps, and a fear of enemies.” Main’s indifference or denial of it becomes obvious when, as de Vogüé points out, he translates Cassian’s “this verse” into “a single verse.”

Main not only disregards this particular scriptural verse, but also prefers a single word to a single verse for an appropriate mantra. It is not fair to attribute Main’s recommending a word rather than a verse or sentence merely to his exposure to Hindu mantra meditation, since, among Hindu meditation traditions, a mantra can be a word, phrase, or verse. However, what is obvious is that his Hindu teacher recommended or gave a “single word” mantra to him. In the first meditation lesson, Swami Satyananda said to him, “In our tradition we know one way in which you can arrive at that stillness, that is concentration. We use a word that we call a mantra.”

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112 De Vogüé, “From John Cassian to John Main,” 92-93.
113 Ramsey, trans., John Cassian: The Conferences, 379 (10.10.3).
114 De Vogüé, “From John Cassian to John Main,” 92-93.
115 Gavin Floor, Introduction to Hinduism (New York: Cambridge, 2007), 221. He says, “Mantra has been notoriously difficult to define, but very broadly refers to sentences, phrases, or words…which are recited or chanted for ritual and soteriological purposes (Ibid).” It should be mentioned that The Cloud, whose contemplative prayer method Main knows well, also recommends a single prayer word.
116 Main, Christian Meditation, 14. Emphases are original.
How to recite the mantra is one of the most recurring themes in Main’s talks and teachings. In the previous chapter, we learned that Main believes that poverty or “being poor in spirit” can be attained through the fidelity to the mantra. In other words, in simply repeating the mantra, one can cultivate poverty.

Main makes numerous statements which give the impression that merely reciting a mantra is almost the sole necessary instruction that the practitioners need to know for Christian Meditation. A few examples are: “Learning to meditate is learning to say the mantra, and…it is as simple as this,”117 “The essence of meditation and the art of meditation is simply learning to say that mantra, to recite it, to sound it, from the beginning to the end of the meditation,”118 “To meditate you need only to repeat your mantra with persevering faithfulness,”119 and “I repeat this to re-emphasize what is essential and perhaps the only advice worth giving about meditation, which is simply: to say your mantra.”120

Main’s focus on the saying of the mantra is further highlighted in the “three preliminary aims” he gives for Christian Meditation:

The first is to say the mantra for the full duration of the meditation….The second aim is to say the mantra throughout the meditation without interruption, while remaining quite calm in the face of all distractions….And the third of these preliminary aims is to say the mantra for the entire time of the meditation, quite free of all distractions.121

117 Main, Word into Silence, 54.
118 Main, Moment of Christ, 1.
119 Main, Word into Silence, 49.
120 Ibid., 56-57. Another example is: “The most important thing to bear in mind about meditation is to remain faithfully repeating the mantra throughout the time put aside for it” (Ibid., 12).
121 Ibid., 15.
All the three preliminary aims are solely concerned with “saying the mantra.” One is primarily instructed to say the mantra from the beginning to the end no matter what one experiences during the period of meditation.

Moreover, when one is concerned with the process of Christian Meditation, Main offers the same instruction: “This is where a teacher is of immense help for keeping you on a straight course. But basically your teacher has only one instruction to give you and that is: to say your mantra. More than this is simply encouragement and comfort.”\(^{122}\) When people feel “they had reached a stage at which the discipline of the recital of the mantra was no longer necessary for them—they were ready to be ‘led by the spirit’ on their own,” Main says, “the teaching you choose to accept is that you recite your mantra without ceasing, until you can no longer say it.”\(^{123}\)

How could Main have come to this remarkable stress on the simple recital of the mantra as the primary discipline in contemplative prayer? What influences led him to say, “the only advice worth giving about meditation, which is simply: to say your mantra”? Whether it is directly related to the influences of his Hindu teacher or not, it is surprising to recognize that this exactly corresponds to what Main learned from him. On his initial meditation, Satyananda instructed Main: “To meditate, what you must do is to choose this word [mantra] and then repeat it, faithfully, lovingly and continually. That is all there is to meditation. I really have nothing else to tell you. And now we will meditate.”\(^{124}\) According to Main’s memory, the core instruction from Satyananda was simply “to say your mantra.”

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\(^{122}\) Ibid., 17-18. Emphasis is mine.


\(^{124}\) Main, *Christian Meditation*, 14. Emphasis is mine.
The “three preliminary aims” presented in *Word into Silence*, the manual book for Christian Meditation, turn out to be not his own, but what he learned from his teachers. In the Gethsemani Talks, Main gave its credit to Satyananda:

My teacher used to say that the first three aims that you have when you begin to meditate are these: first of all, just to say the mantra for the full period of your meditation….The second goal is to say your mantra and be perfectly calm in the face of all distractions that come. And the third preliminary aim is to say the mantra for the full time of your meditation with no distractions.\(^\text{125}\)

The same lesson—“Say your mantra” was given to him over and over again during his time practicing meditation with his teacher in Malaya. In Main’s own words, “The words that really sum up his [Satyananda’s] teaching and wisdom” is “‘Say your mantra.’ In all those eighteen months this was the essential core of everything he had to say: ‘Say your mantra.’”\(^\text{126}\)

Third, when Main says, “Say your mantra,” there are elements in his understandings of the mantra which are not present in Cassian’s and Christian contemplative prayer in general. The mantra Main highly recommends is *maranatha*\(^\text{127}\). He believes this word is the “best mantra” that he knows “for any beginner in meditation.”\(^\text{128}\) It is interesting to notice that ‘*maranatha*’ means “Come, Lord,” and so it clearly has an invocational expression and nuance like Cassian’s prayer formula: “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue.” Nevertheless, for Main, its invocational richness has little value in Christian Meditation,

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\(^{125}\) Ibid., 45.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., 45-15.

\(^{127}\) It is unknown whether Main received a mantra from his Hindu teacher or whether he used a Christian mantra or a Hindu one.

although he recognizes the fact that “it is one of the most ancient Christian prayers there is.”  

Practitioners are instructed, “Once you have chosen it, to turn from the meaning and associations and listen to it as a sound.”  

