



the art of peace

life lessons from Christian mystics

David Cole
(Brother Cassian)



The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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‘For the character of the soul is not inappropriately compared to a very light feather or plume. If it has not been harmed or spoiled by some [thing] coming from outside, thanks to its inherent lightness, it is naturally borne to the heavenly heights by the slightest breath.’

John Cassian¹

‘I [am] a feather on the breath of God.’

Hildegard of Bingen²





Introduction

For almost two decades I have been engaging in a daily practice of meditation and contemplation. Over those years I have also read much and studied the Christian contemplative and mystic tradition to master's degree level, and I have found that all the greatest teachings of this tradition in the Christian heritage can be summed up in the four sections you will find in this book: Stillness, Silence, Solitude and Sanctuary. These form an internal as well as external perspective.

Although my study has been a great help in gaining knowledge and inspiration about this incredibly rich tradition that I find myself in, it is the practical application on a daily basis which has really deepened my understanding and conscious awareness of what I am going to share with you. What you will read comes a little from books and head knowledge, but mostly, as all the best spiritual teachings do, from lived experience in a continually transforming life. Therefore some of what I will share has no source material other than my own experience through engagement in stillness, silence, solitude and sanctuary. I will do my best to share my experiences with you, but some things just cannot be explained by words, concepts or illustrations; one simply has to engage with this practice to experience them. In the end, the whole of the contemplative and mystic tradition is an experiential aspect to faith and spirituality. So, although I obviously encourage you to read the thoughts I share here in this book, which is a tiny drop in the vast ocean of material on this topic, I would encourage you more to get into the practice of regular (I suggest daily) contemplative

mystic Christianity, as has been practised by many within our spiritual tradition over the centuries.

About 'tradition'

In a talk given in the 1980s, Professor Pelikan (a name which I always feel would beautifully suit a character in a children's television programme) differentiated between 'tradition' and 'traditionalism'. 'Tradition,' he said, 'is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.'³ That is, the rich heritage of the past can give life to those who are living out their faith today, tradition being the rich well of wisdom and knowledge that they can draw from. Traditionalism, though, is the 'it's always been done this way, so we will always do it this way' mentality that keeps things going even though they are now having a detrimental effect on those trying to live out their faith today. Pelikan went on to say, 'I suppose I should add that it is traditionalism which gives tradition a bad name. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide.'⁴ That is what I endeavour to do in this book – to live in conversation with the past, with some people who have been a great influence both on the Christian faith as a whole and on me personally and my life journey, with the intention of giving you, the reader, the ability, knowledge and perhaps even some wisdom to decide how to live in a deeper, more experiential way with the Divine.

As we journey through this book together, I will be sharing with you some things from my own lived experience and learnings, while weaving in the thoughts and wisdom of the contemplatives and mystics from throughout Christian heritage.

To find out a little more about the people I will speak of, I suggest you read my friend Carl McColman's book *Christian Mystics: 108 seers, saints, and sages*.⁵ The book you hold in your hand will hopefully draw you into a place of understanding how to live a life centred on, and flowing with, the peace of God which 'transcends all understanding', as the apostle Paul puts it (Philippians 4:7), and show in practical ways how you can both *attain* and *maintain* this in the midst of the busyness of everyday life.

About 'the Divine'

You may notice that throughout this book and, in fact, in my everyday life and other writings, I refer to God more often than not as 'the Divine' rather than any other traditional term for the Christian God. There is good reason for this: words are very powerful things. The ancient druids of Britain and Ireland believed that words were so powerful that it was sacrilege to write down anything spiritual or holy, as the 'trapping' of the words on to parchment reduced their power; therefore theirs was an oral tradition. It is no coincidence that the word we use for collecting letters together to create a word and the word used for collecting words together to create 'magic' are the same word from the same root – the word 'spell', from the Proto-Germanic root *spellam*, meaning to tell or speak powerfully. The following is from an article on unity which I wrote in 2019 for the quarterly magazine of the Celtic New Monastic community that I am a vowed member of – the Community of Aidan and Hilda:⁶

