

# Can Christians Practice “Good” Contemplative Prayer?

by Lynn Lusby Pratt

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 (sometimes called centering prayer, breath prayer, or the 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>

Several 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’ve 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: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, Foster teaches that the practice is “unmediated,” exclusive (that is, “not for the novice”), “wordless,” and even 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 are frequently 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 see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity. . . . I intend to become as good a Buddhist as 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>

To peel off another layer, the true origins of this form of prayer are often in plain sight; many pro-contemplative writings are open about this. Here are just three examples:

- “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>10</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>11</sup>
- Brennan Manning in *The Signature of Jesus* says, “The first step in faith is to stop thinking about God at the time of prayer.”<sup>12</sup>
- “The natural effects of Centering Prayer overlap significantly with other forms of meditation including TM [transcendental meditation], [Zazen](#), and [Vipassana](#) [Buddhist ‘mindfulness’ meditation].”<sup>13</sup>

I find it impossible to mesh these ideas with Christianity. Besides Richard Foster and Thomas Merton, we find Richard Rohr, an interspiritualist who hosts Zen retreats at his center<sup>14</sup>; and Teresa of Avila, among others.

Teresa of Avila was 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 that 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> Contemplative writer Carl McColman 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, Rohr, and the medieval Catholic mystics, then he or she absolutely does *not* mean normal silent prayer and legitimate biblical meditation. The “contemplation” and “silence” of the mystics is 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” (Isaiah 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.” We can take some cues from Jesus’ instruction against “babbling like pagans” (Matthew 6:7). And there’s Peter’s call to prayer: “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.



## Notes

1. Ken Wilson, *Mystically Wired: Exploring New Realms in Prayer* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 9.
2. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 155–157.
3. Occultists themselves admit this connection. For example, in Richard Kirby’s book *The Mission of Mysticism*, he states, “The meditation of advanced occultists is identical with the prayer of advanced mystics,” p. 7. Theologian Jack Cottrell warns of the dangers; see *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2010 edition), p. 177.
4. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, www.books.google.com, p. 79.
5. David Steindl-Rast, “Recollection of Thomas Merton’s Last Days in the West,” *Monastic Studies* (1969), 7:10.
6. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts on the East* (New York: New Directions Books, 1995), pp. 70, 76.
7. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, Image Books edition, 1971), pp. 109, 103, 101, 37.

8. Ibid., p. 42.
9. Ibid., pp. 40, 100, 101, 35, respectively.
10. “History of Centering Prayer” ([http://web.archive.org/web/20100718142654/http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about\\_history\\_prayer](http://web.archive.org/web/20100718142654/http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_history_prayer)).
11. M. Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating, Thomas E. Clarke, *Finding Grace at the Center* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Pub., 1978), pp. 5–6. Also note: “Fathers Keating, Meninger and Pennington . . . invited to the abbey ecumenically oriented Catholic theologians, an Eastern Zen master, Joshu Roshi Sasaki, who offered weeklong retreats on Buddhist meditation, and a former Trappist, Paul Marechal, who taught transcendental meditation. The interaction . . . helped distill the practice of Christian contemplative prayer” (<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/379/article/centering-prayer>).
12. Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 1996), p.198.
13. <https://www.thecontemplativelife.org/centering-prayer>.
14. Richard Rohr is the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation ([www.cac.org/richard-rohr](http://www.cac.org/richard-rohr)).
15. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Teresa\\_of\\_Avila](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Teresa_of_Avila).
16. Philip Yancey, *Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 184.
17. J.K. Jones, “What the Monks Can Teach Us,” *Christian Standard*, 2/22/09 ([https://christianstandard.com/2009/02/cs\\_article-1128](https://christianstandard.com/2009/02/cs_article-1128)), p. 7.
18. Carl McColman, “Who Are the Great Christian Mystics?” (<https://carlmccolman.com/who-are-the-great-christian-mystics>).
19. Ruth Haley Barton, “Make a Joyful Silence,” *Sojourners*, February 2009 (<https://transformingcenter.org/2009/02/make-a-joyful-silence>).
20. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 15.
21. Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), p. 66.