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CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

(THE VISIONS OF THOMAS KELLY AND
THOMAS MERTON)

KEITH R. MADDOCK

The tension between action and contemplation is one of the oldest and most divisive issues in religious life. We are faced with familiar complaints about complacency in conventional religion on the one hand, and social activism motivated by secular or political rather than spiritual values on the other. Yet spiritual leaders and reformers have wrestled with this tension for centuries, and have sought to integrate contemplation and action into a holistic view of life centered in God.

Thomas Kelly and Thomas Merton were visionaries for a renewal of spiritual life in their own times of transition. Kelly spoke out of the period between two world wars, including economic depression, when traditional religious values were subjected to assault on all fronts. It took great courage for him to advocate a spirituality of relevance and personal transformation at that time. In the years following the second world war, another wave of spirituality swept over the western hemisphere, this time in response to excessive optimism based on economic prosperity. Thomas Merton, a popular writer in both Catholic and non-Catholic communities, warned his contemporaries not to ignore the dark side of progress. The experience of grace demands an embrace of suffering, and continuing engagement with oppressive powers.

In our present time of transition, we may appreciate the ecumenical outlooks of Thomas Kelly and Thomas Merton. There is some affinity between them as middle-class American men trying to define a religious base for their personal lives in a secular world. But their most lasting achievements are their recipes for spiritual integrity in a busy North American context, adaptations of one of the most ancient disciplines in the Judeo-Christian tradition—a life ordered and inspired through contemplative prayer. Douglas Steere, another American Quaker, focused on their common ground when he wrote, “Would it be going too far to suggest that what we are after in the nurture of prayer is a continual condition of prayerfulness, a constant sensitivity to what is really going on?”¹

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Kelly and Merton both believed that the seed of faith requires a measure of solitude, or renunciation of the world, to germinate. Faith nurtured in solitude enables the contemplative to return into the world with a deeper commitment to its transformation. Prayer then becomes a holistic discipline that prepares the ground for love to mature into service. Furthermore, their understanding of contemplative prayer suggested a way of spiritual fulfillment that is potentially available to everyone.

Although Merton was writing for a specific community, he stressed the contemplative orientation of the whole life of prayer. “Certainly in the pressures of modern urban life,” he wrote, “many will face the need for a certain interior silence and discipline simply to keep themselves together, to maintain their human and Christian identity and their spiritual freedom.”² While Merton was coming from a tradition accustomed to formal religious disciplines, Quakers have often been ambivalent about the need for outward signs of inward experience. Nevertheless, the objective in silent worship is to bring one’s mind to a stillness that is the measure of discernment for the whole of one’s life.

Kelly goes further when he suggests, “The practice of inward orientation is the heart of religion.”³ In *A Testament of Devotion*, he referred specifically to the need for inner discipline to redirect our experience of worship into the whole of our lives. “What is here urged are secret habits of unceasing orientation of the deeps of our being about the Inward Light, ways of conducting our inward life so that we are perpetually bowed in worship, while we are also very busy in the world of daily affairs.”⁴

But how is a state of continuous prayer to be interpreted for an uncloistered and reformed religious community, where complacency or ambivalence in outward observance is often the norm? Kelly recognized that many of us long for something more than the moderate, halfhearted religiosity we so often experience. He challenged Quakers to recover the passion of their own tradition.

Many of us have become as mildly and conventionally religious as were the church folk of three centuries ago, against whose mildness and mediocrity and passionlessness George Fox and his followers flung themselves with all the energy of dedicated lives. In some, says William James, religion exists as a dull habit.

Religion as a dull habit is not that for which Christ lived and died.⁵

DRYNESS, DEPRESSION, AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Complacency involves an avoidance of contemplation, because contemplation is often associated with images of darkness, absence, and emptiness—conditions that emerge when things are not going well, when lives seem to be going to pieces, when all that carried meaning for us is broken and there is nothing we can think of or envision to improve matters.