Words can be extremely divisive, they can easily exclude. Anybody who spends any time on social media will have seen, and perhaps even have experienced, the divisive power of words. But it isn't just harsh or nasty words or statements which can

cause division; people can feel excluded if words are either colloquial or jargon as well. This is true with both local dialect (which I discovered as a southerner when living in different parts of Yorkshire for a decade or so) and also that which is found within groups, including the church. Church language and jargon can be extremely exclusive. One of the reasons for this is because folk who are new to church have just never come across these words and phrases before, but another reason can also be because some people *have* been in churches, perhaps for years, and may have developed a lot of negative emotional baggage relating to certain church or religious words and language, and so the words themselves can cause a barrier for the person.

Anyone who has either read one of my books or heard me speak at or lead a retreat will probably have noticed that when I refer to the Christian deity, I tend to steer away from the word ‘God’.

One of the people, or sets of people, who did notice were the editors at The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF), who have published my last four books. Following the publication of *Celtic Advent* in 2018, I was asked to write 14 reflections on Celtic Advent for the September–December 2020 issue of *New Daylight*, one of BRF’s Bible reading notes series. One of the things BRF asked was for me to explain why I steer away from the word ‘God’. Here is what I wrote. I hope it helps with our understanding of unitive language:

Celtic Christianity is influencing a lot of people in the modern church, and one of the reasons for this might be that they discern something a little different from the traditional way of seeing things. This, for many, is bringing a refreshment to their spiritual lives.

You will notice that throughout my reflections I often use

the term 'Divine' rather than 'God'. This is not something one particularly finds in Celtic Christianity; rather it is from my own journey. I find that the word 'God' often has a lot of baggage for many [myself included], and that people are far too easily misled to the idea of a masculine deity when the word 'God' is used. So I more often use the term 'the Divine' when referring to the Christian deity – the whole Trinity, as the more traditional word 'God' generally means. This is why I also use a capital 'D' rather than a lower-case one, in the same way that people would write 'God' rather than 'god' when referring to the Christian deity. I have found that this is much more inclusive to folk who have struggled with the church 'God' or who have a different spiritual perspective or belief altogether.

In the same way, my prayers, rather than beginning with 'Father God' or 'Dear Lord', might begin in a more open way, similar to the manner used by Nan Merrill in her book *Psalms for Praying* (Continuum, 2007). I hope that by my slightly different semantics you find something 'more' in these devotions.

Great Divine, open my heart and mind...

About this book

Each chapter of this book will look at an aspect of the Christian contemplative or mystic tradition. With the aid of this book, the reader will be able to transition from being someone interested in, or simply practising, contemplation to *being* a contemplative. This is something which I have begun to understand is ontological rather than a verb, something where one's whole being, whole life, is, as the 20th-century Trappist monk Thomas Merton put it, 'a prolonged immersion in the rivers of tranquillity that flow from God into the whole universe and draw all things back into God'.⁷

In chapter 1 – **Slowing down** – I will be looking at the busy world we live in and giving practical ways in which we can slow down and gain a better pace of life and a balance in all we do. These will include physically slowing down, mentally slowing down and the practices of retreat and pilgrimage. This chapter will also look at the use of labyrinths.

In chapter 2 – **Be still and know** – I will be looking at the words from Psalm 46:10 and expanding on what they mean for us – what it would mean to live a life immersed in the constant cognitive awareness and total trust that God is God and ‘all will be well, all things will be well, and all manner of things will be well’, as Mother Julian of Norwich said.⁸

In chapter 3 – **Still here** – I will be looking at the growing interest in mindfulness and living in the constant awareness of the Divine presence at all times; being fully present in the moment and what that means from a specifically Christian perspective. This chapter will also look at the practice of Centring Prayer.

