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**Contemplative Theology**

**Centering Prayer : What Kind of Prayer Is This ?**

In a comment made in regards to non-Christian meditation in January of 1996,Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico, within a pastoral letter entitled *A Call to Vigilance : Pastoral Instruction on New Age*, wrote : ‘At times an attempt is made to ‘christianize’ these forms, as occurred, for example, with ‘centering prayer’ and ‘focusing’, but the result is always a hybrid form with slight gospel basis.’[[1]](#endnote-1) He went on to imply that non-Christian meditation techniques, such as centering prayer, were outgrowths of the ‘New Age’ phenomenon having very little in common with the Christian Tradition. Furthermore, he contended that they promote the idea of God as an impersonal deity, have little regard for Scripture and the life and role of Jesus Christ, are ‘practices of deep concentration’[[2]](#endnote-2) intent on producing modified states of consciousness as opposed to prayer, and disregard charity as being a foundation for a moral existence.

It is unfortunate that Carrera did not go on to supply proof for upholding his assertion that ‘centering prayer’, in particular, was not a legitimate form of Christian prayer. It will therefore be the purpose of this essay to discover whether or not centering prayer is just a hybrid form of eastern meditation techniques or a form of Christian prayer deeply rooted in Christian Tradition as well as to retort to Carrera’s affirmations highlighted above. With the aid of, among others, of Father Thomas Keating, Cistercian monk who is one of the main proponents of the centering prayer method and founder of the contemplative outreach movement, a movement of prayer groups using the centering prayer method, we will attempt to discover why and how centering prayer was born, to ascertain if this prayer is indeed Christian, to see if the method has antecedents within the Christian Tradition, and to determine whether centering prayer stands on a firm theological foundation.

**In Answer to a Pastoral Need**

Society within the second half of the twentieth century experienced change of profound proportions. Western society in particular shook off hitherto accepted norms to accommodate new paradigms, new philosophies, and new ways of responding to the world. Humankind distanced itself from inherited universal normative values and sought to discover new and many varied ‘truths’. Technological advances, especially in the areas of communication, only served to accelerate the thirst for change.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This shift in values was noticeably felt within the religious and spiritual realms of society. It is common knowledge that, from the 1960’s on, church attendance plummeted. People identified less and less with the religious praxis they had become accustomed to and tended to seek other spiritual alternatives. Many, as exemplified by the Beatles during their sojourns in India in 1964, looked towards Asian and Oriental traditions for inspiration. The ashrams and gurus of India and Buddhist monasteries of Thailand and Japan became centers of deep interest for westerners as men and women from Europe and North America flocked towards those centers in great numbers. As Carrera noted ‘the last thirty years have been shaken by an unprecedented world-wide search for some kind of spiritual experience’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

And what did those persons find? The latter happened on alternative ways to engage the Transcendent, distinct religious and spiritual traditions as well as other non-Christian sacred writings.[[5]](#endnote-5) Once back home, many of these searchers insisted on not only continuing to practice their novel exercises but also to share what they had uncovered with their western brothers and sisters. Thus, the popularity of yoga and eastern meditation techniques spread throughout occidental society and the use of these techniques proliferated to such a degree that they have now become common companions within our cultural landscape.

It is within this context and in response to this context that the centering prayer movement was born and evolved. Recognizing the ‘deep contemporary hunger for spirituality’[[6]](#endnote-6) Cistercian monks living in the Spencer monastery of New England asked themselves this question: ‘why were thousands of young people going to India every summer to find some form of spirituality when contemplative monasteries of men and women were plentiful right here in this country? This raised the further question, why don’t they come to visit us?’[[7]](#endnote-7) Thus, with the insistence of Father Thomas Keating, Father William Meninger became impelled to come up with an approach that would meet the needs of his contemporaries as well as one which would incite those that were experimenting with Eastern techniques to return to their Christian roots. Drawing on the teachings found within *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an important and influential fourteenth century tract written by an anonymous author, Meninger, in the mid-1970’s, proposed a method he termed the ‘Prayer of the Cloud’.

