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REVIEW OF DANIEL P. COLEMAN,
*PRESENCE AND PROCESS: A PATH
TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE FAITH
AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY*
(NEWBERG, OR: BARCLAY PRESS,
2017)

JEFFREY DUDIAK

Daniel P. Coleman is an evangelical Friend who in this book pushes hard for an agenda that many liberal Friends will heartily embrace, though I suspect to the discomfort of the bulk of his fellow evangelicals. Based on his own experience at the nexus of Christianity, Quakerism, and Buddhist inspired meditative practices, his thesis, in short, is that the heart of true religion is a mystical, pre-rational (and thus pre-discursive) connection with Reality (*perhaps* a synonym for “God”), which is the essence of all religions once the superficial, thought-based particularities of doctrine are stripped away. His hope for the revival of religion in the twenty-first century lies in the recovery and popularization of the meditative/contemplative practices that have been developed by the esoteric few (mostly monastics) of all religions throughout their histories, and that are the pathway into this transformative experience of Reality.

As someone who is both philosophically dubious of the book’s central thesis, and a non-expert in the “mindfulness” movement (a Westernized form of Buddhism) and related, Christianized versions of such meditative practices (principally, perhaps, the “contemplative prayer” movement), I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed Daniel’s book, from which I learned much, and which challenged me to consider my beliefs about and understandings of such matters anew. Daniel writes well, drawing together a broad range of material coherently and with clarity. He has done his homework, and produced a concise and helpful introduction to the associated movements and practices for which he advocates.

In the first chapter, Coleman defines his terms: Buddhist “meditation” is basically synonymous with Christian “contemplation,”

practices that facilitate participation in the “mystical,” which he defines as the “immediate experience” of “God/the Absolute/Ultimate Reality” at a deeper, unifying, “esoteric” level—associated with “apophatic” prayer—than that afforded by the “exoteric” side of religions that deal in doctrinal conceptualizations that divide—associated with “kataphatic” prayer.

In the second chapter Coleman details some of the principal characteristics of apophatic mysticism—renunciation (of all that which impedes our access to the Real), recollection (of one’s attention into the present moment), kenosis (self-emptying to make room for the true Self or Christ), union (“deep relational unity with the Ultimate Reality”), transformation (transformative self-awakening by distinguishing the self from its thoughts, or “decentering”), morality (the purging of impermanent thoughts and feelings that opens upon healing and transforming love), and serenity (a deep and abiding sense of calm)—illustrating each with examples from both Buddhist meditative and Christian contemplative traditions. He then outlines in general the shared practices of apophatic mystical traditions, “all essentially methods of decentering and disengaging from the thought-stream in order to become grounded in the Reality of the present moment”—whereby (active) meditative attention to the particular results in a broad (passive) awareness “through the use of an anchor object of attention to facilitate decentering.”

Chapters three and four cover respectively the history and practice of Buddhist meditation, specifically, the ways in which various strains of Buddhism have been imported and accommodated into a Western context, and of Christian contemplation beginning in the third century of the common era through the late middle ages. While brief, these chapters provide a helpful, beginning, historical framework for the larger project. The same goes for the fifth chapter that introduces as largely complementary the four main versions of contemporary Christian contemplative practice that, across the interpenetration with Buddhist thought and practice, have emerged and grown since the 1970s in North America: centering prayer; Christian meditation; Christian Zen; and Christian mindfulness.

The next two chapters seek to illustrate resonances between, first, contemplative practices and Quakerism (from both the perspective of a Buddhist encountering Quaker worship, and across quotations from Quaker tradition), and then the resonances he perceives between contemplation and process thought, both the process philosophies

of Whitehead and Hartshorne and the process theologies of Cobb and Griffin (particularly across its—in Coleman’s view contemplation-compatible—doctrines of panentheism, and its analysis of the divinely influenced but still free “occasion”). A brief conclusion draws together the various analyses of the book examining their implications for, and possible contribution to, a re-visioning of religious life in North America in the twenty-first Century.

Again, kudos to Daniel Coleman for a well-written, informative, and challenging book. And yet, I am left with a number of questions, indeed, even concerns, which I will attempt to articulate here across an examination of three of the dichotomies around which (on my reading) Coleman builds his analyses: the apophatic and the kataphatic; the metaphysical and the prophetic; the universal and the particular. In each case, the meditative/contemplative practices for which Coleman advocates prioritizes the first of these terms, if not to the exclusion of, then at least as the governing context for, the latter terms, a move that Daniel advocates in order to deepen religious life, but that I suspect may in fact impoverish it. As I am writing this review for a Quaker journal, I will focus upon Quaker faith and practice as the principal focus for my comments.

