

Nothing Sacred

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Introduction

This is about 7 so-called “sacreds”: space, object, posture, breath, word, silence, and union. My purpose is to alert Christians to rethink elements of worship/prayer that are being brought into the church as lost aspects of “ancient Christian practice” that we need to reclaim but which are, in reality, borrowed from false religions and the occult. I’ll deal with them in the order listed above because this is the chronology in which they’d occur as steps in contemplative (mantra) prayer (though all 7 don’t necessarily occur in every instance of such prayer). These are each vast topics with multiple applications, not limited to contemplative prayer, so this miniseries can only scratch the surface. But in this material you’ll have enough notes, quotes, and Scriptures for a basic “Nothing Sacred” series to use with your Bible class.

1. Sacred Space

Sedona, Machu Picchu, Medjugorje, Ganges River—sacred places. Magick circles, labyrinths, sand mandalas—sacred spaces. The Old Testament mentions pagan sacred places/spaces; God’s people were not to use those (Deuteronomy 12:1-4; 1 Kings 14:22-24). There were some legit sacred places (meaning, they were God’s idea). God ordained Shiloh as the spot for the ark of the covenant. Later the Jews were to build the temple in Jerusalem. Rival altars (plus any pagan practices) in Bethel and Dan were not God-ordained (Joshua 18:1; Jeremiah 7:12; 1 Chronicles 28:12; 1 Kings 12:26–13:3). A place isn’t sacred just because people decide that it is.

It’s one thing to create a reverent atmosphere; it’s another to think that a certain spot has special power to manipulate God. Maybe you’ve heard statements like: “When [Honi] needed to pray through, he drew a circle and dropped to his knees” (Batterson). When I went to investigate a labyrinth, the minister wanted to give me a sacred word to repeat and a sacred object to hold (a tiny church building) while I walked the “sacred geometry” (Artress) of the labyrinth. If I needed forgiveness, the minister said, I was to keep repeating, holding, and walking “until you feel forgiven.”

A Unitarian Universalist website says, “Sacred space...enhances your ability to commune with a higher power.” Christian writer Ken Wilson considers the OT temple to have been like a Celtic “thin spot” (where it’s easier to break through from earth to Heaven), and implies that today we can use the “centers of our being” as such places (which will serve sort of like the Narnia wardrobe).

Does Scripture say that prayer “works” better if we stand inside a circle, walk a path, travel to a place of supposed spiritual power, or “center down”? Don’t Scriptures like these show that God is always with his people: Joshua 1:9; Matthew 28:20; John 14:16, 17; Hebrews 13:5? And isn’t that evidenced in the variety of places in the Bible where prayer occurred? Under a tree (1 Kings 19:4), in a pagan city (Daniel 6:10), on the cross (Luke 23:46), on a roof (Acts 10:9), at the beach (Acts 21:5)...

Richard Foster teaches that anyone who practices contemplative prayer becomes “a portable sanctuary” for “the presence of God.” If believers are sacred spaces, it’s because the Holy Spirit lives among the church as a whole (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; 1 Peter 2:4-6) and within us individually (1 Corinthians 6:19), not because we performed a ritual in an effort to become a sacred space.

We could think of the Lord himself as our sacred space. We're with him 24/7 (Psalm 23; 139:7); we live "in the shelter of the Most High" (Psalm 91); and "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28; see also 1 John 2:6).

2. Sacred Object

Lucky charms, prayer wheels, St. Catherine of Siena's head, crystals, shroud of Turin—sacred objects.

There were some legit sacred objects in Scripture, like the ark of the covenant. But 1 Samuel 4:1–7:1 shows that possessing the ark didn't guarantee/manipulate God's favor. (The *Raiders* movie got that right.) Our relationship with God is about love and obedience.

Exodus 30:22-33. A sacred anointing-oil recipe was given for tabernacle use. But it was forbidden to use that same formula in other ways. Legit sacred objects were determined by God and intended for his very specific purposes.

In 2 Chronicles 24:7, wicked Queen Athaliah's sons took sacred objects from God's temple and used them for the Baals. It's pagan/occult practice to play to or capitalize on people's attraction to sacred objects—as did the silversmith in Ephesus who made and sold little shrines of the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:23-27).

