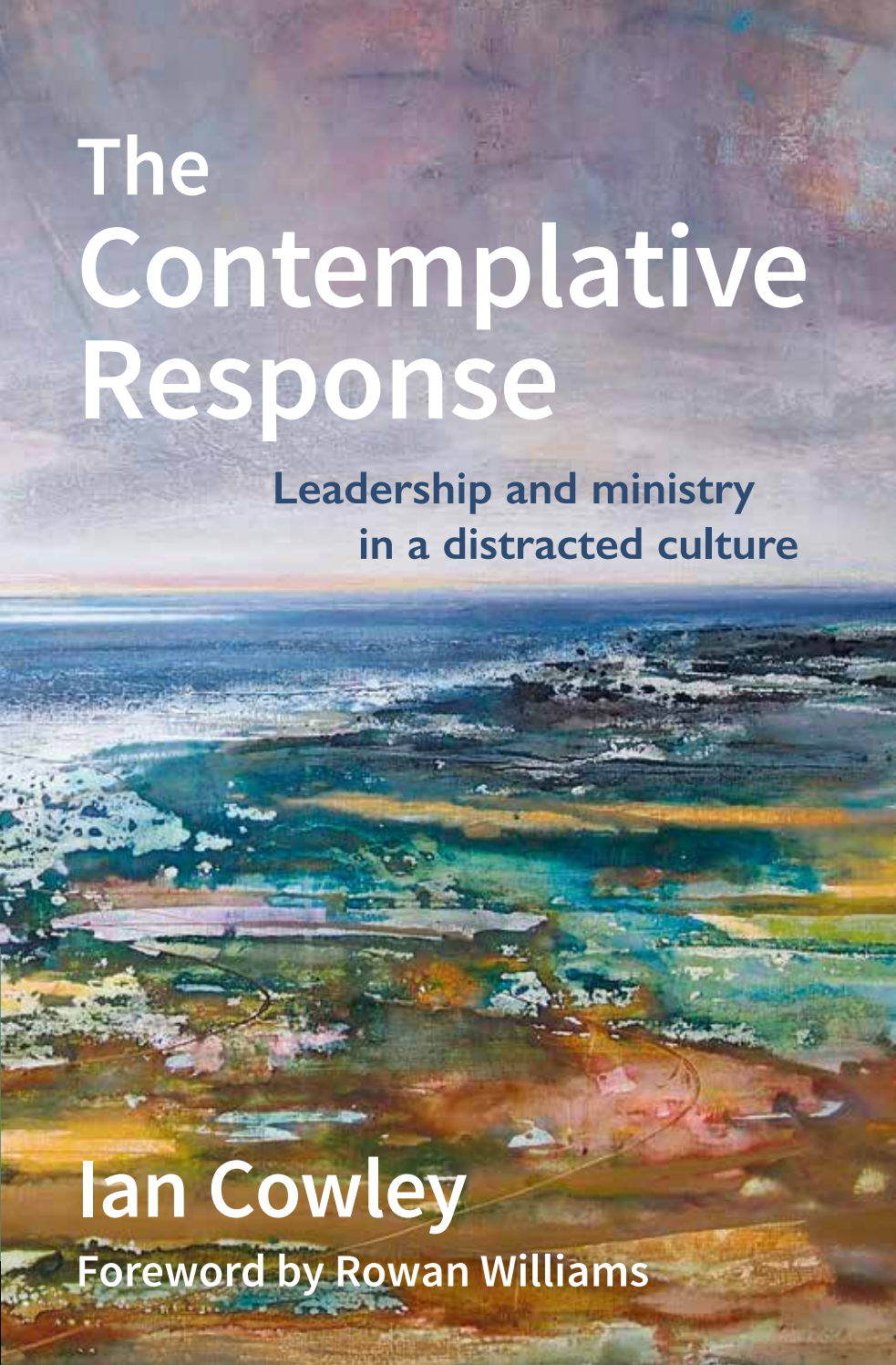
The
Contemplative
Response
Leadership and ministry
in a distracted culture
Ian Cowley
Foreword by Rowan Williams

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Leadership and ministry in a distracted culture

Ian Cowley

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Contents

Foreword

At one point in this book, Ian Cowley speaks of the effort we put into the 'avoidance of depth' in our action and awareness. The most serious challenge his discussion puts before us is the question of where we act from in our engagement with the world around us, human and non-human. If we act from the levels of our being that are closest to the surface, most bound up with our self-image and our appearance in the eyes of others, we condemn ourselves to continuing unreality, with all the damage it brings to ourselves and to other beings. If we act from somewhere closer to the centre, we are likely to open the way to something more creative and healing. Yet we are so in love with those surface pictures and habits that we can put immense energy into – in effect – maintaining a lie.

