

# **“The Relationship between Contemplation and a life of Justice, Peace, and Concern for Creation”**

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### **Original in English**

In this short article I would like to offer some reflections on the relationship between a life of prayer and contemplation, on the one hand, and, on the other, a life committed to justice and peace and concern for all creation.

As a clinical psychologist with an interest in the relationship between psychology and spirituality, one of the things I often find myself helping people to do is to resolve conflicts within their own personality; to reconcile all sorts of apparent opposites within themselves. And of course that is a psychological and spiritual task and indeed a challenge we all have to face: reconciling our inner with our outer, our light with our darkness, our capacity for good with our capacity for the not-so-good, our real self with our ideal self, our past with our present. In a sense we could say that the aim of that lifelong challenge is to bring an inner peace and reconciliation that is also a way of doing justice to the truth of ourselves. So it is a process by which we seek inner truth, reconciliation, peace and justice.

The great Swiss psychologist Carl Jung has taught us that the wholeness of the self – which he sees as being as much a spiritual as a psychological goal – is only achieved by this kind of inner self-awareness, self-acceptance ,and reconciliation, and that it is primarily a process of transformation of all the disparate parts of ourselves into an integrated wholeness.

That theme of reconciliation of what are sometimes only apparent opposites that is at the heart of bringing about INNER justice and peace, has a much wider application than the purely personal and individual. It is at the heart of all external human endeavour; it is at the heart of building a just and peaceful society; and it is at the heart of the Christian gospel. It is also a theme that finds expression in contemporary religious life.

One of the many challenges facing religious life today, and indeed one of the tensions experienced within religious life itself as well between those seeking to live such a life and those who may wish to regulate it, is how we reconcile, for example, the contemplative with the active (the Mary with the Martha), the individual and personal with the social and community, the body with the soul, the “world” with the cloister, concern for the creation that is all around us with the building of the “kingdom within”, even reconciling life in this world with a life that is supposed to be focused on the next. And it seems to me that the questions that must be addressed are: are these real or only apparent “opposites” ? Can they be reconciled? Can they be integrated into a whole that reflects a truly contemporary approach to religious life?

I hope that in some small way some of what I say may provide a framework within which we can consider some of those questions.

A Carmelite friend of mine once said *“All contemplation is contemporary”*. Of course there is also perhaps a deeper sense in which contemplation, our relationship with the divine, is timeless rather than contemporary, in that it reflects what is eternal and beyond time, but in a very real sense, our inner personal here and now relationship with God is our relationship with the eternal God who is forever here and forever now. So in that sense contemplation is by definition “contemporary”.

Contemplation can also be said to be contemporary in the sense that the context in which mystics and contemplatives have experienced and expressed their relationship with the divine is a very particular historically bound context, whether we’re talking about Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, or Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen, or Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day.

So how can our relationship with God in prayer be contemporary in both those senses – a relationship that is in my here and now and yet also reflects God’s eternal now? A relationship, in other words, that is beyond time and place but lives and moves and has its being in this time and in this place; a relationship that somehow reconciles the eternal with here and the now.

Under the heading ‘Contemplation’ in the 2008 General Chapter of the Religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart, we find the words:

*“Today, as women rooted in the heart of Christ, we reaffirm our heritage of contemplation that springs from a ‘compelling love written in our hearts by the Spirit’ .”*<sup>1</sup>

and

*“When we contemplate the heart of Christ we enter into the movement of the Spirit who develops in us a listening heart, bringing us closer to God’s reality, with the desire to promote justice, peace and the care of creation”*<sup>2</sup>

I will return to those particularly beautiful phrases: *“a compelling love written in our hearts by the Spirit”* and *“..the movement of the Spirit who develops in us a listening heart, bringing us closer to God’s reality”* below, but first I would like to say a little about contemplation.

As we know, one of the great spiritual writers of the twentieth century was Thomas Merton. Perhaps the greatest gift Merton left to the whole Christian community was his writing on contemplative spirituality. Of course he did not invent contemplative spirituality, but he did make it accessible to many thousands of people through his writings. And the major theme that emerges in all his writings is that contemplation is not primarily about prayer in the usual sense, or about methods of praying; it’s not one compartment of life, but it is meant to embrace each and every aspect of our life and our relationships: our relationship with God, with each other, and with the whole created universe.

For Thomas Merton – as for every other contemplative before him - the first thing to say about contemplation is that it is above all a gift from God, and it is about seeing God, and self, and the whole of creation at a different and deeper level of reality. As William Shannon<sup>3</sup> notes, contemplation is more than simply the exercise of prayer; he indicates that for Merton it involves the interconnected experience of three things, **SEEKING GOD, COMING TO KNOW ONE’S TRUE SELF, and LEARNING ONE’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD**

### **SEEKING GOD**

When Merton speaks of seeking God, he describes it as a seeking that is quite unlike any other we undertake in life. The most profound thing is that it is not seeking for something that is not already present.