Check out 2 Kings 18:4. The Jews had adopted pagan sacred objects and were also burning incense to the bronze snake Moses had made (Numbers 21:1-9), so King Hezekiah had to get rid of it. In the New Testament, sorcerers who became Christians didn't try to Christianize their pagan sacred objects; they burned them (Acts 19:19). Christians can't justify using Christian objects (like a picture of Jesus) in an occult way and certainly can't justify using pagan/occult objects (like a Ouija board).

In the contemplative prayer context (but not often occurring), there might be a sacred object in the room or the person might hold a small object while doing the ritual. Kurt Koch, legendary expert in the occult, says about various lucky charms: "No matter what the custom is, each and every one of them is just a pitiable effort to compensate for a lack of faith in God."

We have what we might consider sacred objects: the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7), the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18)... Perhaps if we understood and relied on the power of the true, we wouldn't be attracted to the false.

3. Sacred Posture

The lotus position shows up on magazine covers, in TV commercials, and in yoga classes held in churches.

In the pagan context, certain postures are thought to enable a better connection to "the divine" or enable the channeling of certain "energies." And now Christians are instructed to get into this or another sacred posture when we pray. "Sit with your back erect and your head relaxed, but not slumped over. Let your hands rest comfortably on your legs, palms up" (Flanagan). "[Sit] comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within" (Frenette).

But in Scripture, people prayed in every posture imaginable—and the Lord was listening: hands raised (Exodus 9:29), kneeling (Daniel 6:10; Acts 9:40), sloshing around inside a fish (Jonah 2:1), and so on. Jesus "fell with his face to the ground" (Matthew 26:39).

In Jesus' parable of Luke 18:9-14, the Pharisee and tax collector were both standing. The Pharisee's problem wasn't his physical posture, but his spiritual posture and motives (compare Matthew 6:5's "to be seen"). It was his life, not his spine, that was out of alignment.

So if there is a sacred posture, it's the humble posture of the heart—all the time, not just at prayer time (Deuteronomy 4:1-40; Proverbs 15:8). The Lord turns away when we're living in disobedience but trying to manipulate him (Proverbs 28:9; Isaiah 1:13-16). He answers because we acknowledge and trust HIS power (1 Chronicles 5:20; 2 Chronicles 14:11; Hebrews 10:19-23, 26; 1 John 5:14), not the power of a sacred posture.

4. Sacred Breath

Your doctor may discern that you're not breathing properly, not getting enough oxygen. But is there a kind of breathing that sets the stage for opening a spiritual portal? Here are some of the things being taught about sacred breath:

1. When teachers say "breathe in forgiveness" (Bell) or "breathe out your sins" (Rhodes), they may mean that in doing so, you're connecting with "the divine" in yourself, a la Eastern and New Age thought. The sequel to *The Secret* speaks of entering "frequencies" by way of the "I AM THAT I AM breathing exercises" (Twyman).
2. A slight variation is that every individual's breath equals the Holy Spirit. One clear evidence against this idea is the fact that individuals in Scripture on whom or into whom the Holy Spirit came were...um, already breathing (Judges 14:19; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is not the same thing as our breath.
3. Then there's measured breathing in contemplative (mantra) prayer—when a single word (or phrase, like the two "halves" of the Jesus Prayer) is breathed in and out for about 20 minutes. "Take deep breaths.... Establish a slow, rhythmic pattern.... Make every effort to 'stop the flow of talking going on within you—to slow it down until it comes to a halt.'" (Rhodes/Kelsey)

Some teachers say the breathing helps focus on the meaning of the words; others admit the truth: that the words are just a vehicle. Words from any religious belief system, no matter how "sacred," lose all meaning in such repetition because, along with the breathing (which some work up to a rapid, frenzied pattern), one ultimately enters an altered state of consciousness. Yes, really. If you didn't get that from the contemplative authors you've read, you misunderstood them. It's not your fault; they're inexplicably vague—though Ken Wilson openly describes a "sense of floating down an elevator shaft."