The ‘Prayer of the Cloud’, later called ‘Centering Prayer’ by one of Meninger’s collaborators, Father Basil Pennington, consisted basically of the repetition of a single word such as ‘God’ or ‘Love’ to indicate one’s intention to engage the Lord.[[8]](#endnote-8) Introduced at first to seminarians and then, through workshops, to any interested persons this form of prayer caught on rapidly and became, in 1979, the subject of a book written by Basil Pennington: *Centering Prayer: Renewing An Ancient Christian Prayer Form.* Later, with no intention of promoting the Centering Prayer method, Father Thomas Keating was compelled, through the invitation of spiritual leaders around the United States and the Lama Foundation in New Mexico, in particular, to offer centering prayer workshops from St. Benedict’s Monastery located in Snowmass, Colorado, Keating’s new abode.

The interest in centering prayer just seemed to grow and grow and out of this was born, in 1983, the Contemplative Outreach Movement, ‘a network of faith communities committed to the process and transmission of Christian transformation.’[[9]](#endnote-9) With the purpose to offer workshops at parish and diocesonal levels in order to train and support teachers of the method, this organisation has grown from a modest beginning to an organisation that is present in over 39 countries, including Canada. Clearly, centering prayer, a form of contemplative prayer, answered the needs of persons searching for other ways to practice the Christian faith.

What can be concluded from this is that the centering prayer phenomenon was created as a response to the context of the times and, because it was and continues to be sponsored by Cistercian monks, seems to come out of the Christian tradition. In many ways, this pastoral endeavour on the part of Meninger, Pennigton, and Keating preceded Carrera’s call to promote the Christian faith: ‘Sans doute la mesure la plus simple, la plus évidente et la plus urgente à prendre, et qui serait la plus efficace, serait de tirer meilleur parti des richesses de l’héritage spirituel chrétien. Les grands ordres religieux ont de solides traditions de méditation et de spiritualité qui pourrait être partagées.’[[10]](#endnote-10) It is one thing, however, to maintain that centering prayer is not a child of the context of the times but a response to it. It is another, though, to demonstrate that centering prayer is a Christian form of prayer. Let us now turn our attention to this question.

**Repetition of a Word: Is this Prayer ?**

In many ways Cardinal Carrera can be forgiven for presuming that centering prayer is just an imitation of an eastern meditation method. On the surface, the prayer involves the repetition of a word in order to tame the mind and free one from the incessant flow of thoughts that accompany the human journey thereby resembling transcendental meditation as well as meditation forms that use mantras. The reality, however, is that centering prayer involves much more than just the taming of the activities of the mind.

The prayer, for one, leads the practitioner to consent to the Presence of God and to consent to the actions of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. This form of prayer is designed to prepare one to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, ‘a resting in God. In this resting or stillness the mind and heart are not actively seeking Him but are beginning to experience, to taste, what they have been seeking.’[[11]](#endnote-11) Contemplation here is seen as a gift from God, something which cannot be earned through personal endeavor. A person does not command contemplation, the former can only receive it and the decision to offer this gift rests solely at the behest of the Spirit.

Furthermore, Keating states unequivocally that centering prayer has the potential to deepen our relationship with the Lord. ‘What we are most concerned with is the faith relationship. This relationship is expressed by taking the time to open oneself to God every day, by taking God seriously enough to meet Him everyday.’[[12]](#endnote-12) With this statement we are far from Carrera’s contention that centering prayer speaks to an impersonal deity. On the contrary, centering prayer’s premise is that of the ‘Divine Indwelling’ within each and every person and that we are all called on to develop our relationship with the Sacred that resides within us all.[[13]](#endnote-13) Keating is not alone in making this claim. Karl Rahner, eminent theologian and one of the Fathers on the Vatican II Council, in speaking of Jesus death and resurrection sustains Keating’s assessment: ‘By the holy strategy of his eternal nature, he allowed himself to be conquered by death so as to be swallowed up by it and to thereby reach earth’s very center, where he could, amidst all that gives birth and forms the common root, infuse it forever with his divine life.’[[14]](#endnote-14) By repeating the sacred word as suggested by centering prayer one develops the vigilance to maintain the intention to abandon oneself to God’s Presence during the period of prayer and beyond.