Merton was once asked: *“What’s the best way to help people attain union with God?”* and his answer was:

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1 RSCJ General Chapter Document Lima 2008 p.21

2 Ibid pp 21-22

3 Shannon, W. in Shannon,WH., Bochen,C., O’Connell PF. The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia (2002) Orbis Books pp. 81-84

*"We must tell them above all that they are already united with God. Contemplative prayer is the coming into consciousness of what is already there."*<sup>4</sup>

Contemplation, then, is an awareness of what is already there and what is already there is our oneness with God at the deepest level of our being.

And when talking about the experience of seeking God, Merton frequently asks us to reflect on what kind of God we are seeking. The road to contemplation of God is *"strewn with fallen idols, false images that we've created for ourselves"*<sup>5</sup>. All these idols have to go, even all the holy images we have in our minds. Merton talks about:

*"a purification of the sanctuary, so that no graven thing may occupy a space that God has commanded to be left empty."*<sup>6</sup>

In other words, having let go of all the things that substitute for God, the contemplative is able to experience God, not in created words and images but *"in the silence of the very Divine selfhood."* In contemplation, *"we don't bring God down to our level, rather God raises us to the divine level."*<sup>7</sup>

#### **COMING TO KNOW OUR TRUE SELF**

For Merton the experience in contemplation of the reality of God makes it possible to, as he says, *"awaken to the reality of self"...."to awaken to the Real within all that is real."* And the only thing that is real is that *"something of God"* that is in everything created. That is why he describes contemplation not only as seeking God, but discovering my true self in God.

He teaches us that:

*"In contemplation, as we let go of all words and concepts as a way of relating to God, we enter God's own silence in the depths of our being, and there we discover in God a relationship so direct that we discover our own true selves in God."*<sup>8</sup>

#### **LEARNING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD**

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4 Notes from retreat given by Merton to superiors of contemplative nuns Gethsemani 1967. Collection of Sr. Therese Lentfoehr (1967)

5 Shannon, W. op.cit. p.83

6 Thomas Merton New Seeds of Contemplation (1961) The Abbey of Gethsemani p.13

7 Shannon, W. op.cit. p 83

8 Shannon W op.cit. p 84

When we find God in contemplation, we also find the rest of reality, especially our fellow human beings. Merton's idea is that we discover them, in Shannon's words, "*not as a faceless mass but as individual persons, each distinct and unique in the eyes of God, yet in some way not separate from God or even from one another. God is the Hidden Ground of Love for all human beings, and when we become aware of our own total dependence on Him and the dependence of all reality on Him, we experience a sense of interdependence with all God's people and also the sense of responsibility we have towards them.*"<sup>9</sup>

So, for Merton true contemplation increases our sense of social justice and concern, as well as increasing our ecological concern for all the good things of creation that God has given us.

For Thomas Merton, the outcome of true contemplation, true union with God in prayer, was, above all, compassion – compassion for every single unique human being.

Most of us are familiar with the experience in Merton's life that was often referred to as "The Louisville Miracle" or "The Fourth and Walnut" experience. The following is his own account of this experience:

*"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness....."*

*.....This sense of liberation came as a relief and a joy. Thank God, thank God, that I am like other men...a member of the human race...a race in which God Himself has become incarnate. If only everyone could realise this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking round shining like the sun. ...."*

*Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes.....At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness that is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.....this point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.....It is in everybody, and if we could see we could see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and the cruelty of life vanish completely."<sup>10</sup>*

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9 Ibid. p 84

10 Thomas Merton Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (pp 140-142/156-158) (1966) Abbey of Gethsemani

What had initially been a journey away from the world – the *“fuga mundi”* – had come full circle. Instead of the traditional “leaving of the world” and the traditional “contempt for the world” with all its snares and temptations (the famous *“contemptus mundi”* of the monastic life), he began to embark on a spiritual journey towards the world and its beauty and towards all mankind in a spirit above all of compassion. And, as we know, he began to engage with the major world issues of the day, in particular with racism, violence and non-violence, peace and war.

He saw, in other words, that the true fruit of contemplation was, as our topic has it, a *“life of justice and peace and concern for all creation.”*

I have referred already to reconciliation of opposites, or at least apparent opposites. This profound insight of Merton into the relationship between the contemplative life and a life of justice and peace and concern for all creation, represents for me a real reconciliation between the active and the contemplative life. And not just a reconciliation, but a true integration into wholeness of those two movements – the movement inwards towards a deep awareness of the presence of God and a movement outwards to His creation.

