

THE PRACTICE OF CONTEMPLATION AS WITNESS AND RESISTANCE

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WE LIVE IN AN EXCITING TIME, when interest in spirituality is burgeoning. Hundreds of new books are published each year on spiritual practices and traditions. However, the kind of spirituality for which people are hungering seems to be largely relegated to the private sphere, implying a very individualistic understanding of faith. Most of the programmes offered at churches and retreat centres are focused on individual growth, and often seem, as Bridget Rees says, 'more concerned with domestication than liberation, with the *status quo* than new birth'.¹ Moreover, spirituality is often regarded as transcending the concerns of this world rather than being immersed in the messiness of daily life.

I teach a course on 'Contemporary Christian Spirituality and Prayer' at an ecumenical seminary in Seattle, USA, where I live. I love introducing students to new ways of prayer and witnessing the unfolding sacred presence in their lives. But I believe deeply that 'the call of the Christian to transform society' is central to the spiritual life.² This vision of the spiritual call of every person is rooted in the Christian tradition of social transformation. It shifts the focus of spirituality from the private sphere to the social sphere, from practice for one's own sake to practice for the sake of the community. In this article I want to explore this idea of spiritual practice not just as a path to personal piety, but as an act of resistance, witness and liberation which ultimately

¹ Bridget Rees, 'Liberation Spirituality', in *Liberation Spirituality*, edited by Chris Rowland and John Vincent (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1999), 14.

² Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 3.

facilitates the transformation, not just of the individual, but of the wider community as well. I will use contemplative practice as a specific example.

Spiritual Practices

Spirituality has been described by Don Saliers as ‘our embodied humanity fully alive before God and neighbour, stretched by story, stretched by touch, stretched by song, stretched by eating and drinking, bathing, anointing’.³ This description of the spiritual life points to its embodiment through particular practices. In people’s daily patterns of loving, caring, working and living they are following a spiritual path of sorts, whether they realise it or not. The shape of people’s lives reflects their priorities and ultimate values. And the object of a spirituality that nurtures justice is to make these patterns and practices of day-to-day existence a conscious and intentional part of spiritual life, and to encourage practices that respond to injustices and transform communities.

According to Elaine Graham, practices are ‘not the outworking of faith, but its prerequisite’.⁴ Our practices create the framework within which faith in God and an ever-expanding love can develop. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra describe spiritual practices in terms of four characteristics: they address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human actions; they are performed by people together, in communities, over time; they have standards of excellence and need to be done well; and they help us to see how our daily lives are integrated with God’s activity.⁵ Practices resist the separation of thinking from acting; they are social, belonging to groups of people across generations; and they are rooted in the past but also constantly adapting to changing circumstances. Through them our lives together take shape over time in response to God. When people participate in a spiritual practice they are embodying a specific kind of wisdom about what it means to be human in the context of relatedness to God. Our

³ Don Saliers, ‘Introduction: Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness’, in *Human Disability in the Service of God*, edited by Nancy Eiesland and Don Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 31.

⁴ Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 205.

⁵ Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, ‘Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith’, in *Practising Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 6–7.

practices are shaped by our beliefs, and our beliefs arise from and take on meaning within our practices. Through everyday activities we live out our deepest convictions.

This way of thinking about practices can help us to conceive of and to live the Christian life beyond the individualism that dominates Western culture, focusing on the shared and communal quality of our lives. In *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, William Spohn defines spiritual practices as ‘pedagogical and transformational’:

They are ... not only interior; rather, they integrate bodily actions and public commitments with convictions that are rooted in the person’s affective and cognitive structure. Authentic spirituality is not confined to an individualistic ‘care of the soul’, since its practices and frame of reference are communally based and oriented to action with and for others.⁶

Practices ground our bodily lives in the communities in which we live; and they demand a commitment to the care of those communities. But they can also bear witness to a vision that is much larger than the community—God’s vision. Practices root the community in a relationship with God and make what flows from that relationship real through concrete actions.