Bede Griffiths remarks:  

John Main…insisted simply on repeating the word and was not concerned with the meaning very much. Many Hindu teachers have the same method. For them the mantra is more the sound, and you tune into that sound and it centers you and you vibrate with it and enter into deep meditation.  

As Bede Griffiths points out, for Main, “the importance of ‘ma-ra-na-tha’ is…that it possesses the right sound to bring us to the silence and stillness necessary for meditation.”  

Now, what does Main mean when he says that the mantra maranatha has the “right sound”? In the same talk “Leaving Distractions Behind,” Main does not discuss this question at all. On one occasion of Questions and Responses, Main seems to indirectly answer it: “Certainly to begin with I would recommend you to use a word that has at least an open ‘a’ vowel sound in it. I think that everything considered the best word you could use to start with is maranatha.” Yet, here again he does not tell why it is important that a mantra has an open ‘a’ vowel sound in it or its relation to the “right sound.”  

Here we can only speculate on the possible influence of the Hindu mantra traditions. While the phonetic value of a prayer word is not given attention in Christian contemplative  

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129 Main, Moment of Christ, 5.  
130 Main, Christian Meditation, 39.  
132 Main, Moment of Christ, 5. Emphasis is mine.  
133 Ibid., 5-8.  
134 Main, The Way of Unknowing, 107. It is significant to realize that according to his suggestions, neither the English “Jesus” nor “Christ” is a good mantra because neither has an open ‘a’ vowel.
prayer, the sound and vibration of a mantra plays a central role in Hindu mantra meditation. To grasp the significance of the sound in Hindu mantra traditions, it is necessary to briefly draw upon certain mantra theory. It is believed that India’s ancient “seers supersensuously ‘heard’ …divine mantras not as personal but as divinely rooted words and spoke to them in the Hindu scripture or Veda as an aid to those less spiritually advanced.”¹³⁵ For this reason, mantras are not products of the human discursive mind, but eternal sacred sounds directly heard and perceived by those who have come into touch with the Divine Reality. According to Swami Ghanananda, a Hindu monk of the Ramakrishna Order—to which Main’s teacher, Swami Satyananda once belonged—a mantra is a “particular sound-body of Consciousness—not simply an idea conveyed to or understood by the mind of man, not merely a concatenation of letters carrying a face value of a particular meaning.”¹³⁶ It is “intoned and uttered in the proper manner according to letter and rhythm” and “is a veritable mass of radiant energy.”¹³⁷ So by reciting such a mantra, the meditator “invokes the power and truth inherent in the seers’ divine intuition and so purifies his or her consciousness.”¹³⁸

Georg Feuerstein explains the Hindu mantra theory this way:

According to the dominant theory of the science of sacred sound…the universe is in a state of vibration. A mantra is sacred utterance, numinous sound, or sound that is charged with psychospiritual power. A mantra is sound that empowers the mind…. It is a vehicle of meditative transformation of the human body-mind.¹³⁹


¹³⁶ Monks of Ramanakrishna Order, Meditation (Madras, India: Advaita Ashrama, 2009), 107.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Coward and Goa, Mantra, 13.

What is clear is that the mantra is not merely a holy word, but a sacred sound. It seems plausible to presume that Satyananda, Main’s Hindu meditation teacher, emphasized the importance of the sound of the mantra and it became part of Main’s understanding of mantra.

The next question that needs to be addressed is “Why does Main think that it is important that a mantra has an open ‘a’ vowel sound in it?” Unfortunately, it is not explained by Main. Nevertheless, the importance of the ‘a’ vowel sound can be easily traced in the context of the Hindu mantra traditions.

In general, there is no a specific rule that a mantra should have an open ‘a’ vowel sound. However, it is apparent that an open ‘a’ vowel sound has a unique and fundamental place in the world of Hindu mantras. The open ‘a’ vowel sound is the first letter of Om, the most sacred sound in Hindu traditions, as it is pronounced $a, u, m$.\textsuperscript{140} Because of its significance, \textit{Om} (\textit{Aum}) is the “most famous seed mantra.”\textsuperscript{141} Swami Adiswarananda says that “it [Om] is the sound of all other mantras and of all compounded sounds.”\textsuperscript{142} It is believed to contain a concentration of great spiritual power within itself and so is “prefixed or sometimes also suffixed to numerous mantras, such as om namah shiv\textipa{\textasciitilde}ya (Om. Salutation to Shiva) or om namo bhagavate (Om. Salutation to Lord [Krishna or Vishnu]).”\textsuperscript{143} Due to the supreme place of \textit{Om} (\textit{Aum}), the open ‘a’ vowel sound is easily heard in many Hindu mantras.

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\textsuperscript{140} Floor, \textit{An Introduction to Hinduism}, 222.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{143} Feuerstein, \textit{The Deeper Dimension of Yoga}, 298-299.
For the Hindus, the vowel ‘a’ itself also has an elevated status among syllables. In *Prasna Upanishad*, it is said, “If he meditates on one element, A, he will be enlightened even by that”\(^{144}\) while in *Bhagavad-Gita*, the Lord Krishna speaks, “of syllables (letters) I am the letter A.”\(^{145}\) Both Hindu scriptures affirm that the ‘a’ vowel contains spiritual potency. In *Mantra Yoga and the Primal Sound*, David Frawley associates the short vowel ‘a’ with “the absolute, the infinite, pure being, [and] the void” and the long vowel ‘a’ with “the absolute in expansion as the space of the higher self.”\(^{146}\) According to Frawley,

The Vedas say that the letter-A is Brahman or the Absolute. It is the first of all the vowels that constitute the spirit… It indicates the center, origin, being, Self and Supreme. At a physical level, the sound-A serves to ground and stabilize our being and all its processes down to the cellular level. It is the root or base tone behind all the other vibrations of our organism, which we return to in a state of deep sleep. Repeating this sound serves to attune, harmonize and balance our entire organic field. It brings us back into our body and deeper awareness, connecting to the root energy of the heart and the center of our being. At a psychological level, the sound-A returns us to the ground of our being and helps us shut off our outer noise. It calms and silences the minds and senses and takes the pranas [life force or primary energy] back to their core energy. It helps us settle, let go, detach, and simplify. It connects us to our deepest Self and being.\(^{147}\)

In addition, the vowel ‘a’ is obviously regarded significantly in the mantras of the Hindu Tantric tradition. In the Tantric tradition, simply speaking, it is believed that there are seven primary chakras, energy centers in the body and Tantric practitioners intend to open each chakra and ultimately to awaken spiritual power called *kundalini*. In their practices, they use a specific set of mantras which are believed to resonate with each chakra center.