Yet this state may be the most fertile ground for moral and spiritual growth. Learning how to embrace rather than flee darkness often results in a creative restructuring of our patterns of thought and behaviour. Stripped of familiar ideas and illusions about ourselves, our world, and God, we may be able to let go of narrow or false understandings of human existence manufactured by our personal and social anxieties. According to Merton, “It means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God’s will as it comes to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth.”⁶

After a visit to pre-war Germany in 1938, Thomas Kelly drew attention to the fatalism he observed in American religious life. With characteristic eloquence, he wrote, “if you will accept as normal life only what you can understand, then you will try only to expel the dull, dead weight of Destiny, of inevitable suffering which is a part of normal life, and never come to terms with it or fit your soul to the collar and bear the burden of your suffering which must be borne by you, or enter into the divine education and drastic discipline of sorrow, or rise radiant in the sacrament of pain.”⁷

Surrender to the darkness is also the end of self-sufficiency. One is freed from autonomous self-images toward a deeper, more relational sense of personhood. There comes an awareness that we cannot ultimately be defined by our strengths and weaknesses. Merton adds that the deep night “is a great gift of God, for it is the precise point of our encounter with his fullness.”⁸ The fruit of self-surrender is a wholly new way of perceiving and relating to others.

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For Thomas Merton, contemplative prayer is not an external discipline, but something that happens within the depths of our inmost selves. Through it we come to recognize God as the deepest centre of our being, an intuition grounded and ending in love. Kelly uses the expression “holy blindness” for that love-infused, relational perception of the world. He writes that this blindness is like that of a person who looks steadily at the sun and then sees only the afterimage of the sun whenever he turns his eyes back toward the earth. He continues, “The God-blinded soul sees naught of self, naught of personal degradation or of personal eminence, but only the Holy Will working impersonally through him, through others, as one objective Life and power.”⁹

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND SOCIAL CONCERN

Contemplative prayer turns one toward the neighbour. This insight means that while we may learn to experience the whole of life more fully, we are also called to enable others to do so. In *The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity*, Merton writes, “Contemplation, at its highest intensity, becomes a reservoir of spiritual vitality, that pours itself out in the most telling social action.”¹⁰

Kelly envisioned prayer as an intimate relationship with God, through which we may become mediums for God’s will to be known. We become receptive rather than passive, and motivated to action by a will that is not our own.

Prayer becomes not hysterical cries to a distant God, but gentle upliftings and faint whispers, in which it is not easy to say who is speaking, we, or an Other through us. Perhaps we can only say: Praying is taking place. Power flows through us, from the Eternal into the rivulets of Time.¹¹

As the practice of contemplative prayer, religion is not a complement to other aspects of life, but that which underlies and infuses all we do. Merton writes about the necessity for inner solitude in the midst of the busy-ness of modern life in order to strengthen our resolve for service in the world. Similarly, Kelly sought a spiritual resource to nurture and empower all of life’s endless round of activity.

Religion isn’t something to be added to our other duties, and thus make our lives yet more complex. The life with God is the center of life, and all else is remodeled and integrated by it. It

gives the singleness of eye...We can get so fearfully busy trying to carry out the second great commandment...that we are under-developed in our devoted love to God. But we must love God as well as neighbor.¹²

Contemplation involves entering into the core of our being and then passing through that core and out of ourselves into God and into God's world with a renewed sense of vocation. Awareness of this incarnated intimacy is meant to be shared with others. Kelly draws inspiration from the biblical metaphor of Christ's transfiguration, a sign in his restless search for direction. "There are a few," he writes, "who, like those on the Mount of Transfiguration, want to linger there forever and never return to the valleys of men, where there are demons to be cast out." There is more to the experience of God than being plucked out of the world. He continues, "The fuller experience is of a Love which sends us out into the world."¹³

Although each person will find intimacy with God in his or her own way, we can say that the life of prayer for all leads to both the unitive knowledge of God in contemplation and selfless good will and charity toward others. This is what Merton means when he asserts that every Christian is potentially a contemplative. He wrote, "Serious and humble prayer, united with mature love, will unconsciously and spontaneously manifest itself in a habitual spirit of sacrifice and concern for others that is unfailingly generous, though perhaps we may not be aware of the fact."¹⁴

Both Merton and Kelly see a great need for being in the world more fully, rather than an urgency to build the new order through religious or political action. To choose to live in the realm of God now is to choose to live in God's new order, which overcomes the structures of injustice as well as the experience of alienation. Kelly makes a similar observation in succinct terms when he writes, "Social concern is the dynamic Life of God at work in the world, made special and emphatic and unique, particularized in each individual or group who is sensitive and tender in the leading-strings of love."¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Merton felt nothing could restore modern humanity, caught up in technology, depersonalizing societies, and fierce activism, except a new contemplative vision. Seeking isolation, he embarked on a

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life-transforming journey. As that journey led him further from the temptations of the world, he found himself plunged more deeply into the spiritual malaise of the world.

