



## Meditations on Contemplative Spirituality

# The Rationalistic Conundrum: Dissolving Philosophy into Contemplation

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Most people who are involved in an apologetics-based Christian ministry such as The Areopagus are drawn to it because of our emphasis on philosophy, history, science, and other scholarly and intellectual aspects of the Christian faith. By nature, they tend to be left-brain rationalists with an acute passion for understanding the innate coherence and consistency of the Biblical Christian worldview. They are also stimulated and challenged by the various theological and philosophical implications of the Christian faith and message.

Unfortunately, however, many Christian rationalists have a difficult time with contemplative spirituality. It strikes them as a profoundly different mindset, which in part it certainly is. For some conservative evangelicals, the whole contemplative tradition seems problematically inconsistent with a systematic theology that excludes all beliefs and practices that are not directly linked to Biblical proof texts. And since the Bible is not a manual on spirituality or a guidebook on specific spiritual practices, the tendency is to dismiss contemplative practices as unbiblical and therefore illegitimate.\* Others view the contemplative tradition as suspect due to its mystical orientation and its emphasis on matters of the heart (or soul) and sensation that are difficult to reconcile rationally or verify scientifically.

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\* Of course, the Bible is also not a textbook on natural science, psychology, political science, philosophy, etc. – nor is it a treatise on systematic theology. But we *can* and *do* derive principles and draw warranted conclusions from what the Bible asserts or implies relevant to all of these disciplines, and the same principle applies to the theology and practice of contemplative spirituality.

Likewise, and equally unfortunate, is the tendency of many Christian contemplatives to devalue the rational, theological, and apologetical side of Christianity. Many contemplatives are just as intelligent as their rationalistic counterparts, but generally they are by nature right-brain intuitionists who are oriented more toward the impressionistic and sensate aspects of the faith. While the driving motivation for rationalists is often the comprehension and application of propositional truth, intuitionists long to experience and celebrate the beauty, harmony, and love that a cultivated relationship with God inevitably engenders.

But although each of us has an orientation toward one or the other, the rational/intuitional dichotomy is an artificial one that we should endeavor to transcend. As in everything, our ultimate model should be Jesus Christ, and in him we find the perfectly integrated individual who manifest a clean heart *and* a clear head. He nurtured his soul just as he cultivated his mind, and he was, in reality, our model as an intuitive mystic as well as a rational thinker.

Throughout Christian history we have many inspiring examples of great thinkers who were also accomplished contemplatives. In recent times C. S. Lewis and Peter Kreeft exemplify the integration of Christian intellectualism and

contemplative spirituality. But nonetheless, some Christians seem to have an aversion to the mystical/contemplative orientation. These are often people with a rigid and dogmatic systematic theology who (whether or not they would admit it) are convinced that they have God figured out. Theirs is the God-in-a-box mentality, and like all ideologues – whether religious, political, or otherwise – they find it impermissible (not to mention, terrifyingly daunting) to think outside the box or otherwise open up to a reality outside the safe, well-defined parameters of their theological system.

I think the Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal understood well the limitations of rationalism when he wrote that “The heart has its reasons that reason does not know.” Similarly, the late great Thomas Aquinas – perhaps the preeminent thinker of the thousand years between Augustine and the Reformation – came to this realization in the closing years of his life. As he approached death, Thomas was drawn deeper into contemplation and meditation, and friends often observed him caught up in mystical rapture. Gradually, he lost all interest in speaking and writing, culminating in a remark to a colleague: “I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings [seem] like straw.” According to the sources, Thomas spent the last year of his life in near-total silence, preparing to meet his Lord.

Often (but not always), Christians who practice contemplative spirituality are drawn to it by a sense that life lived on a purely rational level can never fully make sense. There are mysteries in this life that reason can never comprehend, just as there is an alternate reality that reason can never explain. This alternate reality is not *irrational*, but it is most assuredly *supra-rational* – over and above mere human reasoning capacity. And when faced with those challenges and dilemmas in life for which reason is inadequate – what I call the rationalistic conundrum – the only solution is simple faith, unconditional surrender, and quiet rest in the arms of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who loves us and sacrificed his life on our account.

Like Aquinas, Pascal and Lewis, many who have gone before us have reached this same awareness. Charles Kinzie notes that in the autumn of his years this same realization gradually dawned on the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain:

A man like Jacques Maritain, after all his philosophizing, ended his days as a novice of the Little Brothers of Jesus at Toulouse on the Garonne River. There, with his wife, he was brought to the grace of obedience. Like his contemporary Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and like his friend Thomas Merton... Maritain became a man of our time by embodying in his life the pilgrimage of those for whom the tension becomes so great that our heart will break.

We cannot resolve many of the questions and tensions of our day until we have been transformed from within, becoming newpersons whereby we gain the perspective of wisdom – having the mind of Christ – of which the apostle Paul wrote.

The transformed person is wise with the mind of Christ. Jacques Maritain dissolved philosophy into contemplation, and contemplation, by grace, was dissolved into obedience. There by the Garonne River he met the Spirit who had ascended. There the broken heart torn by the tension of questions was healed.

Our purpose in cultivating the disciplines of contemplative spirituality is not to escape the realities of this life. But just as there is a world of materiality and rationality that we experience through our senses and process by reason, there is a supernatural realm that transcends the purely material and rational. We access this parallel reality – the realm of the Spirit – by faith when we open our minds and our hearts to commune with God, and when we allow him to transform our thinking and our intuition according to his will and purpose for our lives.

With conscious commitment and conscientious practice over time, a subtle but definite transformation occurs. Gradually, we take on the mind of Christ, and through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit we encounter this life – in all of its challenges – with greater perceptivity, sensitivity, and effect.

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