\(^{147}\) Ibid., *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, 65-66.
One of the well-known traditional mantra sets is “lang, vang, rang, yang, hang, and aum.”\textsuperscript{148} It is apparent that each mantra has an ‘a’ vowel sound.

All these findings support the view that the vowel ‘a’ is the most primal sound in Hindu mantra traditions. It is considered to have a unique sound and vibration which has a special significance in helping meditators move closer to the Divine Reality. In this context, Main’s words seem to make sense, that is, it is important for a mantra to have an open ‘a’ vowel as it “possesses the right sound to bring us to the silence and stillness.”\textsuperscript{149} It is remarkable to recognize that the mantra ma-ra-na-tha has four ‘a’ vowels in it. Despite the uncertainty of its origin, Main’s emphasis on the right sound in the mantra containing an open ‘a’ vowel sound responds to the Hindu understanding of mantra. It is possible that this understanding was handed down to Main through his teacher’s meditation instruction, even if he never publicly acknowledged it.

\textbf{2. 3. Methodological Influences: Saying the Mantra in Rhythm and Listening to Its Sound}

The possible influences of Hindu mantra meditation on the practice of Christian Meditation are closely linked with the Hindu mantra theory which we have examined above. Possible methodological influences are already suggested in the theoretical influences section of this chapter. Here we will explore Satyananda’s practical meditation instruction and general Hindu mantra repetition meditation. We will then compare this with the instructions for Christian Meditation and show parallels between the Hindu and Christian traditions.


\textsuperscript{149} Main, \textit{Moment of Christ}, 5. Emphasis is mine.
In Chapter Two, we learned that the instructions for Christian Meditation are different from Cassian’s contemplative prayer method. Briefly summarizing, Cassian’s contemplative prayer formula, “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue,” is to be used as a “devotional formula.”\(^\text{150}\) Praying with this scriptural verse, one expresses one’s ardent love to God and cries out for divine help and protection like a helpless person in the face of difficult challenges and wandering thoughts. It is fully charged with human affections, which are poured out since the prayer formula is an outcry to God looking for immediate assistance. Pondering upon and assimilating its meaning are essential in Cassian’s unceasing prayer.

In contrast, for the practice of Christian Meditation, Main instructs the practitioners to recite the recommended mantra, \textit{ma-ra-na-tha}, rhythmically in four equally stressed syllables. It is suggested to repeat it “in rhythm with their breathing.”\(^\text{151}\) Dwelling upon the meaning of the mantra is not considered beneficial. Rather, the practitioners are directed to listen to it as they recite and sound it inwardly. The relaxed and calm manner of Christian Meditation resonates with Hindu mantra meditation.

“Listen to it [the mantra] as you say it”\(^\text{152}\) is commonly found in the instruction for Hindu mantra meditations. Interestingly, the same instruction is used in Transcendental Meditation. According to Agehananda Bharati, the initiates of Transcendental Meditation are told to “listen to the inner sound of the mantra unfolding.”\(^\text{153}\) In chanting the mantra \textit{Om}

\(^{150}\) Cassian, \textit{The Conferences}, 10.10.2.

\(^{151}\) Main, \textit{Christian Meditation}, 46.

\(^{152}\) This phrase is from “How to Meditate” by Christian Meditation, which is its formal instruction.

out loud, practitioners are advised to “listen with great attention and contemplate the innate power of sound and its ability to manifest. This will lead to hearing the Cosmic AUM which is not a physical experience, but one that is heard by the inner ear.” The significance of listening is understandable because, in Hindu traditions, the mantras were first heard by spiritual seers and have been handed down from generation to generation. As the practitioners hear it, the mantra is experienced as sound and vibration.

Unfortunately, we don’t have Satyananda’s own words. However, Main remembers his teaching: “My teacher used to say this to me: ‘When you get to this listening stage it’s as though you are toiling up a mountainside and the mantra is sounding in the valley down below you.’” Because, at the beginning stage, listening to it, while reciting it, is difficult for many people as their mind may be pulled into different directions, their ability to listen to the mantra has to be developed. That is the reason why Satyananda refers to it as an advanced stage. It is suggested that Main learned from Satyananda that one listens to the mantra during meditation.

Concerning listening to the sound of the mantra, there are many examples of the Hindu mantra meditations which correspond to Main’s Christian Meditation. One is found in Ram Dass’ 1970s’ bestselling book, Be Here Now. He briefly describes the process of assimilating a mantra into meditation practice:

Start to pronounce His name [Rama as a mantra] silently. It is two syllables: Ra and Ma. However, the “a” of Ma is sounded silently. Listen inside until you can hear the

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155 Main, Christian Meditation, 42. According to Main, there are three stages of engaging with the mantra: (i) saying the mantra, (ii) hearing the mantra, and (iii) listening to the mantra.
name and then begin to let it come outside, as if you were speaking along with the inside voice which is whispering it…\(^\text{156}\)

Here, we can identify both aspects of engaging with the mantra, that is, to recite it and to listen inside to hear it. Saying “let it come outside,” Ram Dass suggests that the source sound of the mantra which the meditator will be hearing transcends the mental sound s/he is creating within her/himself.

Another example is from Pandit Rajmani Tigunait’s *The Power of Mantra and the Mystery of Initiation*: “First we repeat it [mantra] mentally, then we begin to hear it. As our practice deepens, the sound of the mantra becomes more subtle and silent, until eventually we neither repeat nor hear it, but rejoice inwardly in its soundless sound.”\(^\text{157}\) For Tigunait, both reciting and hearing the mantra comprise the practice of the mantra meditation.

