

## Contemplative Spirituality De-Mystified

Despite the cold, and ‘competition’ from the Olympic telecast, the CCJWA seminar held on Tuesday 12 August at the Anglican Parish Centre in Applecross proved a vibrant event, with about 45 people in attendance. The topic under discussion was “Mystical Awakenings: Contemplative Spirituality in Judaism and Christianity”. Speakers Dr Nancy Ault (Lecturer in Practical Theology at Murdoch University) and Rabbi Moshe Bernstein (Educational Director of the Council of Orthodox Rabbis and Educators) gave an insight into contemplative practices in contemporary Christianity and Judaism. The two approaches to spirituality were presented in a harmonious tandem. As the experience of consciousness and the struggle to find a meaningful symbol of God’s immanence is shared by all humanity, not surprisingly there was as much unity as divergence. Following the two presentations, Assoc. Prof. Rowan Strong invited questions from the public, and further discussion was encouraged over coffee.

The direction of the two presentations, noted by Rev. Marie Wilson at the conclusion, could be anticipated in their respective introductions. Rabbi Bernstein turned to the nature of what exists to introduce the notion of a contemplative state which is ‘trans-rational’, while Dr Ault recited from Elliot’s *The Dry Salvages* from *Four Quartets* 3. V, “The intersection of the timeless with time, is an occupation of the Saint,” [but] “for most of us there is only the unattended moment,” to wonder about the nature of contemplation. Is contemplation, as that mystical experience of union with God “at the intersection of the timeless with time,” still perceived as the province of a dedicated elite? It is true contemplative practice in the contemporary environment seems far from its desert and monastic origins, but its roots are to be found in these early ascetical practices.

After tracing these roots, Dr Ault noted that Thomas Merton was instrumental in introducing contemplation into the popular imagination. Originally from a monastic tradition, Merton, experiencing a reconciliation between ‘contemplation’ and ‘action’, relocated contemplation *in* action. He subsequently defined contemplation as the *practice* of unity with God’s will.

Dr Ault described contemplation as “being in the presence of God, a state in which the mind is stilled.” This was in contrast to prayer, as involving conversation with God, and meditation, as reflecting upon a stimulus of a spiritual nature.

Three current contemplative practices in the contemporary Christian environment are to be found in ‘Contemplative Outreach’, the ‘World Community for Christian Meditation’, and ‘Spiritual Directors International’. Contemplative Outreach, drawn from *Lectio Divina* (praying the Scripture), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the Carmelite spirituality of Saints John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, encourages the “contemplative dimension of the Gospel in everyday active life.” As contemplation is conceived of as a relationship with God, the practice of Centering Prayer, a means for nurturing a relationship with God, is encouraged and supported. The aim of centering prayer is to be “present, open, and receptive to God.” Through a symbolic word, or the rhythm of the breath, the person is brought into the presence of God.

The World Community for Christian Meditation promotes meditation with a similar aim, involving the repetition of the Aramaic word “Maranatha” vocalised to the rhythm of breathing, but the mantra is not put aside. Both practices, in their own way, rather than fight distractions, patiently allow them to subside. Dr Ault then led those present in a short experience of Centering Prayer, concluding with Elliot’s thought in Burnt Norton, *Four Quartets* 1.II. “At the still point of the turning world... Except for the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

Recalling Einstein’s observation, “what we consider is an illusion,” Rabbi Bernstein drew our attention to the transcendent effect of meditating on the illusory nature of the physical, with respect to current subatomic theory. Science, in its contemplation of quantum physics, of the matter from which we are constituted as immaterial, as timeless energy speaks to the mystics as it speaks in the language of paradox. Science may be interpreted as the inspiration for ‘trans-rational being’, a notion which avoids the implication of childlikeness in the idea of a state of ‘pre-rational’ being. To find reality is not to go back before reason (a pre-rational fallacy), but to go through it and beyond it.

Rabbi Bernstein’s presentation on expressions of Jewish mysticism addressed some misconceptions and introduced Kabbalah, describing how traditional mystical traditions are interpreted today. It elaborated on a model of the five parts of the soul, concluding with a meditation based on this.

The orthodox Jewish mysticism of ‘Kabbalah’ (meaning ‘received’) was introduced as a tradition handed down to an elite school of rabbis, a collection of hidden wisdom which had been delved from the depth of the Torah, a level beyond the progressively deepening levels of literal, exegetic, and hermeneutic. Learning Sof was reserved for scholars who had mastered the Torah, Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash. Today’s academies for Kabbalah study still require applicants to be male, married, and over 40, thus making it the preserve of an elite.

This orthodox mysticism was translated into contemporary practices, namely, ‘Pop’ Kabbalah, Jewish Renewal in America, and the Kabbalah movement in Israel. At one extreme, there is ‘pop’ Kabbalah which has attracted many by its spirituality. Though there may be genuine positive influences, concern might be expressed over the way it is conducted, as boundaries have been blurred and its practice is exploited for commercial gain. In the middle, there is ‘Jewish Renewal’, in America, not connected with a particular denomination, which draws elements from the Kabbalah tradition, such as preserving the Sabbath, that hold meaning without relying on the in depth scholarship of a Talmudic scholar steeped in Midrash. There is also a center of Kabbalah movement in Israel, under the acronym Habakuk. This takes in the Hasidic tradition from Baal Shem Tov, who rebelled against the dry legalistic interpretation of the law and responded rather from the joy of the heart, revolving life around meditation, song and dance. It includes the Rebbe Schneerson, who inspired the chabad movement, which through meditative philosophy seeks to reconnect intuitive understanding with analytic reason. Also representing chabad is Breslov, great grandson of Baal Shem Tov, who advocated at the sound of the ‘call to prayer’ to go out into the night to pour the heart out to God. Another group is represented by Rabbi Cook who saw all as a manifestation of God.

Rabbi Bernstein reflected there was a trend in young people to refuse the mythical, wanting rather to experience the 'actual God', to be connected with what exists. Contemplation expressed as 'being in unity with the life force generated by God', responds to this desire.

Using the model of all life emanating from 'The One', the five levels of the soul may be contemplated, with the soul interpreted as which most reflects the presence of God. Five words for soul, Nefesh, Ruach, Neshama, Chaya, and Yechida, represented by inert matter, animal movement, speech activity, thought activity, and 'being' itself, symbolize the five levels. The levels correspond to the increasing presence of divine breath. 'Being', the summit, or totality, incarnates 'now-ness' which represents the presentness of life; God is always present because God is always in the 'now'. To demonstrate the application of this model, Rabbi Bernstein led those present in a meditation which was attentive to each level of soul before moving on to the next one, with the goal of approaching that "sense of being that goes beyond our thoughts," to bring us to the gateway of our redemption.

An apt conclusion was provided by Dr Ault in reply to a question about the 'ecstatic' experience. Originally the mystical life was simply understood as the mystery of God and the experience of moving in harmony with the will of God. This was an understanding to which people were returning.

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