

Book Reviews

The Missing Peace. Meditation as a Spiritual Path to Peace, Community and Oneness

Chris Whittington

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This book was launched, with great fanfare, in November last year; and it comes with a remarkable suite of endorsements from distinguished figures in the world of Christian spirituality, including the Augustinian monk Martin Laird, who has himself written extensively on contemplative prayer, Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe OP, and the Anglican Bishop of Gloucester, the Rt Rev. Rachel Treweek. And behind the book is The School of Contemplative Life, founded by the author, and serving the largest online meditation community in the UK.

Chris Whittington, by his own account, stumbled into the contemplative 'Wisdom Tradition' in Christianity when he encountered a book by Bede Griffiths, the Benedictine monk who founded a Christian ashram in India. The discovery led Whittington to the Benedictines of Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, and eventually he went to live and study with them for many years. From thence he pursued his study of meditation at the Dalai Lama's monastery in Dharamsala.

From an early exploration of Christian meditation practice online during the COVID pandemic, *The School of Contemplative Life* emerged, and now embraces an extensive community through its twice-weekly online meditation sessions and its in-person retreats – at Prinknash, Launde Abbey, Ripon College Cuddesdon, and elsewhere.

The online meditation sessions begin with a few minutes' reflection from Whittington on one aspect or another of the practice, and the texts gathered in his book are drawn from these dharma-talks, as they might be called.

The book is not designed to be read cover to cover: each chapter is only two or three pages long, and is intended to guide the reader towards what Martin Laird has called 'the depth-dimension of Christianity'. All the same, the material is presented in four parts: after a brief introduction setting out the project of recovering a 'practice of meditation, of silent prayer' for a church that has mostly forgotten it, the first section 'God is our Being' expounds the non-dual understanding 'that God is not something separate from us, but more intimately present than we can imagine' (p.3). This gently accessible thought is framed in the tradition of Christian mystical writing from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, via Clement, St Augustine and Thomas Merton. Next Archbishop Rowan Williams is cited to remind us that Christ himself practiced solitary prayer, so that contemplative practice follows his model and his teaching that 'the Kingdom of God is within you'. Whittington quotes the New American Bible for these words, though its revised version, approved by the Holy See, like the NRSV, relegates 'within' as against 'among you' to the margin; and the Revised New Jerusalem Bible notes that this reading, 'in the sense of an interior disposition, would have no parallel in the NT, where the Kingdom is always corporate [...]'. This glossing over of distinctions will have consequences for the overall tone of Whittington's teachings in the remainder of the book.

The second part outlines a method of meditative practice involving a mantra-like 'prayer word' that is combined with the flow of the breath. Once again, Thomas Merton's *Journal* is cited: 'My God, I pray to you better by breathing, I pray to you better by walking than by talking'. This is towards the end of January, 1948, and Merton is actually thinking about the connection between the sung liturgy and his own interior disposition. Although Chris Whittington acknowledges that prayer takes many forms and that, at different times, we all pray differently, there is no liturgical context when he sets out the basics of posture, breath, the repetition of a prayer-word, and the recognition that distractions and thoughts are opportunities to return to pure awareness. 'All we need to do is begin, and keep beginning...' (p.25)

It is a highlight of Chris Whittington's determination to recover the great tradition of Christian meditation that he quotes so widely from the great mystical writers of the past, and at considerable length, if need be. For anyone who does not know the *Book of Privy Counselling*, the wonderful passage in which the anonymous author writes simply that 'God is your being, and you are what you are in him' is displayed with all its vigour and insight (p.31). And so it is with St John of the Cross, with

the *Philokalia*, with St Theresa and Julian of Norwich, Eckhart and many others. All are cited to promote a form of meditation that concentrates attention by means of the breath and the repetition of a mantra. This method seems closest to John Main's practice of Christian Meditation rather than the 'naked intent directed to God' of *The Cloud of Unknowing* which is the foundation of the Centering Prayer taught by Fr Thomas Keating - although Whittington quotes the very same phrase from *The Cloud* (p.61). Our way into this practice and its understanding of the human condition is eased by a series of anecdotes from the experience of members of *The School of Contemplative Life*. Meditation, we learn, has proved to be a remedy for various states of anxiety; and this therapeutic dimension is part of the picture of meditative practice that threads its way through Whittington's reflections. To learn that a meditator 'quickly came to see that she was creating mental suffering for herself' (p. 51) or that the greater openness discovered in meditation 'lessens our suffering as we navigate [life's] flow' (p.84) is a testimony to the closeness of Buddhist meditation to what is presented here too.

The last two parts of the book turn to the 'peace' referred to in the punning title. If our interior peace is restored by contemplative prayer, we can become centres of a peace that can be mystically communicated to the world. 'The possibility of a more just and loving world,' Whittington writes, 'is [...] a reality to be seen, touched and made visible in our relationships' (p.91). When Merton puts in a final appearance in the book (p. 80), it is in his exposition (from *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*) of the *point vierge* 'at the centre of our being [...] a point or spark which belongs entirely to God', which in turn yields a transfigured vision of humanity, ablaze with the light of heaven. From 1961 onwards that Fourth and Walnut vision prompted Merton's turn to nonviolent activism in the fields of Race, Anti-Semitism, Poverty, and War. This is a readable and thoughtful introduction to the prayer of silence. Now that Chris Whittington has shown a path to *The Missing Peace*, perhaps he or someone else will provide the guidance needed on contemplative prayer and the missing *justice*.

Tony Phelan (MA and PhD, Jesus College, Cambridge) taught German Language and literature at the Universities of Warwick and Oxford, where he is emeritus fellow of Keble College. He was introduced to Thomas Merton many years ago as a new member of the Iona Community for which he now acts as Moderator of the Common Concern Network on Faith and Spirituality. He is a novice in the field of contemplative prayer.