

Contemplative Prayer Life and Belonging in Church.

by

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Introduction

Contemplative prayer has been described in various ways. Although it is often difficult to articulate exactly the deep experiences of the heart, the following can be helpful descriptions: prayer that moves beyond words, an activity of the heart rather than of the mind, one that focuses on being rather than doing and an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of noise and activity.¹ A contemplative life style is one lived in harmony with these principles. Some people who are drawn along these paths articulate a feeling of discomfort or lack of fit as they continue to live out their Christian lives within the context of their local churches.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*² touches on the lack of understanding shown to those who engage in a meditative relationship with God. Thomas Green³ puts it like this “*those who float in the sea of God will ...find it difficult to share with those on the shore for whom the sea is unreal*”. Barbara Fiand⁴ talks about the organization of the church having traditions that are seen as normative and often revered. In her words “*Variations are regarded with suspicion and ...alterations in behaviour and outlook...rarely accepted*”. In our own country, Alan Jamieson^{5, 6} has explored the experiences of folk whose solution to dilemmas of faith is to withdraw from church membership.

Fowler’s developmental theory of the stages of faith provides some framework for the context of these experiences.^{7,8,9} However, despite much anecdotal information, it is difficult to find material that relates specifically to the effect of the contemplative life on one’s relationship with the institutional church. This project attempted to explore the ways in which this phenomenon is experienced and how people either resolve or deal with it, by collection and examination of qualitative data about the issue. Some conclusions are drawn and implications for the practice of spiritual direction are discussed.

Method

Taped interviews were conducted with five women who were asked questions about the impact of the contemplative journey upon various aspects of their church lives and how they had responded to these changes (see Appendix 1). These women ranged in age from mid-30’s to 60+ and the following denominations were represented: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Pentecostal/Charismatic. Two are spiritual directors who have traveled the path for a number of years and two were by their own admission relatively new to contemplative prayer.

¹ Contemplative Prayer Oasis publication No 6.

² *The Cloud of Unknowing*, H. Backhouse (Ed.) Hodder & Stoughton: London (1985) (p44).

³ Green, Thomas H, SJ. *Darkness in the Marketplace*, Ave Maria: Indiana (1981) (p94).

⁴ Fiand, Barbara. *In the Stillness You Will Know*, Crossroads: New York. (2002)

⁵ Jamieson, Alan, *A Churchless Faith*, Garside: Wellington (2000).

⁶ Jamieson, Alan, *Called Again – in and beyond the deserts of faith*, Garside: Wellington (2004)

⁷ Fowler, James, W. *Becoming Adult, becoming Christian*. Harper & Row: San Francisco (1984).

⁸ Fowler, James, W. *Stages of Faith*. Harper: San Francisco (1995)

⁹ Pritchard, Andrew. “Fowler, Faith and Fallout” in *Reality* Issue 33.

Prayer life is always individual and unique and therefore each of those interviewed had their own experience. I am profoundly grateful to each woman who took part for the willingness to share her own deeply personal story. What follows is an attempt to understand what this facet of the journey has been like for them and where they are apparent to draw out common themes and ways of responding to the experiences. In many cases it has seemed more authentic to quote verbatim from the tape transcriptions than to paraphrase what was said.

Results

The personal nature of the contemplative walk means that those engaged on it are not readily seen in local church congregations that worship in a more overt style. When asked about their attitude to local church, most respondents spoke of a sense of isolation as they took the first steps along the contemplative path, wondering if *“there was anyone else”* who was drawn in this direction. For some this was coupled with questions about whether it was even a valid form of prayer. People spoke of the *“sense of marginalization”*, having moved on from the place of the rest of the congregation and feelings of discomfort with some expressions of faith and worship. Two respondents, who incidentally attend the same church, spoke of changes within their fellowship that allowed more freedom for various styles of relating to God. For them the opportunity to become involved in contemplative group experiences gave *“new freedom, new awareness of acceptance of a variety of personal prayer styles within the church”*.