Ian meets the reader where that reader is (this reader, certainly) and sets out candidly his own moments of hard self-discovery, as well as his counsel for how we might allow God simply to be God in us and for us. To discover something of the contemplative path is to discover something about God: we recognise the strange idol we have set up, the product of the panic, vanity and neediness that come so readily to us; and we learn how to open ourselves to the actuality of a God who is immeasurably more than what our emotional dramas can generate. The movement closer to the true God is also a movement closer to a 'true self' – not – emphatically not – some little core of pure individuality buried inside, but a being free and ready to be nourished by truth, not by image and fantasy.

If we are able to take a step in this direction, we become not more isolated from the world of tough decisions and moral dilemmas, but less eager to run away or hide or pretend. 'The truth will set you free,'

says Jesus; he, who always acts out of the depth of his relation to the God of Israel whom he calls 'Father', lives, dies and rises so that we may be drawn deeper into his own true and just connection with what is eternally real. Our prayer and our actions alike must reflect our trust in the reality and power of this gift.

And so if we are trying to be truthful ministers of the gospel, this is the truthfulness we must seek to model and to share. Ian diagnoses with sharp insight the compulsions that will take us away from this and offers simple and lucid guidance for growing in trust. This is a life-giving reflection; may the readers who need it find it.

Rowan Williams
Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge,
and former Archbishop of Canterbury

Introduction

Blessed are the pure in heart

It is always a slightly awkward and uncomfortable conversation: 'Didn't you know? He has had to withdraw from public ministry for a while.' 'Oh! I am sorry. When did this happen?' It is difficult to know what questions to ask or what to say next.

Recently, a number of my colleagues in ministry and leadership have had to resign because of disciplinary or personal issues. My response to this is always one of sadness, prayer and concern for the churches involved, for the families and for the person who has had to step down from a leadership role under difficult and troubling circumstances.

This has led me to reflect on my own inner life, and the ways in which I tend to respond to the demands and pressures of public ministry. In recent years I have become increasingly aware of my own desires for power and control, for safety and security and for esteem and significance, and of the ways in which these desires are able to rule my heart. Control, security and esteem are important for all of us if we are to survive and flourish. But to become the person that God has made me and called me to be, I need to learn to let go of these desires. I can, if I am willing, learn instead to trust and to allow God to rule my heart and to be my peace and the provider of my needs. The state of my heart before God is the key to my ability to deal well with the temptations and pressures of life in leadership.

When I am busy and caught up in my work, these desires are largely taken care of. Leadership provides plenty of opportunities for me to

be in control, to be secure in my areas of competence and to receive a sense of significance. But when I stop and take time out, I learn some interesting lessons about myself. When I cease from busyness and activity, I discover more fully my own inner restlessness, the internal clamour to keep seeking control, significance and security. So, even though I am away from work, I find that I am still being drawn to acquire more stuff, to achieve more goals and to indulge my appetites. And this is where the problems can arise for many of us.

These are the perennial areas of struggle for Christian leaders. So often it comes back to money and possessions, to sex and drink, and to the workaholic obsession with doing things. I know that I am not immune from the possibility of falling into difficulty in any of these areas. 'There but for the grace of God go I.'

But perhaps the fact that I am aware of my own human weakness is, in fact, a strength. The danger comes when we do not recognise that we are all vulnerable. The real killer so often is denial. Once we tell ourselves, 'It won't happen to me,' or, 'It's not really a problem,' we are in trouble. I have found that it is vital to have a few close friends, as well as a spiritual director or soul friend, to whom I can regularly be accountable. 'Who am I talking to about this?' is an important question for all of us in Christian leadership. This is not just about my prayer life, but about everything that is going on in my life and heart.

An inner truthfulness is also required if we are to grow into holiness. The pruning shears of testing and suffering will be at work in each of us, as Jesus has made clear in the gospels (see John 15:2). When this is happening to us, we will be greatly helped if we have established a daily practice of prayer that is able to address the needs of our hearts for a depth of relationship with the all-loving heart of God. We can also learn to pay proper attention to the God-given rhythms of work and rest, of family and friends, of solitude and society. Then we will find deep within ourselves a growing attentiveness to grace, to the unfailing goodness and mercy of God at work in his people and his creation.

I have recently been reading the DCI Banks series of detective novels by Peter Robinson, set in the Yorkshire Dales. Alan Banks is a good cop, with a deep-seated sense of honour, integrity and commitment to the work to which he is called. He is driven by a strong desire to bring about justice for the victims of some terrible crimes that he has to investigate. He works long hours, and he often seems obsessed.

