

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION AND SEEKING GOD

Of the readings we were asked to reflect and report on, I have selected two, not one, as having particular meaning and relevance for me; Esther de Waal's "*Seeking God*", and DOM John Main's "Christian Meditation". De Waal's treatise speaks to me in that it was instrumental in helping to integrate the spiritual path I had followed at the School of Philosophy, with my Anglican heritage. John Main has reinforced that integration – indeed renewed it for me after a period of lapse – through his testimony of his own lapse and recovery of meditation as the central focus of his prayer life. Indeed his experience seems uncannily similar to my own.

Main reflects that on becoming a Benedictine monk he was given another method of meditation, the so-called "prayer of acts"; a half hour to be spent in acts of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication – prayer that was largely words addressed to God in the heart and thoughts about God in the mind.¹ Although he found this new, to him, form of prayer becoming increasingly unsatisfactory compared to his experience of mantra meditation in the Indian tradition, he stayed with it to give the method a reasonable chance to prove itself. As time went on, and he became more busy as a monk, the confrontation between the two methods became less urgent for him.²

What changed things for John Main was a seemingly innocuous event. A young man came to the monastery asking to be taught about Christian mysticism. He had spent some time with a Hindu teacher and was seeking a Christian perspective. Main gave him Baker's "Holy Wisdom" as his first book of study and was amazed at the young man's real and immediate enthusiasm; to the point where he had to reread it himself. Within a short period of time, the two men were meditating together.³

Baker's reminders of the emphasis St. benedict put on Cassian's "Conferences" caused John Main to read them seriously for the first time. With wonderful astonishment he read, in Cassian's Tenth Conference, of the practice

of using a mantra to create the necessary stillness for prayer, and the practice of continual prayer. Together these words of Cassian took him home once more to the practice of the mantra.⁴

Eventually, Main moved to Canada, and founded the Benedictine Priory of Montreal, a community of monks and lay people practicing Christian meditation. With time, and the influence of Main's articles, books and speaking engagements, the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) was formed to perpetuate his work. Today, the community is flourishing, and together with practicing mantra meditation in the Christian manner, studies the works of the the mystics both from a Christian and an Eastern tradition; particularly the Indian tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Vedanta is the root of the meditative tradition John Main was first exposed to in India; which he rediscovered in the work of John Cassian. Vedanta is also the root of the tradition followed by the School of Philosophy; so in a very real way John Main's work is integrative for me.

Like Main, I plunged into my new vocation with enthusiasm, and was exposed to a wide variety of 'new' prayer traditions. Exploring these, together with the demands of the course, gradually eroded my practice of the Rule I had previously followed, to the point where I could not honestly say I was following it any longer. The intention was there, but the practice was sporadic, at best.

Yet, I know that meditation is important for me. When I meditate I have more energy and generally do better in my daily life. Still, I did not practice regularly any more.

When I was in Sri Lanka this summer, I had the opportunity of living in the community of the Sisters of St. Margaret while undertaking a course at Lanka Bible College. That experience was like a retreat for me, reinforcing the practices of the Rule that I had followed a year previously – those formed by the School of Philosophy - and which, as I discovered after enrolling at Trinity, were rooted in the Benedictine tradition.

When I began my Divinity studies one of my courses required me to evaluate my personal "Rule" in terms of de Waal's exposition of The Rule of St. Benedict in *"Seeking God"*; particularly with respect to prayer, work and balance.

At that time, what defined my Rule of Life was not Church, or anything the Church did. Rather, it was the School of Philosophy. I attended the Toronto School for about ten years prior to acceptance into seminary; in large part because I had become a “seeker” for meaning in my life, and had not found the answers to my questions in Church. The School introduced me to a broad range of philosophers and philosophies, both from the West and the East. In particular, I was introduced to the Indian Scriptures – the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, began to participate in Sanskrit classes as a vehicle to understanding these scriptures better, and participated in formal Gita study. The School also provided classes based on the Christian scripture; particularly the Gospels; and on one memorable summer residential retreat, used Psalm 119 as the basis for 10 days of in-depth study. I was also given a personal program of directed Bible Study, using the King James Bible and a Cruden’s Concordance, to sustain my spiritual development during periods of service in Sri Lanka. That experience whet my appetite for more, and I began to read from a so-called Common Bible, a Revised Standard Version, and was thus introduced to the Apocrypha; where I “discovered” the wisdom literature – The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus. What I discovered was that the Bible did indeed impart wisdom – knowledge about the Creator and the Creation, advice about how to live my life, and how to deal with the issues that arise within it, inspiration, support in difficult times, hope, joy – all of the things I was “seeking” in other traditions, but could not find in my own ... and it was all there, all the time, right in front of me.

These experiences helped me to view my own tradition – Christianity – in a new and more positive light; ultimately leading me back to my Christian roots, and my enrolment in the Master of Divinity program.

Part of my experience at the School of Philosophy was to attend an annual residential retreat of some eight to ten days, at which time we lived and worked according to a “Rule of Life”. The intent was to demonstrate the efficacy of the Rule, and prove to us that it was do-able, so that we would continue it throughout the coming year. The Day began at 6:00 a.m. with a dedication in

assembly, followed by a half hour of meditation. A mixture of work – manual work – and study periods, comprised the balance of the day. In the evening there was another half hour of meditation followed by some uplifting entertainment – perhaps a classical music concert - before retiring. In summary the Rule modeled was 1 hour of meditation, in ½ hour sessions, 3 hours of study, eight hours of work, with the balance of the day being given over to meals, leisure activities and sleep.