The individual responses to these changes of attitude were wide ranging and sometimes involved painful choices. One engaged on a solitary path of reading widely in an attempt to *“make sense of my faith”*. She said *“at times I’ve distanced myself from the organization...”* Others spoke of being selective about which services and activities to become involved with, choosing only the areas that ‘felt’ right. One in leadership took the initiative to institute quiet days and retreat events thus forming a small group of supportive people. Another spoke of finding it too hard to relate to ‘church’ where people are in a ‘different place’ and has stopped trying - *“it’s been a huge journey for me to come to the realization that it is OK for them to be where they are and for me to be here.”* Two have changed denomination in the search to find a place where *“it is easier to contemplate,”* *“where I can function as a Christian.”*

When asked about any changes in relationship with the local church, the responses were again very varied. For some there it appeared that as they became more comfortable with themselves and their own spirituality there was greater freedom to appreciate individual differences in styles of prayer. If this was accompanied by variety in the styles of worship offered by the church the relationship was seen to have been strengthened. For others it was a different story. *“It’s been underlined that one doesn’t necessarily fit into every church...the journey into silence has had a big effect on the way I’ve seen the church.”* And the following *“I don’t belong, this was not my home any more.....it happened very quickly I was left in this turmoil not knowing where I was in relation to the church. [this resulted in] a slow process of going/not going, going/not going. The church is [now] like a beloved aged parent to me. I will*

always be the denomination I am. It has profound riches for me, but I have a bigger life that the church can give me. This has occurred through my relationship with God and not with the church.”

The question about participation in worship produced many responses indicating discomfort and a lack of fit between the respondents and their faith communities. For most, there was a feeling of being uninvolved, choosing not to participate in an activity that was becoming less relevant to their own experiences of God..... *“I tended to withdraw myself...though now I’ve come to a stage where I’m more accepting of differences.”.....”worship has changed from an outer experience to an inner one. When I attend, it’s very familiar, but it’s like there’s more and I’m not getting the more....it can’t and doesn’t fit for me.”....”There were often times when I sat with my eyes closed and just allowed it [the noisy singing and music] to wash over me.”.....”I just felt like I was standing on the outside, watching a whole lot of people doing a whole lot of stuff that just meant less and less to me....it was like everyone else was doing this thing.”* But for one person who worships in a church that offers the opportunity for a time of reflection during the service there was sense of being able to enter into a reflective state which was appreciated and valued.

When asked about participation and interaction with leadership, two younger women denied any involvement in that area of church life. The two who had been traveling the contemplative path for the longest who talked most of difficulty in this area although one conceded that this had as much to do with her personality as with the contemplative journey. There was talk of loving and respecting leadership but being unable to agree with ‘everything’. Another felt she had become more tolerant of herself and more comfortable with a leadership role. There was some agreement that the process of personal growth allowed more tolerance of differences in opinion at this level.

Most of the respondents felt little connection with matters of church governance and decision making. One thought that her personality was the problem here and wasn’t aware of any changes resulting from her contemplative journey. One had made a conscious decision to leave this behind, acknowledging that *“I can’t change it...I tried to but I couldn’t.”* This same person told a moving story of support and encouragement from her parish priest as she worked through the changes that led to this decision.

The question about personal relationships with other church members brought a variety of responses. There were those whose friendship groups had always been with a small number like minded people. Therefore they had experienced little change in this area. Some found that identifying others in the church who were also drawn to a more reflective style of prayer had brought them some new and rewarding relationships. One spoke of *“people who were very angry with me.....there are people who will not speak to me”* because of changes that they perceived in her. She found Matthew 10:37 very helpful at this time and found that God in His grace provided other relationships for her outside of her denomination and sometimes outside

of the church, but felt that she has been called to a continual letting go in order to move on with God. However, this has been a freeing experience for her and *“I’ve been given this attitude of gratitude.”*

Responding to the question about how they had dealt with the changes we had been discussing, the two who acknowledged that they were just beginning on the contemplative path did not feel that they had been required to make any adjustments that required ‘dealing with’. Of the remainder, one spoke of the developing sense of comfort or ease with herself that allowed her to be less judgmental and more accepting of church people. One spoke of the need for personal honesty, integrity and the courage to be able to say what *“no longer fits me.....I can see why people choose not to go on this journey!!....But God is gentle and the choices were always mine.”* There was also acknowledgement of the value of personal spiritual direction, regular retreats, and the importance of living a balanced life; doing things that nourish the whole person.

When invited to make any other comments they wished to on the subject the following were offered: *“Gerald May writes about contemplation being ‘home’...that’s where I am. At home with who I am, at home with God.”* *“The world needs the church. It is the journey we take, but church is bigger than the denominations.”* *“For the first time I can say that I am at peace.”* *“Looking back, it has been an eventful journey.... this is where I’m meant to be.”* *“I feel my personal style of relating to God has been more validated....there are so many aspects to contemplation, I’ve found it refreshing to explore them.”*

Discussion

As previously stated, this inner journey is personal and unique and the experiences on the way are as varied as there are travelers. However, despite the small numbers involved in this study there are some common themes which bear further investigation.

For each of those interviewed, there was some sense that the style of prayer to which they were attracted was somehow outside the accepted ‘norms’ of Christian practice within their church.

