



Contemplative Prayer & the 21st Century

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Abstract

The medieval, contemplative tradition for the most part ended with the great 16th century Spanish mystics. The modern period of the 17th and 18th centuries was an age of reason that sought to eliminate mystery. Modern theology kept in step with the rational nature of the period and the contemplative tradition was lost to the modern age. Thomas Merton reintroduced a contemplative theology to the 20th century, but contemplative practices are much more popular today than they were in the mid-twentieth century when Merton was writing. This paper examines what it is about our present 21st century and the end of modernity that is so conducive to the popularity of contemplative prayer, and so conducive to bringing us to a deeper and richer understanding of the Gospel.

Keywords

contemplative prayer, mysticism, modernity, journey, Gnosticism

A popular phrase today has become, “I’m spiritual but I’m not religious.” I hear people say that all the time. I think what they mean is that they are interested in spiritual things but they cannot buy the pat answers that religion offers. Many people today have come to realize that the human condition in which we find ourselves is much more mysterious than both modern science and modern theology had led us to believe. One of the ambitions of modern science was to eliminate all mystery, and religion in the modern period did little to oppose that ambition. Indeed, most modern theologies strove to offer an understanding as concise, coherent, and certain as their scientific counterparts.

By the 21st century, however, we have become aware of the fact that the kind of objective, certain, and precise understanding that the modern mind sought in both science and religion does not reflect the reality of our human condition. God, who sees things from the perspective of eternity, may see things in their objective certainty, but we do not. We see things from the confined perspective of our place

within time and space. From that perspective, we perceive things with all of the historical, cultural, and linguistic biases that we first acquire at our mother's knee and continue to acquire throughout our lives in our socio-cultural world. Unlike our modern ancestors of the 17th and 18th centuries who imagined that reason and science could bring us to know reality as it was in itself, we now know that our understanding is always a filtered understanding and the filters are all too human.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was perhaps the first to explain this filtered or phenomenal nature of our experience. What Kant believed filtered our experience and thus created the phenomenal world were innate ideas that constituted a universal hardware through which the data of experience was processed. Thus, although this mental hardware filtered our experience, Kant's belief in its universal nature made our experience all very much the same. By the 21st century, however, we now know that what we bring to our experience is much more than what Kant imagined. With the 19th century, we became aware of historicism, and the fact that the understanding by which we process the data of experience is relative to our own historical epoch. With the 20th century and the advent of cultural anthropology and a greater understanding of linguistics, we became increasingly aware of just how relative that understanding was to our culture and language community. We now know that the concepts through which we interpret the data of our experience are not simply God-given but largely the result of human judgments made within history, culture, and language communities. Even the physical place from which we take in the data of experience alters our interpretation of it, as Albert Einstein revealed in demonstration the relativity of simultaneity.

Today's science has conceded that the truth as we understand it will always be perspectival rather than objective, and probable rather than certain. Religion, for the most part, has been slow to accept this, and many religious people continue to insist that their understanding of the truth is objective and certain. Because of this, more and more people find it hard to believe any of the truths religion offers. If religion is to have a place today among people with a twenty-first century understanding of the human condition, it must offer a way to explore the great mystery that is God, and not simply dole out certitudes that only the most naïve can accept. What 21st century people need is a theology that will lead them into the great mystery rather than a theology that will pretend to eliminate the mystery.

All this is not to say that we do not have access to God's truth; we do, but our access is not the kind that modernity promised and past generations naively accepted. We now know that what we claim to know through experience is not the result of given data but is largely an interpretation of that data. We now know that the world that we

experience is phenomenal, or a composite of both the raw data of experience and what we bring to that data. None of us possesses a God's-eye-view. We are interpretative beings, and our interpretations are largely the result of human judgments passed on to us through history, culture, and language. Perhaps other creatures without history, culture, and language interpret the data of their experience through a God-given understanding, but human beings certainly do not.