The School also had a strong belief in service ... that service is where joy is to be found. As a result of my School experience, I was accustomed to offering service and to working as a member of a group. Ultimately, that experience stood me in good stead when I accepted responsibility to assist with a Children's Home in Sri Lanka. There I accepted responsibility for the children's Chapel services – morning and evening prayer - daily. Having become accustomed to attending Chapel twice a day in Sri Lanka. I determined to follow a similar course in Canada. By putting God first it proved to be possible to do, without significant difficulty.

Up until one year ago my "Rule" was substantially the one I was introduced to at the School of Philosophy. I meditated in the morning and evening, and had incorporated Ignatian spirituality, using the material from Creighton University's "Online Retreat in Daily Life, and the Rosary as a focus for that meditation. I also attended corporate worship, for the most part, twice a day. During the course of the day I was able to do the three hours of study.

In order to evaluate my "Rule" I was required to consider it in terms of what de Waal had to say on the subjects of prayer, work and balance.

Prayer

According to Esther de Waal, prayer lies at the heart of the Benedictine life. It holds everything together, sustains every other activity, and is its root, fruit, foundation and fulfillment. Prayer is "*opus dei*" – the work of God – and nothing whatever is to be preferred to it.⁵ The disciple is to be silent and listen, for how can one hear the Word until one is silent? St. Benedict, concerned about the cessation of the inner noise as well as external chatter, believed that Monks

should diligently cultivate silence at all times (42.1)⁶ As de Waal notes, without it one cannot have much hope of establishing that relationship with God of hearing and responding which will help root the whole life in prayer.⁷

St. Benedict believes that spontaneity must be upheld by structure and freedom by ritual. Moreover, the personal prayer needs corporate prayer, and the awareness of the presence of God needs to sometimes be fed by external sources.⁸ For these reasons, he imposes a rhythm and form on the life of prayer through the scheduling of the Daily Offices within the context of the Rule.

De Waal notes that “ultimately praying is living, working, loving, accepting, the refusal to take anything or anyone for granted but rather to try to find Christ in and through them all”⁹. She goes on to say that “Christ is to be found in the circumstances, the people, the things of daily life”¹⁰. The final purpose of the monastic life, she notes, is not the *opus dei* as celebrated in the Divine Office, “but the work of God in uninterrupted prayer, which is the search for God in all things”¹¹.

Work

In St. Benedict’s Rule all activities described are equally valid and to be shared by the community. No single monastic work is more important than another.¹² However, work is to be kept in proportion by prayer and study. Breaking off to pray ensures work doesn’t become end in itself.

De Waal notes that St. Benedict is equally concerned about work becoming self-fulfillment. In the Rule, the point where the craftsman becomes puffed-up by his craft is the point he’s to be removed from practicing it¹³.

For St. Benedict, work takes its place in the Rule as part of the rightly ordered life. He wanted his monks to work because he knew that a normal person cannot be always praying or studying. Accordingly, in the Rule work carries as much dignity as Chapel worship or devotional reading in the library¹⁴. However, work must be put into perspective with the rest of life – it must be dropped at the right moment. The importance of obedience to the monastic timetable is to prevent the tyranny of one element of the life over the rest¹⁵.

Balance

Balance is so central it underpins all else in the Rule. Indeed, de Waal describes it as "...the keystone of the whole Benedictine approach to the individual and the community"¹⁶. St. Benedict believed that body, mind and spirit together make up the whole person. Therefore he designed the daily pattern of life in the monastery to incorporate time for prayer, study and manual work. Indeed, he held that all three should equally become a way to God¹⁷.

The Monk's day was organized into a rhythmic succession of these elements: 4 hours of liturgical prayer, 4 hours of spiritual reading, and 6 hrs of manual work, within the framework of the monastic offices. De Waal notes that the purpose of the Rule is to create a favourable environment for the balanced life to flourish¹⁸. "The principle of moderation in all things", she notes, "pervades every aspect of monastic life"¹⁹.

Evaluation

In light of the above I appeared to have arrived at a somewhat reasonable place, through God's grace; certainly not by any intention of mine. I recognize, however, that there is now much work to do; since I have allowed my practice to become haphazard over the course of the past year.

Rereading de Waal, in conjunction with Main has forcefully reminded me of what treasures I had let go. There are literally acres of diamonds in my own backyard and I was running everywhere else to try to find something better. This having been said, I do very much value the Ignatian practices that I have picked up from Creighton University, the practice of the Rosary and the Daily Office as expressed through the canonical hours in the Roman breviary. My challenge will be to find a way to integrate these into my Rule, together with the continuing the practice of meditation. Since all of the above are to be found in the Benedictine tradition and the WCCM also is rooted in Benedictine experience it may be possible to integrate everything. I do recognize, however, that I am at a stage where I will need help to do so effectively.

Since I am human, I am not always consistent in following my Rule; particularly when I have to do it on my own. I know that I function better in a

group in such matters – someone to whom I am accountable, if only voluntarily. For that reason it will be important for me to find a Spiritual Director. Alternatively, perhaps I can submit to the discipline of a small group – like the 4th day groups from Cursillo.

My tendency is to side with Brother Lawrence, and dedicate all I do to God.²⁰ By myself, I invariably get things all fouled up, so I have developed the habit of giving everything to God and trusting in his direction. I will need to do the same with this.

With the practice of meditation I am trying to listen.

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¹ Dom John Main, OSB, Christian Meditation, (Alvaston: The Grail, 1977), 4

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*, 5

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Esther de Waal, Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984), 145

⁶ *ibid*, 146

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*, 149

⁹ *ibid*, 152

¹⁰ *ibid*, 153

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*, 107

¹³ *ibid*, 108

¹⁴ *ibid*, 109

¹⁵ *ibid*, 110

¹⁶ *ibid*, 85

¹⁷ *ibid*, 86

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*, 90

²⁰ Brother Lawrence, The Practice of the Presence of God, (Madras: Samata Books), 55