Indeed, Coleman opens his chapter on Quakerism and meditation by quoting the Zen Buddhist scholar Teruyasu Tamura, who in encountering Quaker worship appreciated the silence, but who clearly experienced vocal ministry as an “interruption” of the more important work of worship: the apophatic negation of all kataphatic posits that cleared the way to the genuine experience of Reality behind and deeper than anything we can think or say. Indeed, many contemporary liberal Friends would sympathize with this sentiment. And if Tamura later conceded to the Quaker style of worship a role in the communal creation of philanthropic “Bodhisattvas,” he nevertheless recommended that Friends should—given the limitation imposed upon deep meditative work by the presence of kataphatic ministry—augment such public worship by performing the essential, foundational meditative work at home. For my part, I am not at all sure that Quaker worship is “meditation,” or that the goal of meditation is the goal of Quaker worship. Yes, certainly, there is an apophatic “moment” in Quaker worship (and so it is easy to find quotations that support this aspect), namely, the silence in which we clear our hearts, quiet our minds, and bracket our desires and selves to create the receptive space into which God may speak. But the silence is not interrupted by, it is in the service of, the ministry that is spoken out of

it—the complementary “moment” of Quaker worship. That we return again to silence signifies not the negation of the particularity of the ministry, but the commitment to listening ever again to the leadings of the Spirit in our midst. If many Evangelical and Orthodox Friends emphasize the kataphatic side of religious life to the virtual exclusion of the apophatic side (and for whom, therefore, Coleman’s call for an awareness of the latter is a healthy prescription), the antidote is not to emphasize the apophatic to the marginalization of the kataphatic (a syndrome from which many Liberal Friends already suffer). Rather, the apophatic and the kataphatic are the systole and diastole of the beating heart of Quaker worship, which is why, on my view at least, neither Quaker worship, nor prayer—while both include an apophatic moment—are fundamentally meditative or contemplative practices.

There is, relatedly, an assumption, at the core of the argument for contemplative practices, that their purging and kenotic aspects serve to cleanse the soul/self of its destructive and violent inclinations and that the result will be a loving soul no longer doing harm, so able now to contribute to the healing of the world. That is, the shared (perhaps “Indo-European”) assumption of the various practices outlined in Coleman’s book is that contact with “the Real,” that is, the metaphysical emphasis, precedes and has as its side-effect positive ethical implications. (And this is why, I think, Coleman, sharing mysticism’s allergy to “thought” and to “theology,” nevertheless attempts to ground his appeal in a metaphysical system: process thought.) In contrast, prophetic (perhaps “semitic”) religious traditions prioritize the ethical over the metaphysical, and see the constitution of reality itself as the product of an “ethical” response to God’s call. This fundamental spiritual distinction is obscured if all religions are seen as having the same basic *telos*. It is my judgement, moreover, that Quakers, particularly early Quakers, are far better understood as adherents of the latter rather than the former religious trajectory, such that a mystical/contemplative interpretation of Quakerism perhaps does more to distort than to illuminate it.

Finally, in its rejection of “thoughts” (i.e., reason) as the principal point of recourse, meditation seems at antipodes to modernity, but it nevertheless adopts from modern thought the aspiration to transcend merely parochial particulars toward a truly universal “object”—albeit in this case a shared experience (beyond words) of the Real. But just as modernity (until remarkably recently!) kept its dream alive by ignoring the fact that there were any number of competing and

incompatible versions of “universal Reason,” I am not convinced that the experience of “God” by some and “Ultimate Reality” by others and “the Absolute” by others still (not to mention the variations of each of these and others) is really the same experience, or the experience of the same under disposable because idiosyncratic names, despite some structural similarities between such experiences. (While there are structural similarities between any number of marriages, to whom one is married in particular profoundly affects both one’s experience of marriage, and even of how one subsequently conceives of marriage.) It is also not clear (as it was not clear for modernism) that this doctrine really achieves what it is intended to achieve in any case; the attempt to transcend the model wherein one religion is taken to have the truth to the exclusion of another is achieved by substituting the opposition of those who, of any religion, have experienced the truth of religion over against those who are stuck in the mere particularities of any given religion—that is, by substituting a new version of, rather than undermining, the religious truth-falsity duality. It may well be (although this will have to be the discussion of another day) that “universality” is not to be achieved through the marginalization of particularities, but by deepening them, by seeing them as the ways in which “we” (this particular community) respond to that to which we in particular are called, in the service of all. And it may well be that the “universal” significance of our Quakerism (and our Quakerly service) is not to be realized by demonstrating its resonance with some authentic religion-in-general, but by rooting ourselves more profoundly in the faith and practices of this peculiar people.

To conclude, Coleman is correct to note that the popularization of contemplative practices is having a significant effect upon the North American religious landscape as we enter the twenty-first Century, something clearly evinced already among Liberal Quakers. As thinking Friends, it is incumbent upon us to be informed about this phenomenon, and to carefully consider its implications. Gratitude to Daniel Coleman for his important contribution to a conversation we need to have. May it continue.