Performance Theory

To develop an approach to the study of Christian spirituality through the socially transformative power of spiritual practices, I turn to insights from performance theory in the study of ritual. Performance theory seeks to examine how activities and practices create a culture within which people act in meaningful and effective ways. It explores both religious and secular rituals ‘as orchestrated events that construct people’s perceptions and interpretations’.⁷

Approaching spiritual practices from performance theory involves examining how they shape people’s understandings, create culture, and can transform society. Central to this approach is ‘a fresh awareness of human agents as active creators of both cultural continuity and

⁶ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 36.

⁷ Catherine Bell, ‘Performance’, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1998), 208.

change'.⁸ It emphasizes the deeply communal nature of spirituality over its importance for the individual, and examines the communal and social dimensions of spiritual practices and their transformative power. Belden Lane writes that theology's work,

... remains unfinished until it is translated finally into worship and ethical action. Theology as performance necessarily completes itself in spirituality. It is inherently communal, practice-oriented, liturgical, and prophetic.⁹

Spiritual practice becomes an exercise of power as it effects both internal and external changes. Simply by engaging in the practice, one participates in and creates a new reality with an individual and social impact. When many people engage in a particular practice, the social effect is magnified.



Candlelit vigil for the people of Burma

Performance theory reveals something basic about human beings: we constitute ourselves through our actions. Thomas Driver describes ritual, religion and liberative action as being alike in that they can construct alternative worlds. He emphasizes that this is not achieved through 'the mere thought of deity ... but rather such thought in conjunction with the physical enactment of prayer in speech or body language—that is, in performance'.¹⁰ The actual doing, or performing, of rituals or practices can move people towards greater liberation as it

⁸ Bell, 'Performance', 209.

⁹ Belden Lane, 'Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as the Theatre of God's Glory.' *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1/1 (Spring 2001), 1–30.

¹⁰ Thomas Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 95–96.

works to transform our world. I shall look in particular here at how our practices can construct an alternative to the materialistic Western culture in which many of us live.

The Violence of Modern Life

In *The Decline of Pleasure*, the author and drama critic Walter Kerr describes a cultural law by which most people in the Western world live:

Only useful activity is valuable, meaningful, moral. Activity that is not clearly, concretely useful to oneself or to others is worthless, meaningless, immoral.¹¹

The consequences of this law are pervasive and destructive. We are constantly stressed by lack of time. Western culture places a high value on speed and on productivity; and its pace of life keeps increasing despite technological advances which were supposed to provide people with more leisure.¹² In our market economy, with its ideology of individualism and consumption, some people work harder and harder to purchase things they do not need; while others who work just as hard cannot provide the very basics of shelter, food and medical care for their families. Our health, our time with our families, our engagement with our communities, and our true leisure all suffer the consequences of ever increasing work and decreasing security.

Busyness, consumerism, and their accompanying anxiety can easily become substitutes for meaning and clarity of purpose, numbing our capacity to act responsively. Allowing us to be selectively attentive and to filter out complexity and ambiguity, they foster superficial thinking, short-term perspectives, and inappropriate humility. As long as we are busy, we can both feel overwhelmed and 'involved'. Swamped by the demands of securing a life for ourselves, we can more easily justify begging off from responsibility for the commons.¹³

Being constantly busy is not only damaging to our bodies, with their need for rest, and to our spirits, with their need for renewal, but also to

¹¹ Walter Kerr, *The Decline of Pleasure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 48.

¹² Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

¹³ Sharon Daloz, Laurent Parks, James P. Keen and Cheryl Keen, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston, Ma: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.

society at large. We have become so overwhelmed by life that our ability to discern possible solutions to the complex problems of our age has become severely compromised.