This is all beautifully echoed in the RSCJ General Chapter document I referred to earlier. It puts it like this:

*When we contemplate the Heart of Christ we enter into the movement of the Spirit who develops in us a listening heart, bringing us closer to God’s reality, with the desire to promote justice, peace and the care of creation.”*

And the fact that that Chapter document centres this on the Heart of Christ and the movement of the Spirit emboldens me now to try to place some of this in a theological context. In more specific terms what I propose to do is to set this whole integration of the contemplative life and a life of justice and peace and concern for all creation firmly within the theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation, because I believe that it is really only within that context that the deeper significance of this reconciliation and integration can be understood.

As a preliminary to that focus on the theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation I would also like to say a little about the biblical understanding of justice and peace.

In the bible, “justice” and “injustice” are used primarily to describe relationships between people, both one-to-one relationships and also relationships between groups. Justice and injustice are seen in the quality of these relationships. A just relationship is above all one which is loving, truthful, compassionate and forgiving, for God is love, God is truth, God is compassionate and God is forgiving.

“Justice” therefore denotes a state in which relationships are balanced, harmonious and mutual, relationships in which each and every person has the freedom to develop their God-given potential as human beings, whereas the terms “injustice” and “sin” both refer to broken and unbalanced relationships. “Injustice” denotes an unbalanced relationship in which one

person or group is dominant over another, thereby preventing the victims of the injustice from realizing their God-given potential as human beings and as children of God.

And of course, as we know, our history as human beings has been characterised by examples of unbalanced relationships, relationships in which the domination of power, money, greed, selfishness, racism, sexism, colonialism, exclusion of out groups all hold sway : relationships, in other words, that are defined by any or all the cultural patterns of domination. And that is what constitutes real biblical injustice.

It is clear, then, that there is a subtle difference between the biblical notion of justice and the secular definition of "justice". The biblical notion of justice is exemplified by Micah's beautiful injunction that we must "*act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God*".<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew word for justice in this sense is *tsedeq* (to live in harmonious balanced relationship, to live in "righteousness".) The secular notion of justice has more of an emphasis on judging people according to a standard (law) and then giving them what they are entitled to and deserve. There is a Hebrew word for this kind of forensic justice It is *mishpat* . But that word *mishpat* is used in a completely different context than Micah's for example, or in the psalms. Generally speaking, in the Bible, justice is not primarily a legal or legalistic concept. The core biblical concept of justice is to live in harmonious, mutual, respectful, loving and balanced relationships with one another, particularly with the needy, the poor and the oppressed.

And of course the fruit of that "living justly" is peace, the Hebrew word here being of course *shalom*. *Shalom* is usually translated into English as peace, but in fact in Hebrew it has a broader meaning and refers to a "*state of fulfilment resulting from God's presence and his covenantal relationship.*"<sup>12</sup>

*Shalom* actually implies a sense of relational harmony, completeness, and wholeness of the whole community of God. It is relational and communal, and it is to be fostered and found between persons and between persons and their environment. So, we can see that there is a clear connection between biblical justice (acting towards all persons and towards creation in a way that produces harmony and balance) and biblical peace – shalom – which is the relational, communal, fruit of acting justly.

So, in addition to our themes of reconciliation and integration and wholeness, we can now add the connected theme of relationships, relationships that are based on Micah's three pillars of acting with justice, loving tenderly (i.e. with loving kindness; the Hebrew word is *khesed*, and is most often applied to God's loving kindness towards us, what we often translate as mercy), and "*walking humbly with your God*". (The Hebrew word here is *haseneh* and the phrase means to "*live attentively, thoughtfully, and watchfully with your God*"<sup>13</sup>; thoughtful, attentive and watchful not to self but to the needs of others as seen by God.)

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11 Micah 6 1-8

12 McKenzie R The Spirit of the Prophets (1968) p 76

13 *ibid.* p.77

As a psychologist, in addition to helping people reconcile and integrate opposing aspects of their personalities, I am aware that psychological distress and disruption are often about relationships, relationships with self, with significant others, and with the past. So psychological wellbeing is very much about balanced relationships.

And, as we've seen, from a spiritual perspective, Thomas Merton talks about contemplation being about seeking and discovering our true relationships with God, with self, and with the world.

And finally the biblical notions of justice and peace are both all about relating towards each other and creation in a way that reflects the harmony of God's life and covenant.

Which brings me to those core truths of our faith which, above all else, are about relationship, as well as about wholeness, and reconciliation and justice and peace, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, both of which are our human attempts to express, on the one hand, the eternal, intimate dynamic relationship within the Godhead itself, and, on the other, the relationship God has forged with our humanity in Christ. Taken together, these truths are not only the object of our faith and the focus for the contemplative life; for us, as Christians, they are also the source of any true life of justice and peace as well as the ground for our concern for all creation.