Fowler, in his theory of faith development, describes six stages of faith^{7,8,9}. Most adults are found in stages 3, 4 and 5. The movement towards meditation on one's faith journey and contemplation are likely to signal transition between stages 3 and 4. If, as has been suggested by Fowler⁸, many adults settle in the third stage and as Jamieson⁵ observes, the culture of many churches is targeted towards those in that stage, then the transition experience will necessarily be accompanied by discomfort and the tensions described. Indeed stage 4 is said to be frequently characterized by polarization and this was certainly the experience of some of those interviewed. Without analyzing their faith development, it would be fair to say that the women in this sample were at various stages of growth and transition.

The responses received, indicated that for each, there was an impact on various aspects of their church involvement and the roles or responsibilities that they undertook. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the area of worship. It would appear that this corporate activity of connecting with God can become a minefield of discomfort, as previously satisfying practices no longer provide the connection desired. Those attending a church that offered a choice of worship styles spoke positively about that option. The appreciation of liturgical forms of worship as sometimes experienced in conjunctive (stage five) faith, was alluded to by two people while another spoke of having moved “*past that*”. Clearly worship is an integral part of church activity and is therefore an important aspect of this whole experience. Therefore the churches that can accept that as their members develop in faith and grow in their faith journey, preferred styles of worship will change and allow for diversity in the worship opportunities offered, will be the ones where the transitions of faith can be accomplished with least difficulty.

In this group, it emerged that issues related to interaction with leadership and church governance were only of relevance to the more mature. This may be a reflection on the normal rhythms of social life in our society, where younger women are more likely to be focused on the tasks of establishing a home, raising a family or consolidating career choices than involving themselves in the organization of their faith community. Those who responded to this question articulated feelings of not agreeing or feeling at odds over some issues, but also generally indicated that as they had grown these differences had assumed less importance. This may indicate that the knowing and acceptance of self and appreciation of the ‘inner authority’ that occurs as a consequence of ‘being’ with God allows freedom and a certain ability to live with tensions of this nature.

The issues of friendships within the church elicited responses that indicated it to be an area commonly affected by the movement towards contemplation. All found it important to establish and maintain relationships with others who were sympathetic to and understanding of the journey that was being traveled. The variation in answers seemed likely to have been mediated by individual temperamental preferences which will also impact on the journey itself. Those who ‘discovered’ others within their church walking the same path, spoke of being encouraged and enriched by the resulting relationships. Some who articulated painful rejection and hurtful criticism found it necessary to seek friendships and supportive relationships outside their church community.

The variety of ways in which this experience was addressed, has important implications for those engaged in the practice of spiritual direction. As the custom of spiritual direction is relatively unknown in many protestant church communities, it is something of a challenge to make it available to those who feel an inner calling to contemplation as a way of prayer and living out their Christian lives. This would indicate the desirability of more publicity about spiritual direction in these organizations. Some of the participants in this project engaged in what appears to have been a solitary adventure, relying heavily on reading widely around the

subject and attending events about personal prayer that came to their attention. Those engaged in spiritual direction articulated its value and that of personal retreats as they have made this journey.

People already involved in church leadership attempted to initiate events and groups which could be supportive for themselves and others who may be engaging on a similar pilgrimage. Clearly, churches that allow this freedom will be more accepting of those walking this path. For others the decision was painfully made to change church and/or denomination and in one case to stop attending, in an attempt to find a place where they felt that they 'fitted in' more easily. These varied responses offer insights into the kinds of issues that may be brought to direction sessions.

It is surely a great privilege for a director to be able to walk this path with a directee. Barry and Connolly¹⁰ name one of the spiritual director's tasks as helping the directee to pay attention to God as revealed in the circumstances of life. Guenther, in her analogy of the spiritual director as midwife¹¹ offers a useful model for this situation when she talks about working with the other, acknowledgement of the pain in the process and waiting alongside as the process develops and sharing in the joy of the outcome. Especially relevant here is her discussion about transitions, which are acknowledged to be powerful and often frightening experiences.

How might this be worked out in the spiritual direction relationship? Just as the midwife has knowledge that underpins her practice, it is important for the director to acknowledge and work through her own issues in relation to this matter and to become well informed by current information in this area.

The value of having of a safe place to articulate the discomforts and wrestle with issues that are experienced cannot be underestimated. Modeling an empathetic, unconditional acceptance of the struggle will be validating for a directee who senses lack of understanding and resistance from the members of her local church community. Jamieson¹², in discussion of people whose faith no longer fits their church states that listening is the most empowering gift they can be given. Reassurance that others too have walked this path and felt this discomfort can be a relief to those who are feeling isolated by the experience.