In the early novels, Alan has a good marriage to Sandra, and two children growing up at home. Slowly his family drifts apart. Suddenly Sandra leaves him, and his marriage is over. But we, the readers, know that this has all been building up for years. We have seen Banks under pressure, away from home, when he 'loses it' and resorts to getting drunk and losing his temper, and becomes open to sexual temptation. His story is the story of many Christian leaders. The truth is that this can happen to any of us, especially if we are living in denial about our own impulses and behaviour patterns.

I have found that facing up to the realities of what is often called 'the false self' and its desires for control, security and esteem has been highly significant for me. I now understand much better where some of my problematic habits and patterns of behaviour are coming from. The false self is the part of who I am that is all about 'me'. This is part of my sinful human nature, the side of my character that is first of all concerned about my interests, my safety and my position in the world. I am slowly learning to look at my 'false self' with compassion, knowing that it no longer needs to be constantly running the show.

The desire of my heart is that I might find my true self and learn to live in the present moment. This is not primarily about seeking control, security and significance. Rather, this means growing into a way of life where being comes before doing. This way of living can gradually lead to contentment with what I have, to compassion for myself and to control over my appetites. I lose the restless need for self-gratification and indulgence, the need to acquire more stuff and to prove myself to those who are 'out there'. The true self finds peace

in resting in the love of God, in the peace that Jesus promises. Jesus says to each of us in ministry, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide [rest, dwell] in my love' (John 15:9).

As our culture moves deeper into the 21st century, we find ourselves facing unique challenges. Everywhere around us the world is moving faster. The pressure of constantly responding to an endless flow of information is hard for many of us to handle. We are a distracted and troubled generation, despite all the advances of technology. Jesus calls his followers, especially his ministers, to live as those who are pure in heart, whose hearts are held firm and secure in his peace. 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid' (John 14:27).

This is the way of the heart, the contemplative response. In my book *The Contemplative Minister*, I wrote:

> So what is a contemplative? A contemplative person is someone who has learnt to let go, in particular of the desire to be in control and the fear of failing, and who has learnt to listen, to be attentive and to yield to the will of God whatever that may be. Contemplation is an intimacy with God, a wordless resting in God beyond all our thoughts and words and strivings. To be a contemplative people and a contemplative church we must pause from our activity and busyness, to reground our hearts in God, without whom we are nothing.[1]

In this book I have tried to explore a contemplative response to life in the world of the 21st century. What does it mean to be a Christian minister or leader in a world of ceaseless busyness, endless demands and seductive consumerism? What should be the response of any Christian, any follower of Jesus, who seeks to be faithful to Jesus Christ while at the same time being continually faced with the temptations to achieve and do more, to acquire and buy stuff, and to indulge our every appetite? This book will try to point to a way of

living in our complex and distracted culture while remaining faithful to Christ, and abiding in his love and care and mercy.

In this book we will look at the demands placed upon our hearts and allegiances in contemporary culture. We will see how easily we can be pulled from safety and into danger by the currents of the ocean in which we swim. We may find ourselves in deep water, desperate to know the real God who alone can save us. To become our true or real selves, we need to find the real God. But there are many false gods and subtle forms of idolatry surrounding us.

To find the real God, the one whose name is Love, we need to recognise the inner compulsions of the false self. The false self places 'me', instead of God, at the centre of everything. I have found that this manifests itself in my desires to acquire, to achieve and to indulge. The remedies for these compulsions are not easy, but they are biblical, and I believe that they are essential for any Christian who is serious about faithfulness to the teaching of Jesus in our culture and society. These remedies are contentment, detachment and self-control.

Finally, we will look at the nature of the contemplative heart. We will see a heart that is attuned and attentive to the presence of God through daily contemplative practice. This is a heart that wrestles with denial and illusion, and reaches out for truthfulness and self-knowledge. We learn to live in the present moment, not being pulled constantly to what has happened in the past or to what we are going to do about the future. We see that contemplation and action are inescapably bound together. 'The closer you get to God, the more you have God's compassionate heart,' says Sister Diana OPB.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, 'I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are rooted and grounded in love' (Ephesians 3:16–17). My hope and prayer is that this book may

help some of us to respond to the demands and the pressures that surround us with pure hearts, hearts that are held firm in the love of God that is Christ Jesus. This is *The Contemplative Response*.