Trinitarian theology teaches us that from all eternity, God's love is an eternal giving love, a love that by definition has to reach out beyond itself; and, because it has to reach out beyond itself, it has, again by definition, to be a love that is in constant relationship; a love that has to be in constant *reciprocal* relationship. It cannot by its very nature be anything else. That, in essence, is what *defines* God: a love that is in constant reciprocal relationship, eternally and presently reaching out beyond itself. So this self-giving love that comes from what Christ himself and all Christians since have called the Father (the begetter of this love), flows out to what is eternally born of that love, the eternal fruit of that love, what is begotten by that love, what (and Whom) Christians have always called the Son. But not only does the mystery of that love eternally flow out towards the Son, it is eternally reciprocated by the Son. And that reciprocal love is so perfect that it too is "personified" and called by Christians the Holy Spirit. (Technically called "perichoresis" or mutual indwelling.)

This notion of God as Trinity is not a static thing; it is a dynamic process of constant eternal mutually self-giving love. The earliest writer to use the words "mystical theology", Dionysius, refers to the Trinity as divine "*yearning or longing in love*"<sup>14</sup>. So, by its very nature, it has to continue constantly reaching out further and further. And so we have creation. And so also we

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14 Pseudo-Dionysius : The Complete Works 1V,13,712A, p.82 trans. Luibhead and Rorem (1987) NY Paulist Press, quoted in Mystical Theology by Mark A McIntosh Blackwell Publishing 1998 (2006) pp167-8

have Incarnation – the self-giving love that reaches out into creation and becomes human in Christ.

And according to Dionysius, not only is this all about the mystery of God eternally going out from the depths of divine nature first of all to create, and then to become incarnate, and bind all creation into communion, It is also about God drawing all creation back to its divine origins or source. It is about this eternal and simultaneous movement out from the centre and drawing back into the centre. This is surely a perfect model for the Christian life, for the religious life of contemplation and justice and peace. Moving out from the centre and drawing back into the centre.

When men and women of prayer really try to understand this “divine movement”, to become fully aware of it , they can only do so by receiving it into themselves in a way that is beyond all words and signs; a way of the heart. And that is what is meant by contemplation, by the contemplative way: it is the heart’s understanding and grasping of the mystery of God’s love. Contemplation in the Christian tradition, then, is a particular openness to, an attitude of receptiveness towards this mysterious action of God. It is an exposure to the hidden unity of God’s “‘going forth’ and then returning into the hiddenness of the “divine life-in-itself”. And the point made by all the great mystics including Teresa of Avila, and expressed in Merton’s writings as well, is that the fruit of that contemplation is the Christian imperative to become part of that Christ-centred incarnational movement of God out into the world, into creation, reaching out, in Christ – in the Heart of Christ - towards all humankind, and bringing His justice (His way of relating) and His peace (His shalom – His peace that is about relational harmony and community within the Trinity and among the community of humankind.). The contemplative life above all takes us to the very heart of this ebb and flow between the inner life of God and the incarnation of that life, through Christ, in all creation.

When he is writing about Teresa of Avila, Rowan Williams has a lovely phrase, a phrase, I think, born of a real spiritual insight into the meaning of Christian mysticism, or, the contemplative life, and it echoes much of what we’ve just been saying:

*“But, ultimately,” (he says) “ understanding her [Teresa] means understanding what it meant for her to be a ‘contemplative’, which, as she saw it, was essentially a matter of the sustained awareness of living within the movement of God’s love into creation through the life and death of Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup>*

There are echoes here of the words in the RSCJ Chapter document that we’ve quoted already:

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15 Rowan Williams Teresa of Avila Continuum 1991 p.10

*“When we contemplate the heart of Christ we enter into the movement of the Spirit who develops in us a listening heart, bringing us closer to God’s reality, with the desire to promote justice, peace and the care of creation”*

And, again referring to understanding Teresa of Avila’s writings on mysticism, Rowan Williams goes on to say:

*“That understanding....depends on the ‘living book’ of lives lived in the Christian tradition of prayer and compassion.”<sup>16</sup>*

In other words for Teresa, and all the other Christian mystics, including Meister Eckhart for example, the acid test of the contemplative life is not visions or ecstasies but whether or not the experience of direct contact with God is reflected in leading a fully Christian life of love and compassion, of justice leading to peace. The ultimate test is the examination of our lives as a whole.

Only in this way are the contemplative and the active, the inner and the outer, the life of prayer and contemplation and a life of justice and peace and concern for all creation truly reconciled and integrated. And only in that way, perhaps, is it truly possible to live a consecrated life that *“springs from a compelling love written in our hearts by the Spirit”*

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16 Ibid p. 10