A more detailed instruction for mantra repetition meditation is described by Swami Muktananda, an influential Hindu meditation teacher for Westerners. The following description is offered under the subsection title, “How to Repeat the Mantra” in his book, *Where Are You Going?: A Guide to the Spiritual Journey*. The mantra he gives to his audience is *Om Namah Shivaya*:\(^\text{158}\)

You should repeat the mantra silently, at the same speed at which you talk. You can also coordinate it with the breathing, repeating it once with the inhalation and once with the exhalation…*Listen to it as you repeat it*, and in that way your mind will become permeated with mantra.\(^\text{159}\)

\(^{156}\) Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (San Christobal, NM: Lama Foundation, 1971), 36. Rama, or Ram, is one of the most popular Hindu Names for God.


\(^{158}\) *Om Namah Shivaya* means “Om. Salutation to Shiva.”

His words, “Listen to it as you repeat it” are almost identical with the phrase in Christian Meditation’s instruction: “Listen to it as you say it.”

Through Muktananda’s instruction we can see two other possible influences of Hindu mantra meditation on Main’s Christian Meditation, that is, consideration of the tempo and breathing with the mantra in contemplative prayer. Although the manner of breathing in relation to mantra recitation may differ from one school to another, it is common for the instructions on mantra meditation to be concerned with rhythm of reciting the mantra possibly in conjunction with breath.

It will be helpful to quote Main’s advice regarding this matter:

That’s something that you discover a natural rhythm….but probably the best way to say the mantra is to breathe in the mantra and breathe out in silence. Sometimes people find that a four-syllable mantra like maranatha is too much for their lungs and they can’t breathe it all in. And if you can’t while you’re learning to breathe more deeply then you can perhaps breathe in mara and breathe out natha. But probably the best way to say the mantra is to breathe it all in and breathe out in silence.

On another occasion, he said, “We each find our own speed for saying the mantra. Most people say it in rhythm with their breathing.” Both instructions show Main’s interest in rhythm/tempo and breathing in Christian Meditation.

Adiswarananda points out “pace of repetition” as an important guideline for mantra meditation. According to him, an appropriate speed is crucial. Based on his study on the sacred texts of Hindu mantra meditation traditions, Adiswarananda says:

Japa [mantra repetition] should be performed with an even tempo. The repetition should be neither too slow nor too fast. Furthermore, the repetition should be in

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160 This phrase is from “How to Meditate” of Christian Meditation instruction.

161 Main and Freeman, “John Main & Laurence Freeman Respond to Questions on Meditation,” 23.

162 Main, Christian Meditation, 46.

keeping with the rhythm of the seeker’s personality. Every seeker has his own rhythm, determined by his heartbeat, breathing, pace of waking, and manner of speaking. In his repetition he must abide by this rhythm.\textsuperscript{164}

Here the importance of rhythm is clear. A mantra is to be repeated with an established stable pace. Yet, Main and Adiswarananda agree that one should find one’s own rhythm. While Adiswarananda claims that the rhythm is determined by “seeker’s personality,” which includes breathing, Main says that each practitioner discovers one’s own speed for saying it.\textsuperscript{165} “Many people,” Laurence Freeman, Main’s successor in Christian Meditation, affirms, “quite naturally get into a rhythm eventually…. [T]he word [mantra] finds its own rhythm.”\textsuperscript{166}

As breath generates a natural rhythm with inhalation and exhalation, breathing is commonly recommended to be associated with repetition of mantra. Concerning the mantra, \textit{ma-ra-na-tha}, in rhythm, Main suggests “to breathe in the mantra and breathe out in silence.”\textsuperscript{167} In the previous citation, Muktananda recommends his audience to “coordinate it with the breathing, repeating it once with the inhalation and once with the exhalation.” Adiswarananda also mentions the role of breathing in relation to repeating a mantra in rhythm, but does not elaborate on it in detail.

Instructions for Hindu mantra meditation using \textit{so’ham}, one of the most popular Hindu mantras, show that repeating the mantra, listening to it, and saying it in rhythm in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 261.
\textsuperscript{165} Main, \textit{Christian Meditation}, 46.
\textsuperscript{166} Main and Freeman, “John Main & Laurence Freeman Respond to Questions on Meditation,” 34-35.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 23.
\end{footnotesize}
coordination with the breath are all present. It can be considered to differ from other mantras, as it is believed that every living creature always, whether consciously or unconsciously, makes the sound so with the in-breath and ham with the out-breath. Pandit Rajmani Tigunait refers to so’ham as “the universal mantra” because of its “intrinsic characteristic” and “no need for a human teacher to formally initiate us into its use.”

The practice of this mantra is not so different from other mantras, especially for novice meditators. Not being capable to hear the sound so’ham, one has to mentally say or imagine the sound in accordance with one’s breathing and, at the same time, listen to the sound. Here are instructions given by Muktananda:

Whenever you sit quietly, follow your breath and listen to the mantra [so’ham]. If you do not immediately become aware that the mantra is repeating itself, you can repeat the syllables along with your breathing. In a few days you will be able to synchronize the mantra with your breath. Soon you will begin to hear the mantra naturally.

Below is another example found in a contemporary meditation guide book, Meditation for the Love of It: Enjoying Your Own Deepest Experience by Sally Kempton, who spent about 20 years as a spiritual seeker in Hindu meditation. She calls so’ham the “natural mantra.”

The description of Kempton’s “Basic Mantra Practice with So’ham” is as follows:

Sit in a comfortable, upright posture and close your eyes. Focus on the flow of the breath. Gently and with relaxed attention, begin to think the mantra So’ham. Coordinate the syllables with the breathing—so on the exhalation, ham on the

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168 So’ham means “I am That [the Brahman, the Divine].” A detailed practice of so’ham meditation is found in Tigunait, The Power of Mantra and the Mystery of Initiation, 73-84.

169 Ibid., 76-77.


inhalation….Listen to the syllables as you repeat them. Allow your attention to focus more and more fully on the mantra’s syllables.\textsuperscript{172}

It is clear that repeating, listening to, and assimilating the mantra with the rhythm of the breath are all present in both mantra practices. If the \textit{so ‘ham} mantra meditation practice is common to most Hindu meditation traditions, then these three aspects of engaging with the mantra could not be an unusual notion to Hindu meditation teachers, including Satyananda, Main’s teacher.