It may be natural for us to trust our interpretations, especially since our experience appears seamless, and without a distinction between the data of experience and the understanding that we bring to that data. Today, however, we know that there is a distinction between what is given to us in experience and the understanding through which we interpret that experience. Likewise, we know that our understanding changes with the vicissitudes of time. Albert Einstein did not have the same understanding that Isaac Newton had concerning the physical universe, nor do physicists today believe the same things that Einstein believed. Likewise, a psychologist in the 21st century does not believe the same thing that Freud believed at the beginning of the 20th century. Even people who consider themselves Freudians do not have the same understanding that Freud had less than a hundred years ago. Our experience of the world changes our understanding, or at least it should. As we experience the world or a text, anomalies often appear that make it difficult to accept the standard interpretation. We devise new understandings to overcome the anomalies and once we do, we settle on a new interpretation.

In the past, we naively thought that each new interpretation represented reality itself. Today, we have finally conceded that there is no way to know if our present understanding provides the ultimate interpretation. Religion has been slow to accept what we now know to be the interpretive nature of our human condition. Many religious people profess to believe the same things that the reformers believed in the 16th century. They defend their interpretation by telling us that God has not changed, but the physical universe and the human psyche have not changed either. What has changed is the understanding that we bring to our experience of the physical universe, other people, our self, or the Scripture. The theologians of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation believed that the sun went around the earth. We now know that is not true. Our understanding has changed. Likewise, we now know that the mind is not a *tabula rasa*, and we do not simply record data as given. We interpret data based upon our understanding. This is the nature of human consciousness as we understand it today. It is what our early modern ancestors did not understand.

- THE MYSTIC -

The mystic, however, seems to have always understood, at least regarding their God experience, that the raw material of what God communicates is distinctly different from our interpretation of that communication. Because of this the mystic or contemplative has always sought to isolate the raw data of their God experience and free it from interpretation. In doing so, the contemplative simply seeks to be present to God, without supposing an interpretation as part of that experience. This is the mystic's prayer. It is a prayer that distrusts one's own understanding because the mystery of God always goes beyond the words and ideas that make up our understanding and thus provide our interpretation. For the mystic, their God experiences or prayers are always ineffable, and they know whatever words they do later attribute to those experiences will be different from the experience itself. Long before it became obvious to 21st century minds, the mystic knew that the raw data of their God-experience was something very different from the interpretation they might assign to it.

Of course, there have always been people who claim to be mystics that are very different from what I am describing. Their mystical experience is not very mysterious at all. They know exactly what God communicates to them and they suffer no self-doubt concerning whether their interpretation replicates what God communicates. To them, their God experience and their understanding of that experience are identical – how unlike the true mystic, and how unlike what we now know to be the human condition. The true mystic understands that communion with an eternal and infinite God is inexpressible in terms that objectively and precisely capture that experience.

Certainly, we need to record our God experiences in memory, and that requires that we put our experience into words or images, but the mystic never loses sight of the fact that the words and images they use are insufficient. What we record or interpret with our understanding is never the same as the actual experience. The mystics have always been the ones who have never lost sight of the mystery in it all. They understand that God is beyond our explanations and theologies.

There had always been a mystic tradition that understood this, but it seems to have ended with the modern period. After the great Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila (1515-1591) and John of the Cross (1542-1591) in the 16th century, there are but few examples of the mystic tradition in the modern period. Apart from Brother Lawrence (circa 1614–1691) and Madame Guyon (1648–1717), most of modern theology was all about being certain and precise about what we knew about God rather than the mystery of God. One exception, however, was Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), and although many would not think of Edwards as a mystic, he does see the mysterious

nature of our God experience. Edwards, was one of the leaders of “The Great Awakening” which swept through the American colonies in the 1730s. During that revival, there was a great dispute over whether the manifestations that were taking place were from God or the imagination of the people involved in the revival. Edwards took the unique position that it was both. That is, that God was doing something amid the people but it was also the people’s human understanding that created their interpretation of their God experience. Edwards says, “As to truly spiritual sensations, not only is the manner of its coming into the mind extraordinary, but the sensation itself is totally diverse from all that men have, or can have, in a state of nature.”¹ Thus, with Edwards, as with all true mystic, there is a great unknowing that comes out of a suspicion that the interpretation we assign to an experience is less than certain or precise because the human understanding which creates our interpretation.