Part One

Choose this day whom you will serve

1

The restless heart

It had been one of those weeks. The diary was already full before the problem with one of our senior leaders. I had to be in London all day on Tuesday, and on Thursday I had promised to go with my wife to visit her father, following her mother's recent death from cancer. There was a series of meetings, all of which I needed to attend. I had a big wedding on Saturday and two major talks to prepare, and I had a nagging health problem that just wouldn't go away.

I arrived home just after six in the evening. I felt tired and stressed, and I knew I still had a couple of hours' work waiting for me in the study. My wife had been out all day teaching. The next thing I knew, a few sharp words had been spoken, and I lost it. I grabbed my mobile phone and threw it across the kitchen as hard as I could. It bounced off the kitchen wall and with a loud crack smashed into three or four pieces on the floor. One classic Nokia phone had reached the end of its life. My wife and I stood looking at one another for a few moments, and then I strode out of the house and climbed into the car and drove away.

I didn't have any idea where I was going. I just had to get out of there, get away from all the pressure, away from all the places where I was required to be strong, to be friendly, to be wise, to be kind and to be in control. I drove out into open green countryside nearby and found a place to stop. I walked for about half an hour, then sat quietly in the car.

Finally feeling more settled, I went home. I said to my wife, 'I'm really sorry. It all just gets too much sometimes.' She looked at me for a while and a sad smile flickered in her eyes. We spent a short time

talking, dealing with what had happened. Then we settled down to supper and a quiet evening together. The work could wait for another day.

But I knew that what had happened was not good. I could say, 'I'm sorry', but the mobile phone was still smashed into pieces, and I had done it. I knew something was out of kilter here.

Here I was, a busy, energetic and apparently confident Christian leader, involved in a range of responsibilities and roles, with a good and loving home and family. I could tick most of the boxes of what I thought a man of my age might want to have achieved in life. I had, I believed, a solid, well-grounded Christian faith. In my view, I was managing to live my life reasonably well, according to the values and teachings of my faith. But when I stopped to think, as I did that night by the side of a quiet country lane in rural Cambridgeshire, then I knew that something was not right. I knew within myself a deep restlessness that my faith had never been able to address. I longed for rest and relief from the endless struggle to stay on top of everything. Sometimes, when I withdrew from my busy life for a brief while, I seemed to find some measure of peace and rest. But soon I was again back on the treadmill, back to rushing around, keeping on keeping on, making things happen and 'living life to the full'. I knew that somehow this was not enough. In fact, this way of life was itself the problem.

* * * * *

I love to travel. I have travelled in many parts of the world, in Africa, Europe and North America. Sometimes I would go to France or South Africa on holiday with the family, but I also liked to plan trips on my own, at times to wild and unexplored places. My wife would mostly tolerate my absences, and look after the family while I was away. It seemed to me that I needed the adventure of going to some place on the map 'just because it was there' and because I wanted to see what the place looked like. Once I travelled by train all the way to the

northernmost station in Scotland, Thurso, just to enjoy the journey and then come back. I love the feeling of waking up in a hotel in a strange town or city, quietly enjoying the local breakfast, the smell of the coffee and the taste of the food. Then I will head out to watch, gaze and explore.

When I left South Africa and came to live in England, many new opportunities for travel opened up for me. I found that newspapers and magazines constantly offered advice and deals on exciting and interesting journeys and places to visit. There was a world of unlimited opportunity beckoning me. The only question was, 'How much can I fit into my busy life?'

I was particularly drawn to train journeys in Africa, Europe and North America. When I was growing up in South Africa, long, slow train journeys were a part of my life. Now I could spread my wings across the globe. One time, I booked tickets to fly to San Francisco and then take the train 2,000 miles to Chicago, where I would spend a couple of nights before continuing by train north to the Canadian border across North Dakota and Montana, then back to San Francisco. When we reached the Rocky Mountains, I planned to break my train journey in Whitefish, Montana, and drive up to Calgary in Canada to visit an old friend. This all went to plan, except that I had not realised how cold it can be high up in the Rocky Mountains in the middle of March. I found myself sitting alone in a rental car waiting to cross the Crowsnest pass from Fernie in British Columbia to Alberta in temperatures of minus 40°C. I was told that the pass had been closed because it was too dangerous.

I was about to book a room in a truck-stop motel near Fernie when I heard someone say, 'There is a convoy going through in half an hour. They say we can join the convoy if we are willing to take the risk.' I wanted to get to Calgary that night, so I didn't hesitate. As the convoy made its way slowly across the top of the mountain pass, with horizontal snow blowing across the road, I knew that I was on the edge, that things could very quickly go badly wrong here, but

I was also exhilarated. Okay, this was risky, but somehow this was being alive. This unforgettable experience was for me what living was all about.