As explored, Main’s instructions for listening to the sound of the mantra and saying it in an even tempo, possibly, in accordance with the breath are easily found in Hindu mantra meditation traditions. These elements are not found in Cassian’s contemplative prayer. \textit{The Conferences} advises practitioners to cry out to God with the prayer-formula as if one were in a great danger. Main and Satyananda instruct practitioners to listen to the mantra while saying it in a calm manner. In Christian Meditation and Hindu mantra meditation, the practitioners are taught to recite the syllables of the mantra in conjunction of the gentle rhythm of in-breath and out-breath. These shared manners of engaging with the mantra could be evidence of Hindu mantra meditation’s influence on Main’s Christian Meditation.

\section*{3. Concluding Remarks}

The comparative analysis of this chapter shows that the differences between contemporary and traditional Christian contemplative prayer forms correspond to the similarities between contemporary Christian contemplative prayer and traditional Eastern meditative practices. Concerning Centering Prayer, reciting a sacred word with gentleness

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid. While some traditions teach that \textit{so} on inhalation and \textit{ham} on exhalation, other traditions teach it the other way around.
and effortlessness, accepting invasive thoughts in practice as natural and even necessary for healing, and viewing pure consciousness as the highest state of contemplation—which are all discordant with *The Cloud*—closely resemble the teachings of Zen meditation/Transcendental Meditation. Concerning Christian Meditation, reciting a mantra with an open vowel ‘a’, repeating its syllables in rhythm possibly in conjunction with the breath, and paying attention to its sound—which are not found in *The Conferences*—closely correspond to teachings of Hindu mantra repetition meditation. If these parallels reflect possible influences of the Eastern meditation teachings, what does it imply? In the next chapter, we will discuss the implications of the study.
Conclusion

Contributions and Implications

This dissertation examined the sources of Thomas Keating’s Centering Prayer and John Main’s Christian Meditation, arguing that these forms of contemplative prayer are likely influenced by Eastern meditation practices. It is commonly accepted that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are modern adaptations of traditional Christian contemplative prayer forms from *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. I showed that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation have both Christian and non-Christian features in their understanding and instruction of contemplative prayer.

Chapter One examined the main features of traditional Christian contemplative prayer in *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. *The Cloud*’s author stresses the supremacy of love and instructs the practitioners to reach out to God through the impulse of love. One is advised to cry out to God for immediate help using a short, one-syllable prayer word such as “God” “fire,” or “sin.” Any distracting thoughts should be struck down with the prayer word. For this reason, McGinn refers to *The Cloud*’s prayer method as “short ejaculations.”

In *The Conferences*, we found that Cassian’s contemplative prayer method, called “unceasing prayer,” is also a brief ejaculatory invocation for God’s immediate protection and assistance. Cassian gives a specific biblical verse (Psalm 70:1) for the prayer: “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue.” The reason he selected this formula is that it is a cry of help to God that reflects watchfulness, human frailty, and humility. One is told by Cassian to use it as an outcry imploring God for rapid help in the face of danger or temptation.

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Chapter Two’s comparative analysis led us to recognize similarities and differences between present-day contemplative prayer forms and their Christian sources. It is clear that in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation there are theological and methodological features which are foreign to, and even contrary to, their claimed primary resources, *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*.

The most apparent differences are found as below. First, in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, the actual meaning of the prayer word (or mantra) is insignificant or less important than it is in *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. In the traditional prayer methods, the contemplatives use a prayer word or specific biblical formula to cry out to God. As an instrument, the prayer word expresses the contemplatives’ powerlessness, humility, and existential need of immediate help from God. Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation instruct their practitioners to recite the sacred word or mantra *gently* without paying attention to its meaning; meanwhile in the traditional contemplative prayer forms, the contemplatives wholeheartedly mean what they say: “God” “fire” or “sin” in *The Cloud* and “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue” in *The Conferences*.

Second, in the present-day prayer forms, the practitioner’s emotional attitude or affection is not given as much importance as it is in traditional contemplative prayer forms. The former instructs the practitioner to mentally repeat a prayer word, the latter to say it with loving affection or burning desire. The *Cloud’s* author and Cassian teach ejaculatory prayer forms, which use human feelings and emotions to center oneself in the presence of God; Keating and Main, however, do not encourage the practitioner to use such affective energy.

Third, Keating and Main’s handling of distracting thoughts in prayer are different from the teachings of *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*. While appropriate handling of
thoughts is an essential part of the instruction of both traditional and contemporary contemplative prayer forms, their treatments of thoughts are quite different. In *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*, the practitioners are instructed to vigorously respond to distracting thoughts by crying out to God for help using a monologic formula. In contrast, Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation deal more gently with distracting thoughts. Keating and Main advise their practitioners to never directly respond to distracting thoughts; instead, if thoughts come, simply return to a prayer formula “gently” or “without effort.”

Fourth, traditional contemplative prayer understands meditation, or meditative scriptural reading, as a means to contemplation. In *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*, prayerful scriptural reading is the necessary preparation for wordless and imageless prayer—contemplative prayer. It is not likely to skip the step from meditative prayer to contemplative prayer. However, discursive meditation is not required as a preparatory step for Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. These two prayer forms teach that contemplative prayer can be practiced without prior experience of meditative prayer.

Fifth, the anticipated participants are different between traditional and contemporary prayer forms. Traditionally, contemplative prayer is understood as a higher form of prayer, so it is restricted to those who are mature and developed spiritually. In *The Cloud* and *The Conferences*, practitioners of contemplative prayer are expected to have attained high ethical and spiritual virtues and to have seriously undertaken preliminary spiritual exercises such as repentance, renunciation, and meditative scriptural reading. However, Keating and Main open their prayer forms to anyone who wants to learn them. There are no preparatory requirements for the initial practice of Centering Prayer or Christian Meditation. A simple
desire for an intimate relationship with God is the only requirement for the practice of contemplative prayer.