Thomas Merton has written:

The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.¹⁴

Here Merton is specifically addressing people who are working for peace and justice. He sees the ways in which we participate in our culture's drive towards productivity as participation also in the violence of our culture against our own bodies and spirits. This violence has a physical impact: the way we push ourselves can lead to serious health problems, and further marginalises those who are already coping with illness. It also has a social impact: we are always feeling overwhelmed and do not have the time to reflect on the complex problems that we need to address. We begin to lose the sense that we can do anything constructive to respond to social issues. And there is a spiritual impact, in that the spiritual life can become focused on forms of *doing* rather than *being* in the presence of God. Often, moreover, practices such as meditation and contemplative prayer are presented as ways of coping with modern life rather than as ways of transforming it.

But the practice of contemplation has the potential to become both an act of resistance to the busyness of our culture and a way of deepening our awareness of God, which also brings us into closer unity with our own values and priorities, and into closer communion with others. In this sense, contemplation is not primarily a technique for prayer. Rather, it is a way of being present to what is really inside our own experience, of taking the time and making space for this presence, and of allowing ourselves to be moved by what we find there.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), 86.

The Practice of Contemplation

Contemplation is, in essence, disposing ourselves to be aware of the presence of God, who is always present to us, and allowing ourselves to be moved by that presence. Society pressures us to work harder and harder, leaving us less time for personal renewal and prayer and therefore moving us further from what is most real in our lives: the experience of God. But contemplation values being over doing and puts us in closer touch with what it is to live a meaningful life.

Contemplation as a Way of Living

In describing mystical contemplation, William McNamara speaks of ‘a long, loving look at the real’.¹⁵ Contemplation is long in that it requires time and space, and it is loving in that it is rooted in God who is the ground of love and of our being. Its object, the real, is the whole substance of our lives: contemplation does not necessarily always address beauty or wonder; often it faces pain and suffering. To look with love in an unhurried way, to take this stance in the whole of our lives, is to cultivate a contemplative way of being. Contemplation is the profound realisation that life proceeds from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source; it is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.



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Shibuya station, Tokyo, rush hour

¹⁵ William McNamara, *Wild and Robust: The Adventure of Christian Humanism* (Cambridge, Ma: Cowley Publications, 2006). And see Walter Burghardt, ‘Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real’, *Church*, 14 (Winter 1989), 15.

The practice of contemplation is not just a way of praying, but a way of living. As the pastoral theologian Jean Stairs says, contemplative living is a powerful preventative and restorative practice.¹⁶ It is one of the most effective things that we can do for ourselves when we feel like hostages to the modern world. Contemplation is profoundly healing in its discontinuity with the whole direction of modern life. Its imperative is based on Jesus' own model of ministry, in which he often took time to be alone and pray when he was under pressure.

The theologian Monica Furlong describes busyness as an illusion, something we choose for ourselves because it 'anaesthetises the feelings of inadequacy and insignificance which assail us when we admit that we have remarkably little to do'.¹⁷ It is only when our bodies protest against the life of busyness with aches and addictions that we may begin to question our motivations and how we fill our lives. Furlong points to the

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dangers of ignoring our body's natural voice that tells us when to rest and when to be active. If we ignore it often enough, either through willpower or through artificial stimulants, then we eventually forget how to listen until it becomes insistent through illness.¹⁸ To help us listen, Furlong suggests that what we need is a rhythm of doing and being, activity and rest. She describes the belief that life cannot go on unless we work ourselves beyond our means as a form of megalomania, 'a pathological state which must be fought'.¹⁹ As our exhausted minds and bodies are allowed to rest we begin to discover more important and life-giving goals than productivity.

Living contemplatively means seeing the world in a new way. Contemplation puts us in touch with the divine source of love and the ground of our being, and allows us to recognise God dwelling in our deepest hungers and longings. Contemplative prayer 'reminds us that we are not flat surfaces but mysterious depths which cannot be plumbed directly through what we think and what we do'.²⁰ Contemplation is the fundamental activity of divine-human partnership that lets us see perceptively and lovingly the innermost reality and truth of everything.