This is also the great understanding of our age. Today, more and more people understand what the mystics have always understood. Such an understanding is essential in order to follow Jesus, since those that follow must be very different from the Pharisees on this one important point of humility. Followers of Jesus admit a certain ignorance that continues to open them to the Jesus revelation. The Pharisees, by contrast, suffered no self-doubt concerning their understanding of who God was and who they were in relationship to him. Their certainty concerning their understanding kept them from following Jesus, and our certainty today is equally what keeps us from following Jesus into an ever-greater experience of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. That ever-greater experience that God desires to draw us into is possible only if we are able to look to God rather than our own understanding for the security we desire. The philosopher John Dewey said that insecurity is what generates the quest for certainty in both philosophy and religion. Religion often appeals to human insecurity by offering doctrinal certitudes rather than God. In our present age certainty of understanding is seen as beyond our human grasp, and many of us have come to see the quest for certainty as an illusion. This does not mean that people are abandoning truth but rather that people are no longer buying the kind of certainty that modernity tried to tie to the idea of truth.

This is good news for the Gospel, for the truth of the Gospel is something that we access through a faith journey that is antithetical to certainty. The Dean at our seminary spells faith R-I-S-K. It is only as we step out into the things to which God calls us that we experience God’s faithfulness, but the step is always one taken in uncertainty. Much of religion and theology is about offering us simple certitudes

¹ Edwards, Jonathan. *The Religious Affections*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997, p. 141.

that we might believe and therein feel secure, but that is very different from the kind of faith to which the Gospel calls us. In its modern form, a great deal of religion and theology presented us with a Jesus who punishes evildoers and rewards good people like ourselves who believe the right things and practice the right kind of behavior. That is who we would be if we were God, but Jesus tells us that God is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”² Jesus reveals a God who desires his torturers be forgiven³ in order that they might spend eternity with him. We can understand a god who is like us but a God who forgives his torturers is a mystery to us.

- THE MYSTERY OF GOD -

The Jesus revelation certainly presents us with a mysterious God who is unlike anything we might have anticipated. What we have always wanted from God is a prescription that we might follow in order to feel secure in our relationship with God. Jesus’ teachings, however, leave us realizing that we are sinners who must trust God’s forgiveness and mercy. We would much prefer a Gospel that left it up to us rather than putting it all in God’s hands. When we simply have to trust God’s forgiveness and mercy, we feel out of control and no longer secure. We are uncomfortable with the security that God provides by faith in his forgiveness and mercy.

An experience that vividly illustrated this to me was several years ago when I was taking care of my mother with Alzheimer’s. She was in her 90s and blind. I would bring her down the stairs in the morning, and she would want to hold on to me. It gave her a feeling of security, but it was a false security. I would tell her that her holding on to me was not going to help. Her not falling was dependent upon me holding on to her and not her holding on to me. She never got that, and we, like blind Alzheimer’s patients, never get it either. Our only security is in God holding on to us, and not in our thinking that we are holding on to God with our theologies and the certainty of our understanding.

This is why Jesus does not give us certitudes but instead says, “Follow me.”⁴ When we do follow him and do what he does, we discover the God that he is trying to reveal. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day refused to do that. They were very happy with their own understanding, and so are most of us. Today, however, perhaps more

² Luke 6:35.

³ Luke 23:34.

⁴ Matt. 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21, Mark 2:14, 8:34, 10:21, Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 18:22, John 1:43, 10:27, 12:26, 13:36, 21:19.

than ever before, there are growing numbers of people who do not buy the pat answers and formulas for salvation that religion offers, but are instead interested in exploring the mystery that is God. This is why Eastern religions are gaining favor in the West. They do not offer answers but instead offer access to the experience of mystery.

The Gospel was never about giving answers. The Pharisees were the ones that had all the answers, Jesus, on the other hand, was remarkably devoid of answers. In fact, of the 183 questions asked of Jesus in the Gospels, he answers only three for sure. Maybe you could stretch that to five depending upon what you consider an answer, but he was certainly not about giving us answers. When asked a question, Jesus either asks a question in return, refuses to answer, or answers a different question from the one asked. By contrast, the business of religion became largely a matter of answering the questions, but that was not what Jesus was offering. What Jesus was offering was a way into the great mystery that is the forgiveness and mercy of God.