Finally, there are elements in contemporary contemplative prayer forms that are foreign to the traditional contemplative prayer forms; for instance, regarding levels of consciousness and the understanding of thoughts as normal and necessary in Centering Prayer, and the significance of rhythm and sound of the mantra (prayer word) in Christian Meditation. These novel features suggest certain possible influences of other resources on present day contemplative prayer forms.

In light of these differences, Chapter Three explored and illustrated the correspondences between Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Centering Prayer and between Hindu mantra meditation and Christian Meditation in order to identify possible influences of Eastern meditation. Scholars and instructors of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation agree there was an initial challenge of Eastern meditation by which the two creators were led to discover the lost art of Christian contemplative prayer and create the present prayer forms. Keating and Main were both exposed to and actually learned at least one Eastern meditation method. Keating learned Transcendental Meditation and also attended several week-long intensive Zen retreats, called sesshin. Main was initiated into a Hindu mantra meditation by a Hindu swami, Satyananda, and regularly practiced meditation under his guidance for about eighteen months.

Since we know that Keating and Main had experience of Eastern meditation practice(s), we were able to recognize obvious parallels and similarities between their prayer forms and the Eastern meditation practices they were exposed. These parallels are significant,
because they correspond to the differences between the present-day contemplative prayer forms and their Christian sources, identified in Chapter Two.

In Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation there are several features which parallel closely, and appear to be possible influences of, the Eastern teachings. First, like the present day Christian contemplative prayer forms, Transcendental Meditation and Satyananda’s Hindu mantra meditation do not stress the meaning of a mantra in practice. (Zen Meditation normally does not use a word or phrase for meditation.) In Transcendental Meditation, the practitioners are not taught the meaning of the mantra. The actual meaning of the instrumental word (mantra or sacred word) does not play an essential role in the contemporary Christian contemplative prayer forms and the two Hindu mantra meditations.

Second, Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation downplay the role of human affections and emotional energy in a way similar to the Eastern meditation practices. While The Cloud’s author and Cassian advise the contemplatives to use the prayer word or formula to express their longing for God or their desperate need of God’s help and protection, the practitioners of the two Hindu meditations are instructed to repeat a mantra in a gentle, relaxed manner. Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation agree with the latter and do not recommend their practitioners bring their affections into the practice of contemplative prayer. Rather, they should use the sacred word or mantra with ease and gentleness in their practices.

Third, regarding the treatment of the prayer word and distracting thoughts, Keating and Main replace the vigorous methods found in The Cloud and The Conferences with a general attitude of letting go and the gentle handling of undesired thoughts. In Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, if thoughts or images come, one gently returns to the prayer
word. This manner of dealing with thoughts corresponds to the Eastern meditative disciplines.

Fourth, despite encouraging meditative scriptural reading for practitioners, Keating and Main do not consider this practice a required preparation for contemplative prayer. According to traditional forms of Christian contemplation, meditative scriptural reading (kataphatic prayer) is a necessary step to be mastered before one can practice contemplative prayer (apophatic prayer). However, Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Hindu mantra meditation aim directly for a wordless and imageless state of consciousness (apophatic prayer), Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are taught as a form of apophatic prayer which leads one beyond words and images without necessarily having the experience of kataphatic prayer and spiritual exercises.

Fifth, as with Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Hindu mantra meditation, the two present-day Christian contemplative prayer forms are unrestricted and therefore accessible by anyone who wants to learn them. Regardless of one’s preceding spiritual preparation or whether one is religious or a lay person, Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation can be learned and practiced. They have a very concrete, simple, how-to method—that is not found in The Cloud and The Conferences and yet is found in the Eastern meditation practices. Keating and Main make their contemplative prayer forms available to anyone who wants to experience the presence of God in a wordless and imageless state.

Last, the novel features of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are present in the Eastern meditation practices learned by Keating and Main. As Keating regards thoughts as a normal, necessary, and integral part of Centering Prayer, Transcendental Meditation
views thoughts as part of a natural stress releasing process. Both practices claim that having thoughts is not necessarily negative, but normal and even positive, because it is considered a healing process in Centering Prayer and the elimination of stress and fatigue in Transcendental Meditation. Keating’s explanation of the dynamics and development of Centering Prayer closely parallels Transcendental Meditation’s theoretical framework. For Christian Meditation, it is repeating a mantra in rhythm and listening to its sound which is foreign to The Conferences. However, these two practical guidelines are common in Hindu mantra meditation because, according to the Hindu tradition, the mantra is a sacred sound that is charged with spiritual power. Main’s emphasis on the sound—not the meaning—is an indication of the possible influence of Hindu mantra meditation on Christian Meditation.

All these parallels are significant and suggest possible influences, especially since they correspond to major differences between the traditional and modern Christian prayer forms, described above. Therefore, we were able to show (i) that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are not merely renewed traditional contemplative prayer forms; they go beyond the teachings of their primary Christian source, The Cloud and The Conferences, (ii) that the two present-day prayer forms involve theories and practices that parallel those of the Eastern meditative disciplines of Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Hindu mantra repetition meditation, and (iii) that Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation should be regarded as creative hybrids of Christian contemplation and Eastern meditation. Due to the popularity of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, these findings are significant contributions to the field.

Further Implications
In closing, I want to briefly discuss three implications. First, if Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation—the two most wide-spread contemporary Christian contemplative prayer methods in the West—are creative hybrids of Christian contemplative and Eastern meditative traditions, it means that they are the fruits of interreligious encounter between the West and the East. In Chapter Three, we saw that Keating and Main learned Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation and Hindu mantra repetition meditation and that both had relationships with teachers of Eastern meditation. Their writings also show their considerable knowledge and understanding of Eastern meditation traditions. It is significant that Keating and Main’s interreligious dialogue took place in the field of practice.

In an important document, “Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientation on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” published in 1991, the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue distinguishes four forms of dialogue: (i) the dialogue of life—taking place where people strive to live together in harmony and respect their neighbors of different faiths, (ii) the dialogue of action—working together for common social concern, (iii) the dialogue of theological exchange—seeking to better understand one another’s religious heritages and appreciate the commonalities and differences, and (iv) the dialogue of religious experience—sharing one another’s spiritual practices and ways of approaching God. According to this category, Keating and Main are great examples of those who have engaged in the dialogue of “religious experience.” In fact, they are pioneers of Christian-Hindu/Buddhist dialogue at the level of religious experience.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed March 19, 2018). This document specifically identifies “prayer and contemplation” as an example of spiritual practices which can be shared with people of different faiths at the level of the “dialogue of religious experience.”
(practice), as Main experienced Hindu mantra meditation in 1955 and Keating experienced Zen Meditation/Transcendental Meditation in 1970s.

