

# Should Christians Do Contemplative Prayer?

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How about if we call a spade a spade? I'm speaking of contemplative prayer.

If you've been using the term as the new way to describe your own practice of getting alone with God, being quiet, and praying silently . . . well, you *haven't* been doing contemplative prayer (also called centering prayer, breath prayer, and Jesus' prayer).

It's easy to misunderstand. Popular writers and teachers portray contemplative prayer in vague language that seems "almost intentionally inaccessible."<sup>1</sup>

About seven years ago, I began to seriously investigate. Having some knowledge of Eastern religions and the occult, I soon saw red flags. I found that contemplative prayer is neither contemplative (thinking deeply) nor prayer (talking to God). Instead, it involves a mantra (a word or phrase repeated for ten to twenty minutes) as the means for erasing thoughts.

I would have voted for the practice *not* to be called contemplative prayer! But alas, it's too late. That term and its meaning have been established for centuries.

The process itself is the same for mystics of all religions—in Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, in Hinduism with transcendental meditation and yoga, in Sufism (Islamic mysticism), in the meditation of New Age spirituality, and in contemplative prayer. Participants are advised to choose a "sacred word." But the repetition renders any words meaningless (ask a psych prof), so it doesn't really matter whether a Christian says "Jesus loves me" or a Buddhist says "Hail to the Lotus." The repetition induces an altered state of consciousness in which the practitioner senses a "union with the divine," having presumably contacted the god of choice.

"But that can't be!" you protest. "I know what I read about contemplative prayer." Do you?

## Ask the Experts

We can learn all we need to know from two recognized experts on the subject, Richard Foster and Thomas Merton.

Richard Foster, author of the best-selling *Celebration of Discipline*, contends that contemplative prayer is not Eastern. But what he describes matches Eastern practice, and he favorably refers to

Eastern and occult proponents. In his book *Prayer*, Foster teaches that the practice is “unmediated,” exclusive—“not for the novice,” “wordless,” and dangerous—requiring that “prayers of protection” be offered against dark forces before one attempts it.<sup>2</sup>

- *Unmediated.* Scripture speaks of Jesus as our mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) and the Holy Spirit and Jesus as intercessors (Romans 8:26, 34). I have no idea what Foster considers a hindrance in normal prayer that should be bypassed in favor of “unmediated” prayer.
- *Exclusive.* Are we to believe Jesus forgot to tell us that certain prayer is reserved just for the initiated? And that this secret was only finally figured out by medieval mystics? Where’s the evidence?
- *Wordless.* Foster does not mean praying silently, in our minds. Upon further study, it’s clear that he means no word spoken *or* thought. No content. Is there in the Bible a kind of prayer with no content? Is this “silence” (also sometimes called the void or the pure darkness) a sacred place where God speaks and acts?
- *Dangerous.* No true prayer offered to the true God could accidentally dial a wrong number! The Lord hears us when we call (Psalm 4:3; Isaiah 58:9). I submit that dark forces could be contacted during contemplative prayer because mysticism opens occult doors.<sup>3</sup>

The late Thomas Merton’s books remain popular with Christians even though his Catholic theology gave way to Buddhism—a religion with no creator God and, of course, no Jesus. Merton said that Buddhism is “an opening to love.”<sup>4</sup> And “I am going to become the best Buddhist I can.”<sup>5</sup> Merton echoes Foster’s four points about the nature of contemplative prayer:

- *Unmediated.* Merton speaks of “direct realization” and even of going “‘beyond God’ to the ultimate perfect emptiness.”<sup>6</sup>
- *Exclusive.* What is experienced is “the sign of the Spirit upon the Chosen People of God.” Do it wrong, and you’ll be “impervious to the deepest truths.” Only in this experience can you find God, he says, but he also scolds “people who try to pray and meditate above their proper level.”<sup>7</sup>
- *Wordless.* “Often making use of no words and no thoughts at all.”<sup>8</sup>

- *Dangerous*. There is a “danger of psychological regression,” a “deep dread and night,” a descent into “dread to the center of our own nothingness.” A person may “find himself getting all kinds of strange ideas.”<sup>9</sup>

## Out in the Open

To peel off another layer, we find many pro-contemplative writings relatively open in their explanations—like these articles from three different websites.

- The article “Contemplative Prayer in the Western Tradition” states that contemplative prayer goes “beyond the level of sense perception.” Even the word *mantric* is used to describe the repetitive, mind-emptying technique.<sup>10</sup>
- “The History of Centering Prayer” specifically mentions that Fathers Pennington and Keating, the architects of centering prayer, went to “ancient sources” to revive this “simple method of silent prayer for contemporary people.”<sup>11</sup> You might assume those ancient sources mean the Bible. But in their book *Finding Grace at the Center*, Pennington and Keating are clear that they draw on Eastern practice: “We should not hesitate to take the fruit of the age-old wisdom of the East and ‘capture’ it for Christ. . . . [We should] acquaint ourselves with as many of these Eastern techniques as possible. . . . Many Christians who take their prayer life seriously have been greatly helped . . .”<sup>12</sup>
- At ContemplativeChristian.com, proponents try to tie contemplative prayer to the Bible and dispel any idea that it is a “new age belief system” but admit the practice is in all world religions. The writer is excited about the “deliberate efforts to encourage contemplative prayer” in Protestant churches, stating, “The Protestant Church can’t boast of this kind of historical tradition, as its concern for the Bible as sole truth has limited its receptivity.”<sup>13</sup>