In a modern world that was all about eliminating mystery, a Gospel that promises to lead us into the great mystery that is God does not sell well. With the 17th and 18th centuries, we became evermore intent on seeing the things we did not understand as puzzles we could solve rather than mysteries into which we needed to gain insight. Modern science told us that there were no mysteries, and reason properly applied could answer all of our questions. We bought into this thinking, and, as a result, it is not surprising that the great medieval mystic tradition for the most part ended with the modern period. Mysticism was not very compatible with a modern mind that sought solutions to change our human condition rather than insight into the mystery of that condition and the God who created it. Fortunately, by the 21st century, more and more people have come to question that modern mindset, and are venturing out into the great mystery that is God. More and more people are finally getting to a place of being able to accept the radical Gospel that Jesus is proclaiming.

If really received, the Jesus revelation should destabilize our understanding in order that we might be free to encounter a God so radically different from anything our human understanding would allow us to imagine. In the Sermon on the mount Jesus tells us that we are wrong about nearly everything. We think that adultery is a sin, but Jesus tells us that mere lust is just as sinful as adultery. We think that murder is sinful, which it is, but he tells us that anger is equivalent to murder. Even things that we find praiseworthy, like making and keeping our oaths, Jesus condemns. Jesus condemns other things that we see as innocuous as well. He condemns worry, but we think worry is a good thing, it means we are responsible, and we deem being responsible a good thing. He even tells us that we cannot love earthly treasure but we must love our enemies. He is turning our

world upside down and destabilizing our understanding. We want a god who loves good people and punishes bad people, but Jesus tells us that God causes the rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous.⁵ What Jesus reveals is that God loves all of his children, but usually only the prodigal comes to understand that. Indeed, in the story of the prodigal son, the older son never enters into the party and he despises his father's love because it is a love for all of his children.⁶ We, like the older son, want God to only love good people like ourselves. The last thing we want is a God who is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."⁷

Jesus wants to bring us into a greater experience of God and a greater experience who we are in relationship to God. To do that, he, not unlike Socrates, must first get us to admit our ignorance. We must begin by acknowledging that we do not know. Of course, it is not simply a matter of not knowing. The unknowing is merely a means to our knowing, and knowing in a deeper and more intimate way. One of Richard Rohr's great lines is "It's not an unknowable mystery, it's an infinitely knowable mystery." It is to this journey that Jesus calls us – a journey into an infinitely knowable mystery.

- OUR JOURNEY INTO THE MYSTERY -

A journey motif runs throughout the Bible. God calls Abraham to a journey into an unknown land, Moses leads the people on a forty-year journey of aimlessly wandering in the wilderness, and Jesus says, "Follow me" and leads us into a similar spiritual journey. But a journey into the unknown is exactly what we do not want. We have always wanted certitudes, and modernity told us we were right to desire certainty, which they equated with truth. Consequently, when God calls us to follow him, we insist that we do not know the way.⁸ We want certitudes, guarantees, or maps of where we are going and reasons why we need to go there. We want an understanding that makes us feel secure. To all of this Jesus responds, "I am the way."⁹ That is not what we want to hear.

Religion is often more accommodating to our request than Jesus. Religion often gives us just what we want, and provides our understanding with explanations that seem to make sense and give us something to hold onto. That, however, is usually the very thing that keeps us from the journey to which Jesus calls us. Religion gives us

⁵ Matt. 5:45.

⁶ Luke 15:11–32.

⁷ Luke 6:35.

⁸ John 14:5.

⁹ John 14:6.

a way to avoid the journey into the mystery that is God by telling us that it is no mystery at all, and that if we trust the doctrines they set forth, we will know all we need to know about God. This is the great heresy, maybe the only heresy. We know it by the name Gnosticism. Gnosticism may take many different forms but it is always about our knowing rather than faith in God's mercy and forgiveness. We constantly fall into believing that because we know certain truths about God that puts us in a privileged place with God. The truth, however, is not about what we know, but rather about deeper and deeper experiences of God's mercy and forgiveness. According to Christian orthodoxy, Satan would know all the truths of the church but he is one who would never seek the experience of God's mercy and forgiveness. Many religious people take on a similar nature when they think that because they know something about God or practice certain rituals or behaviors they are righteous and no longer in need the experience of God's forgiveness.