There is nothing about sacred breathing in the Bible's prayers or in the descriptions of/instructions for prayer (Nehemiah 6:9; Matthew 6:9-13; Philippians 1:4, 5, 19; Colossians 4:2-4). The creator of the universe made prayer simple enough for a child to do: just breathe normally and talk to him.

5. Sacred Word

The Hindu "om," The Zen Buddhist "namu___," and maybe even "bibbidi-bobbidi-boo"! Sacred/magick words. Chants. They occur in pagan and fantasy contexts. But in a Christian context? About the only thing that shows up in Scripture is Jesus' warning, "Do not keep on babbling like pagans" (Matthew 6:7).

But today we're told to repeat Christian sacred words, usually along with measured breathing. "The constant repetition of [Jesus'] name clears my head" (Campolo). "Listen to the mantra as you say it" (Main). Robert

Schuller taught that “mantras with the ‘M’ sound” work best. Note that some of the brainwashing cults of the ’60s and ’70s specifically required the chanting of phrases like “thank you, Jesus.”

This repetition of a sacred word is supposed to be a way to get closer to God. A practical observation: Would your relationship with your family be enhanced if every evening you arrived home and repeated for 20 minutes, “Hey I’m home, Hey I’m home, Hey I’m home”?

Madame Guyon used Scripture, but explained candidly, “Once you sense the Lord’s presence, the content [of the Scripture]...is no longer important. The Scripture has served its purpose.” Kurt Koch warned, “The mechanical and magical usage of the words of the Bible is...occult in nature.”

If there is such a thing as a sacred word, perhaps it’s the name of Jesus (Philippians 2:9; Revelation 19:13). Still, there’s no way his name should be degraded by being used in the same way pagan religions use their sacred words. And of course, we have THE sacred Word, the Scripture (Psalms 18:30; 119:89, 104). What could be superior to hearing from God through the Word and talking directly to him in prayer in the ways illustrated in that Word?

6. Sacred Silence

It seems as if silence should have been placed at #3 or so. And there is an element of becoming quiet to begin prayer time. But when contemplatives speak of “the great silence of God” (Manning) or “the silence which resides within us” (Callanan), they don’t usually mean normal silence, but the silence that is triggered at this point in the ritual. This silence is reached when the breathing and mantra put one into an altered state of consciousness, the silence, which the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* called “divine darkness.”

We’re led to believe that spiritual truth can’t be attained through our normal senses (used in reading Scripture, normal prayer). The mystics scold us for one-way prayers (“You’re doing all the talking!”), for our “addiction to words” (Foster). But wait. Virtually every instance of prayer in Scripture clearly depicts prayer as talking to God. That’s what prayer is. Even when we’re too distressed to speak or can’t find the words, there’s no special kind of silence to enter. Our Father can interpret our crying (Psalms 18:4-6; 38:9; Romans 8:26, 27). Nothing in Scripture indicates that prayer is to be what Jack Cottrell aptly calls “contentless,” void of all word and thought. Emptiness.

The supposed Christian version of entering this sacred silence renders exactly the same experience had by mystics of all religions (as in Hinduism’s transcendental meditation, Buddhism’s Zen, Islam’s Sufism) and by non-religious people doing generic “meditation”: things like a feeling of oneness with the universe, pretty lights, etc. (and sometimes dark side effects rarely mentioned). A Zen master I spoke with, who also considers himself a good Methodist, thought it a happy thing that all those experiences were the same. He was not concerned that the entire Old Testament warns believers against imitating pagan practice.

Relinquishing control of the mind opens the mind to occult/demonic mischief. Any number of Scriptures remind us to stay alert (Ephesians 6:18; 1 Peter 4:7; 5:8). The key Scriptures misused to promote sacred silence are: (1) Psalm 46:10’s “Be still.” But this is not the soothing invitation it’s made out to be; check any good commentary. And (2) 1 Kings 19:12’s “gentle whisper” to Elijah. We’re supposed to forget that God was present in all the noise of 1 Kings 18, 19 and pretend that he shows up only when the person self-induces “silence” (which is not even what happened in 19:12).