¹⁶ Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Monica Furlong, *Contemplating Now* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1983), 16.

¹⁸ Furlong, *Contemplating Now*, 90.

¹⁹ Furlong, *Contemplating Now*, 109–110.

²⁰ Wendy Farley, 'The Transformation of Faith: Contemplation as Resistance in a Postmodern Age', *Memphis Theological Seminary Journal*, 36 (Fall 1998), 49.

As we enter more deeply into reality, we find ourselves wanting to take part in shaping it. This participation, however, requires a sense of openness and involves risk. Jean Stairs asks, 'Do we listen for reality as we would have it be or as it is?'²¹ Are we listening to confirm what we already think, or are we open to being surprised by the grace of God revealed in others or in the discovery of something new? Contemplation involves developing our compassionate attention: as we begin to see below the surface of things we also become aware of voices that usually go unheard. 'The soul that is united with God sees the world with God's eyes. That soul, like God, sees what otherwise is rendered invisible and irrelevant.'²²

Contemplation as Therapy

Unfortunately, the practices of contemplative prayer are often marketed as an antidote to the toxicity of modern life to anyone who feels overwhelmed or alienated by work. J. Matthew Ashley points to the growing 'spirituality of business' literature which presents contemplative practices as techniques 'by which executives can manage stress, increase corporate *esprit de corps*, and get a greater sense of fulfillment from their work, without ever considering the wider, social impact of corporate practices'. He worries about the danger that Christian spiritual traditions are being packaged,

... as little more than techniques that help us fit in and adapt to this juggernaut of a world we have created. This is a spirituality of the status quo, a spirituality that has very little good news for the poor, for those who cannot hope to 'fit in' to our world, because they are being crushed by it.²³

A true contemplative spirituality is not about slowing down for a moment to cope better with stress. It listens to our deepest needs and desires. Contemplation is a gift of awareness which helps us to break through 'the superficial exterior appearances that form my routine vision of the world and of my own self' so that 'I find myself in the presence of

²¹ Stairs, *Listening for the Soul*, 23.

²² Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2001), 283.

²³ J. Matthew Ashley, 'Contemplation in Prophetic Action', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Spring/Summer 2000), 10.

hidden majesty'.²⁴ Living in this way leads to a transformation of the self through a new way of seeing, a vision rooted in the ways that God sees the world. This transformation is an awakening to the sacredness of all of reality, and leads beyond the self to a renewed awareness of others, especially of those whom society marginalises and disregards. What is seen as truly sacred is more likely to be treated with dignity and respect. From the long, loving look at the real comes communion,

... the discovery of the Holy in deep, thoughtful encounters—with God's creation, with God's people, with God's self—where love is proven by sacrifice, the wild exchange of all for another, for the Other.²⁵

Thomas Merton describes the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life as 'not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing his own private intuition of God; it is a sea of Love, which flows through the One Body of all the elect'.²⁶ Contemplation may initially lead us more deeply inward, into solitude and silence, but true contemplative experiences always bring us back to a more profound awareness of how deeply we are each connected to all of creation.

Contemplation as Resistance

The practice of contemplation can be an act of resistance to the norms and expectations of a culture that is harmful to us, a refusal to accept values that do violence to our bodies and spirits. If we place contemplation at the heart of our way of being in the world, we resist the notion that we are only valuable for the things we do. Merton claims that without this contemplative orientation, we build churches not to praise God,

... but to establish more firmly the social structures, values and benefits that we presently enjoy. Without this contemplative basis to our preaching, our apostolate is no apostolate at all, but mere proselytizing to insure universal conformity with our own national way of life Without contemplation, she [the Church] will be reduced to being the servant of cynical and worldly powers, no

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 41.

²⁵ Burghardt, 'Contemplation', 16.