Believing that we know, and we know for certain, does comfort us and give us a sense of security, so we accept the certitudes of religion and settle for worshipping the god of our understanding rather than following Jesus into the mystery. Maybe that is a necessary starting point, and almost all of us begin there, but ultimately our understanding is a poor source of security. We find real security in God alone, and we access that experience in prayer.

God is always trying to draw us out of our own understanding and into a spiritual journey that leads us into the mystery that is God. The contemplative is one who finds herself in just such a place. She no longer finds security in what she knows. What she knows usually has been destabilized in order that she might move into the unknown, which is the mystery of God. When the understanding through which we interpret the world becomes destabilized, we enter into what the mystic refer to as the dark night of the soul. In the dark night of the soul, the sense we were always able to make of the world is gone, and the security our understanding had always provided has evaporated. It is a little like being a child again. Remember how scary some things were because we had not figured it all out? Without their understanding to count on, children depend upon their parents, but when adult understanding breaks down all we can count on is God and the sense that he has us. When we do sense that, it is better than all the understanding in the world.

Of course, the false sense of certainty that understanding provides is always initially more attractive because it is a certainty that we can possess rather than a certainty that possesses us. Like my blind mother with Alzheimer's, we want something to grab onto rather than something that has a hold of us. This is why we are so attracted to theology, and the more certain the theology the better. Not that theology is bad. Surely, we need some theology. When, however,

we imagine that our theology provides a perfect or even adequate understanding of an infinite and eternal God, our theology becomes the thing that keeps us from the ever-greater intimacy to which God calls us. In such cases, our theology becomes the idol that we look to for our sense of security rather than God. This is why the dark night of the soul is so essential. If our understanding is not destabilized, we will never seek security apart from that understanding. Why would we? If our understanding provides all the certainty and security we want, why would we seek security anywhere else? That is why so much of Jesus' teaching is about destabilizing our understanding. Jesus, however, does not simply destabilize our understanding and leave us there. He says, "Follow me" and leads us into the mystery that is God. He is the way, but the way is not a theological way through which we might gain an evermore-certain understanding of God, but rather a path of prayer through which we might experience our union with God.

This might seem a little strange at first since Jesus' teachings on what we call prayer are rather limited in comparison to his teachings on things like forgiveness or the evils of wealth and hypocrisy, but that is because we have a very limited, cultural notion of prayer being all about words. Prayer, as we have seen, is actually simply a matter of being aware of God's presence and, as such, Jesus' entire life was a prayer. Jesus prayed without ceasing, and what is most essential about following him and living as he lived is that we too pray without ceasing. Of course, when we think about following Jesus and doing what he did, we would much prefer to raise the dead or give sight to the blind. God using us to perform miracles makes us feel great, while practicing an awareness of God's presence makes us feel that we are not very spiritual. That is because we are not very good at being attentive to God. We are distracted from an awareness of God's presence by just about anything. Unlike Jesus, whose love relationship with the Father kept him in a constant state of awareness of his Father's presence, we constantly drift off into all sorts of other concerns that capture and possess our attention. The good news, however, is that it is this recognition of our failure to give God the kind of attention that love demands that causes us to repent or turn our attention back toward him. When we do, we experience forgiveness, and if we become evermore aware of our sin of not giving God the attention that love requires, we find ourselves in an almost constant state of receiving forgiveness.

We might at first think that living in an almost perpetual state of repentance, and being the constant recipient of forgiveness, is hardly the Christian ideal. We want to do it right, and repentance means we are doing it wrong, but the Gospel is all about receiving forgiveness and mercy, not in order to become sinless, but in order to become forgiving and merciful. God sanctifies us through his forgiveness but

our sanctification is not to make us into his sinless likeness but his forgiving and merciful likeness. Two thousand years after Jesus first presented the Gospel to us, we still do not get it. Perhaps the only way we ever will ever get it is through prayer.

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