We fail to question such Scripture misinterpretations because we're seduced by spiritual-sounding statements like these: "God's first language is silence" (Keating). "All truths come from, exist as and return to silence. Silence is behind every holy thought, word and act. All holiness is silent" (*Natural Awakenings* magazine). But before you get carried away, stop and notice the misuse or complete absence of Scripture in such assertions about sacred silence. There's a clue.

7. Sacred Union

The last stop on the contemplative prayer train—by use of sacred breath and sacred word, which take you to the sacred silence—is sacred union.

This union is not what Scripture talks about in terms of being united with Christ and in unity with other believers (John 15:1-10; Romans 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 2:1-4). Rather, it's to come to "the full realization of the unity of all that is" (Nouwen). Translation: to be awakened to the fact that you are god. In the mystical worldview, God is not a creator distinct from his creation. "Here [in the contemplative state] everything is God" (Guyon).

Aspects of sacred union might be erotic: "Mystical union.... God as Husband.... It's our making love" (Voskamp). The practitioner might believe he's receiving spiritual messages, or has advanced beyond the need for doctrine. Over time, a downplaying of or aversion to Scripture can occur: "I develop a nasty rash around people who speak as if mere scrutiny of [the Bible's] pages will reveal precisely how God thinks and precisely what God wants" (Manning). "The ultimate authority of my life is not the Bible...something written by men and frozen in time. It is not from a source outside myself. My ultimate authority is the divine voice in my own soul" (Kidd).

Thomas Merton said that if we could see ourselves as we really are, "we would fall down and worship each other." Richard Foster encourages in this way: "Contemplatives sometimes speak of their union with God by the analogy of a log in a fire: the glowing log is so united with the fire that it is fire." Evelyn Underhill (who studied Teresa of Avila) says, "The completed mystical life...is the deified life."

But of course, we aren't God. So starting down this highly marketed path of sacreds had us—from the beginning, and regardless of our intention—heading toward a goal that denies the Lord himself: this "union" that equals our own godhood. It seems incredible that people who have studied the Scripture need to be reminded that we are not gods, that God said, "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6).

Conclusion

If God had created a barrier, with the intention of keeping the "uninitiated" from his presence, no human would be able to outsmart him and figure it out—as the contemplatives/mystics seem to have done. And Scripture certainly doesn't authorize any tedious (or pagan) formula for "accessing" the Lord. Or that "the first step in faith is to stop thinking about God at the time of prayer" (Manning).

No! When sincere people sincerely speak to the Lord, he hears (Psalm 91:15; Daniel 10:12; 1 John 5:14, 15). No secret formula is involved in simple invitations like "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8).

This mystical sacred path begins so innocently. Getting into a space that makes you feel reverent, breathing in a way that makes you feel good, repeating Jesus-y words, an exotic sense of spirituality and "cracking the secret

code” What’s missing from the whole shebang are the things that Scripture actually describes as being part of prayer and our relationship with God: praise (Psalms 54:6; 66:1-4), confession of sin (1 Kings 8:35, 36; Psalm 51:1-3; 1 John 2:1), reliance on God’s power (Psalms 55; 66:3-7; 91:14; Ephesians 1:18-21), thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6)... And remember, the purpose of the so-called sacred practices/steps (whether you realized it or not) is to help you reach “enlightenment”/Christ consciousness—that you are, in fact, god.

Leonard Sweet openly admits: “Mysticism begins in experience; it ends in theology.” And that’s the problem. These experiences lead us to “reimagine” the Scripture instead of beginning with God’s Word and making sure our experiences line up with it. When we buy into mysticism, we’ve unintentionally changed direction and headed away from, not toward, Almighty God.

People who progress along this path of sacreds begin to feel spiritually superior (while often talking very humbly); in reality they’re spiritually deceived and in danger. Follow the progression of some teachers and note a tendency to set Scripture aside, deny the deity of Jesus and the atonement, and more. The end of the line is spiritual darkness!

We need to educate ourselves in 3 areas: 1) what Scripture teaches; 2) what other religions/New Age teach as to the origin and purpose of these sacreds; 3) the spiritual family trees of the writers/teachers we’re listening to. To help with #2 and #3, search online for some of the names quoted in this series, together with terms like “mysticism” or “Eastern religion” or “contemplation.” It will click better for you to do your own research, see it with your own eyes.

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