But one year later, I discovered the downside of travel. I had planned to take my family back to South Africa for a holiday and time with family and friends. We would fly to Johannesburg and then drive to Kruger National Park for a week in the game reserve before continuing on to my family in KwaZulu-Natal. Everything was booked and paid for. Three days before we were due to travel, I became aware of a problem with my left eye. I went to see an optician, who sent me straight to the outpatients' clinic at the local hospital. An eye doctor examined my eyes and told me I could go ahead with my trip but that I should see a doctor again as soon as I returned to England. A week later, I woke up in a remote camp on the Mozambique border. A curtain of fluid seemed to have descended across my left eye. We managed to find a doctor in the game reserve, who said that I must go straight to the nearest eye clinic, in Nelspruit, just outside Kruger Park.

The doctor at the eye clinic took a quick look at my eye. 'You have a detached retina,' he said. 'You must have this operation today or you will lose the eye. Can you get to Johannesburg this afternoon?' Johannesburg was a three- or four-hour drive away. I looked at my family. My son John said, 'I'll drive, Dad. We can do it.'

The doctor phoned the Johannesburg Eye Hospital and made an appointment for me for emergency surgery later that afternoon. In the bright midday sun, we walked out into the clinic car park with some drinks and packets of sandwiches. John drove us without stopping four hours across the South African interior to Johannesburg, where a highly skilled surgeon was able to save my eye.

However, the nature of the surgery meant that it would be some months before I could see normally again, let alone drive a car or visit a game reserve. But we still had three weeks in South Africa.

I became a passenger, coping as best as I could behind my eye patch and my bewilderment. All I wanted was for us to go home, just to be safely back home where I could rest and recover.

It took some months and a further operation before I could obtain a new pair of glasses and was able to drive and read comfortably again. A detached retina is a serious medical emergency, as I now understand all too well. I guess I had hoped that things like this would not happen to me, and if they did, I would just deal with it. But life is not that simple.

Since this happened, my attitude to travel has begun to change. I read a quote from Malcolm Muggeridge, saying,

> When I look back on my life nowadays, which I sometimes do, what strikes me most forcibly about it is that what seemed at that time most significant and seductive, seems now most futile and absurd. For instance, success in all of its various guises; being known and being praised; ostensible pleasures, like acquiring money or seducing women, or travelling, going to and fro in the world and up and down in it like Satan, explaining and experiencing whatever Vanity Fair has to offer. In retrospect, all these exercises in self-gratification seem pure fantasy, what Pascal called, 'licking the earth'.[2]

I began to ask myself, 'Why do I want to visit all these places? Have I not seen enough of the world by now?' Never mind the weariness, the cost, the environmental footprint. For me, airports are not what they used to be. They used to be places of excitement with a sense of the privilege of air travel. Now they just seem to be long queues of people, endless shopping arcades, and more discomfort and waiting around. Maybe it is true that travel is a young person's game, but part of me does not want to get old. In my generation, we are told that 60 is the new 40 and 70 is the new 50. Or is it? What is going on here?

As I asked these questions, and others, I became aware that this was all tied up with the inner restlessness and driven activism that had been at the centre of my life for so long. These were questions that went deep into the heart of my own sense of identity, my sense of who I am and who I want to be seen to be. I was increasingly uncomfortable with the forces that were driving me. I knew that what I longed for was some greater measure of inner peace and contentment. But this is an elusive state of being about which most of us in contemporary western society can only dream.

In 2008 I was appointed to a new job, developing and running programmes and events in vocation and spirituality across a large area of southern England. I worked with two other Anglican clergy, Darrell Weyman and Sue Langdon, to set up some events for those in leadership and ministry, to be called 'The Contemplative Minister'. Darrell Weyman had read a great deal of the writing of Thomas Merton, the Trappist contemplative and writer. Darrell produced some notes to be handed out on the first Contemplative Minister day. On the front page, I read this quote from Thomas Merton:

> All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honour, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.[3]

As I read this, I could see that Merton had found a key to the inner struggle that I was experiencing. For Merton, a life devoted to what he calls the 'false self' is a life of sin. I needed to face up to the ways in which my own egocentric desires were running my life. I could see

my own patterns of behaviour: the compulsions to keep acquiring more stuff and to be constantly achieving goals and completing tasks, and the need to indulge my appetites, particularly whenever I had nothing else with which to occupy myself. For me, the authority and power of the false self had never been seriously and consistently challenged. If I was ever to become my true self, and be true to my own heart, this had to change. This was not likely to be easy.