Contemplative 101

The mystical side of Christian spirituality

September 20, 2026

God’s nature and relationship with Creation

God as separate vs God present in all

- Some spiritual traditions understand God as separate from Creation.
- The Contemplative tradition sees God as part of all that God has created.

- Some traditions believe God has predetermined the unfolding of our lives (time).
- The Contemplative tradition understands God as giving Creation (and time) freedom to unfold in whichever way its relationships with the rest of Creation allow.

- *What difference does each perspective make on our relationship with God?*

God’s nature and relationship with us

God as ruler and judge vs God as nurturing/loving presence

- The dominant understanding attributes God with omniscience and omnipotence — and the ability to judge us and forgive us for our sins.
- Our relationship with this God can be based on humility and submission.

- The Contemplative view sees God manifested in relationships that give and sustain life physically and emotionally/spiritually.
- Our relationship with God is grounded in intimacy that flows both ways.

The nature of our spiritual anchor I

Theology, learning and following rules

- The Reformation (1517) amplified the teaching of Scripture as the source of the Good News:
  - The “Word of God”
    = the spoken and written word of proclamation and theology
  - Prayers, lessons, and homiletics to do the heavy lifting in common worship
  - A person learns how to become a Christian and learns the Creed
  - A person becomes a better Christian by following the rules
  - Each person forges their personal relationship with the Divine.

  - This tradition leans heavily on Reason and the human intellect

The nature of our spiritual anchor II

Liturgy, embodiment and lived experience

- Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox traditions offer more “embodied” teaching:
  - God’s “mysteries” are emphasized through symbols and rituals
  - Christ’s real presence, sacrifice and Resurrection are found in the Eucharist
  - Liturgy guides us through physical, symbolic, and emotional space into deeper faith
  - The priest is the guide and intermediary in the personal and corporate experience of the great mysteries.

  - This tradition leans heavily on emotion and lived experience in space and time.

The nature of our spiritual anchor III

The Contemplative Way

- Each person's connection to the Divine is as individual as their self and their story.
- The Contemplative tradition (a.k.a. the mystical tradition):
    - Creates space to creatively encounter the Divine Presence
    - Discoveries and encounters are as individual as each person
        - In traditional worship or in other spaces, including nature
        - In silence, or in the midst of music
        - In words, or actions, or liturgy, or in stillness.

Too unstructured to be meaningful?

God’s thoughts are not our thoughts

- It is the human mind that imposes limits and structures
  (Look at Creation to appreciate diversity and its freedom to unfold as it will)
- Contemplation bypasses the mind’s desire to control its environment
- Contemplation opens a space where the Divine can speak to us freely and openly
- Because Contemplation opens us up to a genuine experience of the Divine,
  there is no need to doubt or question. We become aware of the reality that truly IS.
- A meditation or prayer practice helps unlock that open space.
  (We need to get our overactive and overzealous minds out of the way)

The Masters show the way

Meister Eckhart (German, c.1260-1328)

There is no need to look for God here or there. He is no farther away than the door of your own heart. There He stands waiting till He finds you ready to open the door and let Him enter. No need for you to call Him from afar — He is waiting more impatiently than you for that door to open. He wants you a thousand times more urgently than you want Him. There is only one thing you must do: Open the door and enter.

No one has ever longed so much for anything as God longs to bring man to Him. God is so close to us, but we are distant and turned away from Him. God is within, we are without. God is at home with us, but we are strangers to ourselves.

Pfeiffer, Frantz, and Evans, C de B., trans. Meister Eckhart*. London: John M. Watkins, 1924.*

The Masters show the way

St John of the Cross (Spanish, 1542-1591)

“Contemplation is nothing else but a secret, peaceful, and loving infusion of God, which if admitted, will set the soul on fire with the Spirit of love.”

The Masters show the way

Simone Weil (French, 1909-1943)

God gave me being in order that I should give it back to him. It is like one of those traps whereby the characters are tested in fairy stories and tales of initiation. If I accept this gift it is bad and fatal; its virtue becomes apparent through my refusal of it. God allows me to exist outside of himself. It is for me to refuse this authorization. Humility is the refusal to exist outside God. It is the queen of virtues.

Weil, Simone, Crawford, Emma and von der Ruhr, Mario, transl., Gravity and Grace*, London, Routledge, 2002.*

The Masters show the way

Howard Thurman (American, 1899-1981)

I want, somehow, in the circling series of all my days and months and years, to be free to be me.

And I feel, by my insights that move in and out of my horizon like some fleeting ghost that I can trust God with this.

So that the essence of my religious experience is to go through the experience of stripping until I lay bare to God Himself in me. And God claims God in me.

And when that happens, I can trust it.

Lecture: Deep Calls Unto Deep, Part 2: The Demands of Religious Experience, January 30, 1980

Perhaps it was ever thus

Paul was a Contemplative at heart

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Paul's Letter to the Romans, 8:26-28

Fourteen introductions to a rich prayer life (each from a slightly different perspective):

- *Time for God*, by Jacques Philippe (the most recent edition comes with a study guide)
- *Thoughts Matter: Discovering the Spiritual Journey*, by Mary Margaret Funk
- *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, by Martin Laird
- *A Book of Silence*, by Sara Maitland
- *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, by Richard Rohr
- *Falling Upwards*, by Richard Rohr
- *New Seeds of Contemplation*, by Thomas Merton (one of the modern classics)
- *Contemplative Prayer*, by Thomas Merton (one of the modern classics)
- *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*, by Henri Nouwen
- *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, by Cynthia Bourgault
- *Fire Within*, by Thomas Dubay (centered on Teresa and St John of the Cross)
- *Let Nothing Disturb You; 30 Days with Teresa of Avila* (a digest)
- *The Interior Castle*, by Teresa of Avila
- *Meister Eckhart's Book of the Heart: Meditations for the Restless Soul*, by Jon M. Sweeney & Mark S. Burrows (Meister Eckhart's mysticism turned into remarkable, short poems)