Keating does not stop there, however. He insists on the importance of immersing oneself in Scripture through ‘Lectio Divina’, a practice of divine reading which takes its model from the experience of the liturgy.[[15]](#endnote-15) For Keating, ‘Christianity is not centered around a moral teaching, but around a person.’[[16]](#endnote-16) Through the reading of the Word of God it becomes possible to establish a relationship, a friendship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.[[17]](#endnote-17) In this way Christ also becomes a model for moral action. ‘This activity enables us to be nourished by the ‘bread of life’(Jn 6:35), and indeed to become the Word of God (Jn 6:48-51).[[18]](#endnote-18) Keating, as can be seen, is far from disregarding the Word of God and the life of Jesus Christ as Carrera attempted to impart. Lecio Divina, as a companion to centering prayer, actually deepens the faith experience of the Christian.

But who within the Tradition has actually practiced this form of prayer?

**A Tradition Recaptured**

Many examples of Christians who have used methods similar to centering prayer abound in the Christian Tradition. As was noted above, Father Meninger drew heavily on *The Cloud of Unknowing,* an influential anonymous tract written in the fourteenth century, for inspiration in developing the centering prayer method. But one needs to go back further in time to find what influenced the author of the Cloud; back to the fourth century. It was then that St. John Cassian, after coming out of the desert of Egypt, wrote about discussions he had had on prayer with Abba Isaac, a famous and wise desert hermit. Cassian recounts that Isaac recommended that ‘to maintain an unceasing recollection of God, this formula must be ever before you. The formula is this: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me.’[[19]](#endnote-19) John Climacus, writing in the VIIth century mentioned this: ‘Un seul mot du publicain apaisa Dieu et un seul cri de foi sauva le larron. La loquacité dans la prière disperse souvent l’esprit et le rempli d’images, alors que la répétition d’une même parole ordinairement le recueille.’[[20]](#endnote-20)In other words, the formula for contemplation required the repetition of an admonition to chase away all intervening thoughts and images to maintain attention towards God. This approach would be used for the better part of ten centuries within the monasteries of Europe.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Moving forward and back to the XIVth century we find the Rhineland mystics of Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso advocating the importance of silence as a place beyond words. Individuals were motivated to sit calmly in silence to allow the Sacred the freedom to move and act. The author of the Cloud of Unknowing added this : ‘Il te suffit de choisir un mot bref, d’une seule syllable, de préférence à deux syllables. En effet, plus le mot est court, plus il est adapté au travail de l’Esprit.’[[22]](#endnote-22) Even St. Francis de Sales, an eminent archbishop of Vienna who influenced persons such as St. Jean Eudes and St. Vincent de Paul, used this form of prayer, the repetition of a single word, as his prayer of choice in order to taste the Presence of God.[[23]](#endnote-23) In fact, had it not been for the controversy that surrounded the Quietist movement in France during the XVIIth century the contemplative tradition may have continued to influence prayer praxis down into modern times. But, as Fabrice Blée pointed out in his essay *Le «pur amour» selon madame* *Guyon: origine et conséquances d’un malentendu* that appeared in *La Mystique Démystifiée,* the contemplative tradition was forced into the backwaters by the powers in place. Both King Louis XIVth and Pope Innocent XII, intent on keeping control over their flocks, converged their energies to quiet the likes of Madame Guyon and Fénélon, both proponents of the contemplative way.