I find it impossible to mesh with Christianity the “contemplation” of the mentors named on that site. There’s Thomas Merton again; Richard Rohr, who hosts Zen retreats at his center<sup>14</sup>; and Teresa of Avila, the medieval nun best known for her book *Interior Castle*, whose contemplative experience was described as “a sweet, happy pain, alternating between a fearful fiery glow, a complete impotence and unconsciousness, and a spell of strangulation, intermitted sometimes by such an ecstatic flight that the body is literally lifted into space. This after half an hour is followed by a reactionary relaxation of a few hours in a swoon-like weakness, attended by a negation of all the faculties in the

union with God. From this the subject awakens in tears; it is the climax of mystical experience, productive of the trance.”<sup>15</sup>

Though the biographies of medieval contemplatives tell of levitation, self-torture and starvation, and erotic encounters with entities, today’s promoters tend not to mention that!

*What Now?*

I’m stunned when some respond, “I do contemplative prayer but not your definition of it.”

It’s not *my* definition; we’ve established that. But for the sake of argument, let’s say there *are* two kinds of contemplative prayer: a good kind rooted in “ancient Christian practice” and a bad kind rooted in Eastern/occult practice. Then we should be able to produce two lists of experts, one promoting each kind.

But after years of research, I’ve come up with only one list—*because there is only one*.

Both the people who claim contemplative prayer is *not* of Eastern/occult association and those who gladly acknowledge that it is reference and recommend the same list of experts—those mentioned above and more. Philip Yancey labels such experts “masters of prayer.”<sup>16</sup> J. K. Jones calls them a “lush rainforest of spiritual giants.”<sup>17</sup> *The Web Site of Unknowing* speaks of their “fascinating theological insights.”<sup>18</sup>

Such recommendations influence us, especially after we’ve already been seduced by ethereal words like these:


- “In silence and contemplation, we rest from all of our human striving and division.”<sup>19</sup>
- “Move beyond thinking into a place of utter stillness with the Lord . . . and then God works.”<sup>20</sup>
- “It is to this silence that we all are called.”<sup>21</sup>

A vast crowd has been quoting and recommending today’s proponents of contemplative prayer while also misunderstanding them. If the writer is following in the footsteps of Foster, Merton, and the medieval Catholic mystics, then he or she absolutely does *not* mean normal silent prayer and legitimate biblical meditation. The “contemplation” and “silence” in that case would be mantra meditation. That’s what the authorities being referenced mean.

If you're not doing contemplative prayer, this might be a good time to consider not applying that term to what you *are* doing.

And . . . well, if you *have* been doing contemplative prayer, please research further what's been presented here. Look to the Scriptures. Our God is not silent on these things. Isaiah speaks of the Lord abandoning his people because they were "full of superstitions from the East" (2:6).

Deuteronomy 12:30, 31 is just one of many passages with warnings like, "Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about [pagan] gods, saying 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.' You must not worship the LORD your God in their way." And we can take some cues from Jesus' instruction against "babbling like pagans" (Matthew 6:7), as well as from Peter's "be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (1 Peter 4:7).

This is just the tip of the iceberg, friends. Contemplative prayer is a dangerous, unscriptural practice. And that's calling a spade a spade. 

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(Scriptures are from the *NIV*.)

## Endnotes

1. Ken Wilson, *Mystically Wired: Exploring New Realms in Prayer* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 9.
2. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 155-157.
3. Christian experts on the occult would agree. See Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2010 edition), 177, for example.
4. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, [www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com), 79.
5. Thomas Merton, quoted at [www.contemplatives.us/archives](http://www.contemplatives.us/archives).
6. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts on the East*, [www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com), 88.
7. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, Image Books edition, 1971), 109, 103, 101, 37.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 40, 100, 101, 35.

10. [http://www.kyrie.com/inner/contemplative/contemplative\\_prayer\\_western\\_tradition.htm](http://www.kyrie.com/inner/contemplative/contemplative_prayer_western_tradition.htm).
11. [http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about\\_history\\_prayer](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_history_prayer).
12. Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating, *Finding Grace at the Center*, quoted at [www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com).
13. [www.contemplativechristian.com/contemplative-prayer/history](http://www.contemplativechristian.com/contemplative-prayer/history).
14. [www.cacradicalgrace.org](http://www.cacradicalgrace.org).
15. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Teresa\\_of\\_Avila](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Teresa_of_Avila).
16. Philip Yancey, *Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 184.
17. "What the Monks Can Teach Us," *Christian Standard*, 2/22/09, 7.
18. [www.anamchara.com/mystics](http://www.anamchara.com/mystics).
19. Ruth Haley Barton, "Make a Joyful Silence," [www.marinachristian.sitewrench.com](http://www.marinachristian.sitewrench.com).
20. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 15.
21. Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 66.

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Lynn Lusby Pratt is the author of *Devotions by Dead People* and *Debt Free College—We Did It!*