In his introduction to Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*, Douglas Steere reveals a surprising insight (for a Quaker) into the monastic vocation Merton followed. He points out that we live in an age of crisis, revolution, and struggle—a time that calls for the special searching and questioning that is characteristic of the monk in meditation and prayer. Continuing from that observation, he writes that “the monk searches not only his own heart: he plunges deep into the heart of that world of which he remains a part although he seems to have ‘left’ it. In reality the monk abandons the world only in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depth.”¹⁶

In his own way Kelly was cloistered in an academic career that was often as frustrating as it was necessary to his personal fulfillment. For all of his intellectual achievements, his uniquely contemplative style of writing suggests that his interior journey was deeper than the outward circumstances of his life would suggest, and the personal tensions it entailed were as life-changing and emotionally draining as any Merton later experienced.

Kelly's first-hand observation of the growing crisis in Europe marked a significant turning point in his life. Recoiling from the intensity of both fascist and communist ideologies, and from the number of people actually suffering under Hitler, he experienced deep depression. While visiting Cologne Cathedral in 1938, he felt the evil pressing him down into the very stones on the floor where he was kneeling. But then, through prayer, he felt relieved by a mystical presence that enabled him to return home—where his original sense of helplessness gave way to an outcry of passionate concern.¹⁷

Solitude is the essential condition for contemplative prayer. Yet isolation from the world, whether supported by institutional discipline or by a strong vocational drive, is only a beginning. The obstacles to being alone with God are the constant attributes of our busy and crowded existence in the modern world. Craving a deeper experience of solitude, Kelly and Merton reoriented their religious lives to resist the ambitious activism of American life and the complacency of conventional religion. They experienced the long dryness that both frustrates and nourishes longing before coming to terms with their

disillusionment about the world and submitting themselves to the dark night journey of coming into intimacy with God.

The ultimate dread of living today is to find ourselves alone, cut off from human society and its ambitions for security and progress. The religious vocation, true to its quest for spiritual integrity, is all the more pressed to transcend the ways of the world and to make a fresh commitment to the discipline of contemplative prayer. In the last article he was writing before his death, Kelly expressed the new vision vividly.

With trembling awe at the wonder that is ever wrought within us, we must humbly bear the message of the Light. Many see it from afar and long for it with all their being. Amidst all the darkness of this time the day star can arise in astounding power and overcome the darkness within and without.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Douglas Van Steere, *Together in Solitude* (=TS) (NY: Crossroad, 1982), p. 14.
2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (=CP) (NY: Image Books, 1971), p. 19.
3. Kelly, "The Light Within," *A Testament of Devotion* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1989), p. 30.
4. Kelly, *Testament*, p. 27.
5. Kelly, "Holy Obedience," *Testament*, p. 49.
6. Merton, *CP*, p. 68.
7. Kelly, *Testament*, p. 64.
8. Merton, *CP*, p. 100.
9. Kelly, "The Quaker Discovery," *Testament*, p. 58.
10. Merton, "The Contemplative Life," quoted in John J. Higgins, *Thomas Merton on Prayer* (NY: Image Books, 1975), p. 93.
11. Kelly, "Excerpts from the Richard Cary Lecture," in *The Eternal Promise* (=EP) (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991), p. 34.
12. Kelly, "The Simplification of Life," in *Testament*, p. 112.
13. Kelly, "The Eternal Now and Social Concern," in *Testament*, p. 97.
14. Merton, *CP*, p. 74.
15. Kelly, "The Simplification of Life," in *Testament*, p. 102.
16. Steere, "Intro.," to Merton, *CP*, p. 23.
17. Steere, *TS*, p. 101.
18. Kelly, "Children of the Light," *EP*, p. 162.