In chapter 4 – **In pursuit of silence** – I will be looking at the idea of finding silence, what silence actually is and how we cope with the noise level in the world in which we live. The title of this chapter is taken from a documentary film and will include references to it.⁹

In chapter 5 – **Into the silent land** – I will be looking at how to gain a sense of silence internally; how to still and quiet the internal conversation and dialogue which goes on constantly within ourselves. We will take some of what we learned from the previous chapter and implement it to our internal world. The title and inspiration for the material in this chapter comes from the book of the same name by Martin Laird.¹⁰

In chapter 6 – **The wordless way** – I will be looking at apophatic theology and the unknowing of God. We will consider prayer without words and an understanding of God without concepts.

In chapter 7 – **Go to your cell** – I will be looking at one of the specific teachings in desert monasticism and traditional monasticism, that is, to go and spend time in silence in your monastic cell or room, and in the silence discovering all that you need to know. In this chapter we will look at the concepts of both solitude and silence and at the instruction of Christ to his disciples on prayer in the sermon on the mount to go to a solitary place and use few words (Matthew 6:6–7).

In chapter 8 – **The desert of your heart** – following on from the previous chapter, I will be looking specifically at the Desert Fathers and Mothers and how we can implement their teaching and practices into our own inner lives.

In chapter 9 – **Alone together** – I will be looking at the contemplative life from a monastic perspective, focusing mostly on New Monasticism. We will look at the difference that collective silence and practising this life together with others can make.

In chapter 10 – **Seeking refuge** – I will look at the concept of seeking refuge in the Divine presence in our inner selves. We will look at verses such as Psalm 46:1, and what they can mean in our pursuit to gain and maintain the stillness and silence we have looked at so far, particularly when we feel we are in times of desolation in our contemplative practice.

In chapter 11 – **Natural space** – I will be looking at the connection to nature in the Christian tradition and the concept of quantum consciousness. We will explore engaging with the natural world in a more spiritual way.

In chapter 12 – **Contemplata aliis tradere** – I will be looking at how contemplative practice and the contemplative life can affect the world in which we are each individually called to live. *Contemplata aliis tradere* is a Latin phrase which means to pass on to others what we have gained in contemplation, and it is one of the central tenets of the Dominican Order. This chapter will look at how we can live our lives as contemplatives in an ontological context and how we can practise contemplative outreach and engage in contemplative mission simply by ‘being’.

I hope that this little addition of mine to the vast ocean of wisdom on this subject will help draw you closer to, and live more deeply in, the Divine presence within you, surrounding you, saturating you and flowing through the whole universe.



Notes

- 1 Boniface Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences (Ancient Christian Writers Series No. 57)* (Newman Press, 1997), p. 331.
- 2 Found in a letter from Hildgard to Odo of Soissons, in 1148 (known as Letter 40R). This comes from the fuller quote: ‘Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honour. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. So am I “a feather on the breath of God”’.
- 3 Jaroslav Jan Pelikan Jr., *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson lecture in the humanities* (Yale University Press, 1986).
- 4 Joseph Carey, ‘Christianity as an enfolding circle: conversation with Jaroslav Pelikan’, *US News and World Report*, 26 June 1989, p. 57.

- 5 Carl McColman, *Christian Mystics: 108 seers, saints, and sages* (Hampton Road Press, 2016).
- 6 aidanandhilda.org.uk
- 7 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Shambala Publications, 2003), p. 270.
- 8 From her thirteenth Revelation of Divine Love.
- 9 pursuitofsilence.com
- 10 Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: The practice of contemplation* (DLT, 2006).



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Deep inner peace and peace of mind with spiritual balance is something everyone wants, but how does one attain it? More importantly, how does one maintain it in the midst of everyday life?

Moving through sections on *Stillness, Silence, Solitude and Sanctuary*, this book draws on the lived experience and learning of the author, as well as the wisdom of Christian contemplatives and mystics from the past, to help people walk the mystic path of peace through life.



Award-winning author **David Cole** is an international spiritual teacher and retreat leader and the Deputy Guardian for the Community of Aidan and Hilda, in which he is known as Brother Cassian. He is the founder and executive director of Waymark Ministries CIC, which creates opportunities for people to engage with the Christian message. His books include *Celtic Advent* and *Celtic Lent* (BRF, 2018), *Celtic Saints* and *The Celtic Year* (BRF, 2020).

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