As has been seen, then, centering prayer has come forth from a long inherited tradition. The form of prayer involved in the repetition of a single word, therefore, also belongs to Christian praxis. It is not a hybrid of eastern meditation techniques. The introduction of centering prayer may have been prompted as a response to the needs of contemporaries searching for alternative ways to engage the Lord, but its method is steeped in Christian Tradition.

**Theological Foundations**

There is more to support the cause of centering prayer. The latter’s proponents claim to be upheld by, among others, three main theological principles. The first is the conviction that humans are fundamentally good; beings made in the image of God with the potential for ‘unlimited growth’[[24]](#endnote-24). Persons have the capabilities to become Christ like, to become, as St. Paul has written, new creatures. To develop a relationship with the Father, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit is every individual’s birthright.

A second theological principle stems from Jesus’ wisdom saying that appears in Mt 6:6 : ‘But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will repay you.’ John Cassian writes that Abba Isaac believed Jesus to mean that when we pray we were to close our mouths and distance ourselves from our inner thoughts, this to pray from the secret of our hearts. [[25]](#endnote-25) That is precisely what centering prayer advocates.

A third theological principle which supports the foundations of the centering prayer method is Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of the Indwelling of the Trinity within each and every human being. ‘God is present to us all the time’[[26]](#endnote-26) and all we need to do to access that Presence and develop a relationship with God is to focus within. The repetition of the sacred word as suggested through the centering prayer method is designed to aid us in consenting to this divine Presence and to the action of the Spirit within our lives.

**Conclusion**

We undertook this journey to disclose whether or not centering prayer was a legitimate Christian form of prayer or a hybrid of eastern meditation techniques. We discovered along the way that centering prayer did indeed have deep roots within the Christian Tradition; that it had a very immanent and personal God as its object; that it pointed directly in the direction of Jesus Christ for inspiration; that it was supported by theological principles. Why then does it still attract suspicion among certain elements of the church hierarchy?

**Notes**

1. Norberto Rivera Carrera, *A Call To Vigilance ( Pastoral Instruction on New Age ),*

   January 7, 1996 in <http://www.ewtn.com/library/bishops/acall.htm>, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid.,p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Taylor, *Grandeur et misère de la modernité,* Montréal (Québec), Bellarmin, 1992

   Theme developed within this treatise [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Norberto Rivera Carrera, *A Call To Vigilance ( Pastoral Instruction on New Age ),*

   January 7, 1996 in <http://www.ewtn.com/library/bishops/acall.htm>, p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*, N.Y., Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012,. p. xiv [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p.xiv [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. xiv [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. xvii [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. xxii [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Norberto Rivera Carrera, *Jésus Christ porteur d’eau vive : Une réflexion chrétienne sur le nouvel âge*, 2003, <http://www.cesnur.org/2003/vat_na_fr.htm>, p.36 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart : The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, N.Y., Continuum, 2009, p. 141 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. P. 24 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Thomas Keating, *The Thomas Keating Reader : Selected Writings from the Contemplative Outreach* *Newsletter*, N.Y., Lantern Books, 2012, p. 124 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life : Sermons, Prayers, and Essays*, N.Y., Orbis, 2010, p. 54 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World: An Introduction to Contemplative Christianity*, N.Y., Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008, p.48 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. p. 50 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*, N.Y., Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012 p.96 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World: An Introduction to Contemplative Christianity*, N.Y., Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008 p.55 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Basil Pennington*, Centering Prayer: Renewing An Ancient Christian Prayer Form*, N.Y., Doubleday, p .18 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Jean-Marie Gueullette, *Petit traité de la prière silencieuse*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2011, p.159 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. p.19 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. p. 166 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid.,p.169 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart : The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, N.Y., Continuum, 2009, p.158 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Thomas Keating, *The Thomas Keating Reader : Selected Writings from the Contemplative Outreach* *Newsletter*, N.Y., Lantern Books, 2012, p. 135 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid.124

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    Taylor, Charles, *Grandeur et misère de la modernité*, Montréal (Québec), Bellarmin, 1992 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)