From my view, Keating and Main have a special place among those who are involved in the field of the dialogue of religious experience (practice). They not only participated in Eastern meditation practices, but also incorporated practical elements of Hindu/Buddhist meditation to create Christian contemplative prayer methods. Concerning the dynamics of “prayer” in the context of interreligious relations, an important document given by the World Council of Churches, “Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions,” observes: “The disadvantage may be that one remains a bystander.”

However, Keating and Main exemplify how a Christian can participate in, and learn from, other faith traditions’ contemplative practices, and then bring one’s learning to bear positively into one’s own religious tradition. It is significant simply to recognize that their involvement in the field of practical dialogue resulted in the creation of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation.

The impact of their interreligious dialogue is significant because many people practice these two contemplative prayer forms as their daily spiritual discipline. Today, thousands of people benefit from these two pioneers’ interreligious encounter. It seems fair to say that, to some extent, the practitioners of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation indirectly promote the importance of religious dialogue, especially, at the level of spiritual practice. The spirit of Keating’s and Main’s dialogue of religious experience (practice) will continue to live through the practice of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation.

3 http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2002/guidelines-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions (accessed March 19, 2018). The document was published in 2004. It is interesting to notice that the word contemplation or contemplative prayer is not mentioned in this document, while it is given as the guidelines for interreligious dialogue by the World Council of Churches.
The second implication of my study relates to the question of religious hybridity. Identifying Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation as hybrids of two different religious traditions contributes to the academic discussion on religious “hybridity” or “hybridization.”

According to Robert J. Schreiter: “Defined simply, a hybridity results from an erasure of a boundary between two (cultural or religious) entities and a redrawing of a new boundary.”

Scholars who have been interested in the interactions of religious traditions and their outcomes found that “The movement of religious traditions into new context reshapes their borders and meanings, and contact and interaction in plural worlds often lead to religious hybridization.”

By hybridity I simply refer to the phenomenon that when religions encounter one another, “they constantly borrow and reconfigure themselves through new knowledge and practices.” I believe that this hybridization occurred in Keating’s and Main’s encounter of Eastern meditation traditions and the creation of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation.

In *Constructing Local Theologies*, Schreiter outlines three different types of hybridities: “(1) where Christianity and another tradition come together to form a new reality, with the other tradition providing the basic framework; (2) where Christianity provides the

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4 Although Schreiter believes that in Christian theology syncretism and hybridity are interchangeable, I use the term hybridity because it has neutral nuance while syncretism is loaded with negative meanings. See, Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 74-78.


framework for the syncretistic system, but is reinterpreted and reshaped substantially, independent of any dialogue with established Christianity; (3) where selected elements of Christianity are incorporated into another system.” Although these frames for hybrid phenomena are helpful, the cases of Keating’s Centering Prayer and Main’s Christian Meditation do not fit neatly into any one of them. This is mainly because Schreiter primarily examined hybridity in terms of how Christianity has been inculturated into non-Christian cultures.

However, it is interesting to recognize that the opposite of the third type of hybridity occurred in the process of development of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. What I mean by the “opposite” is that “selected elements of [Hinduism/Buddhism] are incorporated into [Christian] system.” More precisely speaking, chosen features of Hindu/Buddhist meditation practices are integrated into Christian contemplative prayer forms. In our cases of hybridity, non-Christian meditation traditions remain unaffected, while The Cloud’s and Cassian’s traditional Christian contemplative prayer forms are significantly reshaped and changed by the influence of Eastern meditation. It is also noteworthy that the hybridizing process took place mostly in the West and the beneficiaries of these hybrid practices are mostly Christians in the West—not the non-Christians in Hindu/Buddhist cultures. 8

Were Keating and Main aware of the fact they hybridized both Eastern meditation and Christian contemplation to invent new contemplative prayer forms for modern practitioners? Did they do so intentionally or unwittingly? They didn’t say. What we do know is that they passed over to other religious spiritual practices and came back to their

8 So it seems fair to say that Keating and Main are free from possible criticisms regarding hidden intentions of exploitation of Eastern religions. Their hybrid spiritual practices do not diminish and harm the Eastern meditative practices which they learned.
Christian contemplative traditions “with new insight.” In coming back, they brought elements of non-Christian meditative practices and then incorporated them into traditional Christian contemplation. Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation can be considered to be two positive examples of religious hybridization at the level of spiritual practice.

The third implication of my study is the recognition of the differences between the modern and traditional Christian contemplative prayer forms requires further research. As Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation have become the most popular and accessible Christian contemplative prayer forms, how does it affect or has it affected the general Christian understanding, and experience, of the contemplative approach to God? Particularly, when compared to the highly affective forms of traditional contemplative prayer, does the downplaying of affections related to devotional ardor in the practice of modern contemplative prayer make any difference to the practitioners’ inner spiritual development and their relationship with God? Do these differences affect the contemplatives’ experience of God? How does it affect their understanding of the role of emotion and affection in spirituality? I believe these are important questions to posit, since Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are methodologically and theoretically different from traditional Christian contemplative prayer. Especially, the unknown implications of downplaying loving affection in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation await further research.

While answering these questions is beyond the scope of this thesis, personally, I believe and claim it is essential for Christians to integrate affective energy into the practice of

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9 Here I borrow the words of John Dunne, who more than forty years ago said, “The holy [person] of our time…is a figure like Gandhi, a [person] who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time” (John Dunne, The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976], ix).
contemplative prayer. If God is, above all, love and if, in the words of The Cloud, contemplative prayer is a “work of love” between the practitioners and God, how can one come to God without expressing, and growing in, one’s love? Here I want to touch briefly upon the significance of affection and love in the traditional understanding of contemplative spirituality.