²⁶ Merton, *New Seeds*, 65.

matter how hard her faithful may protest that they are fighting for the Kingdom of God.²⁷

It is imperative for communities of faith to integrate the contemplative rhythms of being and doing into their life of faith, because ‘shared performative ritual action may profoundly shape the imaginative world of an entire community’.²⁸ We should consider the ways in which our liturgies reflect this rhythm and pace. Certainly good ritual arises from prayerful preparation and lots of work to bring the various elements together. But are we concerned with filling every moment of our lives, or do we allow moments of silence into which the community can enter?

Do we balance the importance of symbol and sacrament with an acknowledgement that all we do and say always falls short of the magnitude of God’s presence in our lives?

It is especially important for this rhythm to be integrated into the lives of pastoral leaders. If the leaders of our faith communities always run themselves ragged without time to rest in God’s presence for their own spiritual nurture, then what sort of witness does that offer to the wider community? The practice



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²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1996), 116.

²⁸ Wendy Wright, ‘“A Wide and Fleshy Love”: Images, Imagination, and the Study of Christian Spirituality’, *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, 7 (Spring 1999), 7.

of contemplation needs to be performed on every level; and the witness of pastoral leaders is an especially important way of showing people that there is another way of approaching and valuing our lives.

One way for communities to follow this rhythm is by providing time and space for people to practise contemplation together. This might occur through days of retreat or through reclaiming the Sabbath as a day free from worry and work. Living contemplatively not only benefits individuals in re-establishing a sense of the significance of their lives and choices; it has benefits to the community as well.

If a significant proportion of a Church's membership is practising a contemplative lifestyle, then it is highly likely that the culture, vision, mission, and faith environment of the congregation itself will undergo significant change.²⁹

We must take time as communities to grow in our awareness of the ways in which God is working in our midst; and we can only grow in this way when the rhythms of being and doing are allowed to flourish.

Contemplation as Resistance and Witness

The practice of contemplation certainly renews us for our work towards justice, but I suggest that it is an act of justice itself as well. While the rhythms of being and doing may restore our bodies and spirits for the work of service to the larger community, I believe that the practice of contemplation is an act of resistance to the cultural norms of society. Living in the rhythm of doing and being; being in touch with the body's voice; sitting with the depths of love that reside within each of us; not being exhausted and scattered can also become a powerful witness to the wider community of an alternative way of being in the world.

Spirituality is embodied in particular practices, including that of contemplation. To make spiritual practices intentional and conscious and to shape them in light of the experience of others, especially of those on the margins of society, is to help create a liberating pattern for our lives. Such practices teach us about a life lived in awareness of God, and they move us more deeply into this reality and what this reality demands of us. Just as the aim of pastoral ministry is not just personal transformation, but social transformation—the reimagining and

²⁹ Stairs, *Listening for the Soul*, 39.

transformation of social worlds'³⁰—the aim of a liberating Christian spirituality is not only personal but also social.

Christian Spiritual Practices as Living into a New Reality

God is always inviting us into a new and renewed reality. Spirituality is an ongoing process of liberation—both personal and communal—freeing us from the limitations of our culture and moving us toward a deeper and more expansive love that is inclusive and life-giving for everyone. The ways in which we practice our spirituality, the ways in which it is embodied in our lives, witness and grow out of our faith in God and our belief in transformation in this world. Because spirituality is embodied, its practices are an expression of our most deeply held beliefs and values. Performed as a community, these practices can provide a powerful witness to the world.

Spiritual practices provide the space for God to act within us and bring about the transformation of our communities. Christian spirituality is always a movement towards greater freedom, both interior and exterior. Interior freedom involves letting go of those beliefs and expectations which no longer serve our needs and hinder our ability to expand our vision of the Kingdom of God. Exterior freedom involves concrete actions that help to create this welcoming and liberating space for ourselves and others. Practices are a lived and embodied way of bringing our relationship to God to communal life. They show us how our whole lives are entangled with the holy and thus provide us with a liberating space into which we can live our transforming relationship with God and so transform the communities of which we are a part.

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³⁰ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and the Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), 102.