There will be a progression in the journey towards this point, but the director would be advised to make the usual checks about what else might be happening in the person's life, physical health and possible issues with God when confronted with this, particularly in a new directee's life. Encouragement to live a balanced life that makes place for the enjoyment of activities that nourish the whole person; physical exercise, creative leisure activities and adequate rest, will

¹⁰ Barry, William, A & Connolly, William, J. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. Harper: San Francisco (1986)

¹¹ Guenther, Margaret. *The Art of Spiritual Direction*. Cowley: Massachusetts (1992).

¹² Jamieson, Alan. *Finding faith for those who have moved beyond the normal church diet* (Presentation at St John's College; Auckland (October 2005)

help to keep the issue in perspective. The availability of books and other material acknowledging that others have walked this path and information about stages of faith might also help.

Issues of grief and loss were evident in the stories told by participants. Loss of friendships, of roles, responsibilities and status within the church; loss of nurture once experienced there and loss of the sense of belonging to name a few. The losses experienced will be individually unique but will require working through as part of the journey.

Encouragement to heed and follow the call of God into the contemplative experience as part of trying to make sense of the ambivalence that is felt may help to put things into a more eternal context. May¹³ discusses the way in which our insecurities can be compounded by the perception of negativity in our environment. Nowhere is this stronger than in the area of spiritual growth. It is therefore important for the spiritual director to encourage discretion in the choices about those with whom it is prudent to share details of these experiences.

Whatever the temptation, the spiritual director should avoid any negative comments or criticism of the reported behaviour of other members of the church community. This is a matter that should be dealt with in supervision. Perhaps more than anything else, those walking this part of the journey will be best encouraged by the provision of time, a safe space and permission to explore the experience, where God is leading and how he is prompting them to respond.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the limitations of this project, in particular, the small sample size and the gender bias, the ages, various denominations and variety of time spent on the journey represented offer many insights into this phenomenon. It would seem to indicate that those engaged in a contemplative walk with God, who are serious in their search to know more of Him are at times pained and troubled by the sense that they are either no longer accepted or unable to feel at home in the church community which has previously nurtured them, sometimes over many years. It should be acknowledged that personality type will also impact on the ways in which individuals will both experience and respond to the dilemma under discussion. This information was not sought in this particular study and may provide some fruitful ground for future work.

These folk should be a tremendous resource in the work and the mission of the Church and there is a need for both loving acknowledgement and acceptance of where the contemplative journey is leading and support for individuals as they follow the inner call. Karl Rahner states that, “*The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he will not be a Christian at all.*”¹⁴ If he

¹³ May, Gerald, G. *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*. Harper: San Francisco (1992)

¹⁴ Rahner, Karl. Quoted in Hall, Thelma. *Too Deep For Words – Rediscovering Lectio Divina* Paulist: New York (1988) p55.

is correct then this movement is one to which more and more Christians are likely to be drawn. Ideally the local church and its leadership would acknowledge this and provide variety in the worship options available to all its members. The opportunities for these individuals to develop relationships with other walking the same path, to engage in good spiritual direction and make private retreats will all assist in the growth towards growing in oneness with God. In the words of some of the respondents, being; *“At home with who I am, at home with God.”* *“I can say that I am at peace.”* *“.... this is where I’m meant to be.”*

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Appendix 1

Spiritual Growth Questionnaire.

1. Contemplative prayer can be variously described as: prayer that moves beyond words, an activity of the heart rather than one of the mind, one that focuses on being rather than doing, an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of noise and activity.¹

Do any of those statements resonate with you?

2. Would you describe your prayer life and attitude to spiritual growth as contemplative?

If the answer was “no”

2 (a) How would you describe your prayer life and attitude to spiritual growth?

3. Has your attitude towards your local church been affected or altered as a result of your spiritual development and prayer growth?
4. Please tell me about those changes.
5. Has your relationship with your local church been affected or altered as a result of your spiritual development and prayer growth?
6. Could you describe any changes?
7. Please outline effects of your spiritual development and prayer style on the following areas of your church life.
 - a) attitude to and involvement in worship.
 - b) participation in and interaction with leadership
 - c) church governance and decision making
 - d) personal relationships with other church members
8. How have you dealt with these changes?
9. Are there any further comments that you would like to make on this subject?

Demographic details:

Age: 20-30, 30-40, 40-50, 50-60, over 60.

Gender:

Denomination / church affiliation:

¹ *Contemplative Prayer* Oasis publication No 6.

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