Along with The Cloud’s author and John Cassian, Teresa of Avila (d. 1515-1582), John of the Cross (d. 1542-1591), and Thomas Merton (d. 1915-1968)—three great spiritual masters who are hugely influential in the field of Christian contemplative prayer—also consider the practitioners’ love toward, and affectionate relationship with, God to be pivotal in the practice of contemplative prayer. Teresa’s method, which she taught her nuns, is to be aware of the presence of Christ and to “look at Him,” who is always looking at us.10 Her contemplative prayer form, which she called the “prayer of recollection,”11 is a simple gaze of the soul’s eyes at Christ within, with “some loving words,” if necessary. How does one remain present for, and gaze at, Christ? Teresa answers: “You do so with love and…you go about striving to please Him.”12 The affectionate attitude in contemplative prayer is also revealed in a way Teresa addresses Christ: “My true Spouse” and “My Lord and my Love.”13


11 Regarding recollection, Teresa says: “This prayer is called ‘recollection,’ because the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God” (Ibid., 141). It is important to remember that the prayer of recollection implies both recollecting and being recollected. Its goal is not only to gather together the self dispersed in various interests, but also to be recollected to repose in the presence of God. As a Christian spiritual discipline, it is more than a simple exercise of calming the mind and enhancing the power of concentration; rather it serves to unite the recollected soul with God. Although the ability of the mind to be single-pointed is essential to this practice, recollection embodies an intimate communion between soul and God. In this sense, recollection is not simply a spiritual exercise, but also a state where a soul remains solely in God.

12 Ibid., 133.

13 Ibid., 135.
She instructs her nuns to keep their inner eyes toward Christ, because “your Spouse never takes His eyes off you.”14 In another place, while describing the same prayer of recollection, she says, “One should…surrender oneself into the arms of love, for His Majesty will teach the soul what it must do at that point.”15 Although Teresa does not give an explicit instruction on how to use them, it is clear that her method of contemplative prayer involves significant affections.

In the writings of John of the Cross on contemplation, love language is prevalent and paramount. Similar to Teresa’s case, the relationship between the contemplative and God is primarily depicted as the bride and the bridegroom, the beloved and the lover.16 According to John, the soul’s perfect union with God, the goal of contemplative prayer, is achieved through love, since “there is no greater or more necessary work than love.”17 Concerning the role of love, he says: “The power and the tenacity of love is great, for love captures and binds God [Her/H]imself. Happy is the loving soul, since she possesses God for her prisoner.”18

Like Teresa’s method, John’s contemplative prayer form is to “keep spiritually tranquil in a loving attentiveness to God.”19 To do so, one should “direct [one’s] affection

14 Ibid, 134.
16 His two poems, The Spiritual Canticle and The Living Flame of Love, beautifully describe this intimate relationship between the contemplative and God.
18 Ibid., 599.
19 Ibid., 91.
habitually toward God,” while forgetting or laying aside thoughts.\textsuperscript{20} Disordered or unruly affections are a great hindrance to remaining attentive to God so, through contemplative practice, one re-orders one’s inordinate affections. In his response letter to a Carmelite friar, who desires to occupy his will in God alone, John advises: “Cleansed of all inordinate satisfactions, joys, appetites it [the soul] might be wholly occupied with loving God with its affections.”\textsuperscript{21} As Harvey D. Egan points out, what is sought in a contemplative journey is not “an affective vacuum” but “to reverse one’s inclinations toward the pleasure and satisfactions of this world” for “another, better love (love of one’s heavenly Bridegroom).”\textsuperscript{22}

In Thomas Merton’s understanding of contemplation, love is central as well. For him, contemplation is the union of one’s mind and will with God “in an act of pure love.”\textsuperscript{23} In his book, \textit{What Is Contemplation?}, Merton says: “The thing that must be stressed is that contemplation is itself a development and a perfection of pure charity. He who loves God realizes that the greatest joy, the perfection of beatitude is to love God and renounce all things for the sake of God alone—or for the sake of love alone because God [Her/]Himself is love.”\textsuperscript{24} However, because to love God alone and desire God’s will only are challenging tasks, one has to practice mental prayer or discursive meditation, which “teaches you how to become aware of the presence of God; and most of all [which] aims at bringing you to a state

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 747.


of almost constant loving attention to God.”\(^{25}\) Until infused contemplation is given by God’s direct intervention, one has to make deliberate and constant effort to develop and keep a vital contact of love with God. To enter into contemplation, one should be able to “gather up all the love of [one’s] soul.”\(^{26}\) The emphasis on love in contemplative prayer is prevalent throughout Merton’s writings.

These three contemplative teachers alike stress the practitioners’ love toward God in a contemplative journey. For them, love is not merely the fruit of contemplative prayer, but also the cause of one’s growth in affectionate attentiveness to God. Being in love with God is the means as well as the end of contemplative prayer, although the degree of one’s love and effort significantly differs through the process of the development of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer should spring from love; contemplative prayer should end in love. By practicing loving God alone, one recognizes how much one’s love is occupied with superficial pleasures; by constantly bringing one’s loving attention to God, one purifies one’s love. Through the practice of contemplative prayer, one gets more ready for, and moves closer, to encountering Divine Love. Although in a mystical experience of infused contemplation the practitioners (the beloved) may experience union with God (the Lover) beyond a subject-object relationship by the grace of God, contemplative prayer as a practice, which aims toward that unitive experience, should integrate the inner attitude of loving


\(^{26}\) Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 217.
affection toward God. I want to close by quoting William Johnston’s words on Christian contemplation:

No need to say…that Christian contemplation is a path of love. It is nothing other than total fidelity to the greatest of all commandments, to love God with one’s whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and one’s neighbor as one’s self. Put this into practice and you will go far on the road of mystical contemplation. However, let me immediately add that you cannot by your own efforts keep this greatest of all commandments. You cannot love totally without the prior gift of God’s love for you…. As you walk in the mystical path your being is, oh, so gradually, becoming being-in-love. This is a slow process of conversion and enlightenment. Born in the state of being-in-isolation we gradually become being-in-love…. Our being-in-love is always partial; we are always on the way, always becoming.27

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