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The Contemplative Dimension of Faith

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at the Meditatio Seminar
Common Ground: The Contemplative Dimension of Faith
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Fr Laurence Freeman defines the contemplative dimension of faith as an experience of peace and love that is present at the heart of all faiths and in the core of the human person. Faith is the innate human capacity for relationship, commitment and transcendence. The experience of God is open to all though this experience may be described differently according to one's belief system. The contemplative experience of meditation offers the potential of a 'common ground' for creating a global community of faith among people of different beliefs



The World Community for
Christian Meditation
Singapore

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So we have a responsibility to do what we can *now* to correct these tendencies and inoculate the children as it were so that they will be able to cope with these forces, these detrimental forces, as they go through the stages of development as they grow up. So I think it would be a very useful aspect of inter-faith dialogue and relationship, as we reflect upon how we can work together for the benefit of humanity, for the common good, that we can discuss with each other how we can make the religious, and spiritual formation of the children and the young people of our different faiths deeper and more centred in this contemplative dimension



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Teaching of Meditation to Children

The contemplative dimension of faith is this dimension of experience that lies at the heart of all faith and in the core of the human being. It is a way into the ultimate mystery that awaits us beyond the reach of words or concepts or even beliefs. The important thing to realise is that this ultimate mystery is a fact. ...However many names we may give to it, there is always the hundredth name which is secret, mysterious, unspeakable, too sacred to articulate. So, it is a fact, a reality.

Laurence Freeman OSB



I've spoken a little about the teaching of meditation to children. It seems to me that the sooner we can introduce meditation to the young the better. If we want to change the world, and the world needs to be changed, we need to change direction. This is the point. We are like a runaway train. It's not just that we have structures we need to change, or particular problems we have to solve; it is actually the direction we are moving in that needs to be changed. That is how radical and urgent a problem we're facing, humanity is facing.

So it seems to me that if we really want to introduce a force of change that will change the direction, we can't just rely upon our politicians and our social thinkers now in the middle of the crisis. We have to look ahead 20, 30 years, and we have to look at the minds of the people who will be in leadership at that time. Therefore we have to begin with children *now*. Not only that, but also for the sake of the children *themselves*.

We know the enormous pressures that children are under, the high level of mental illness and depression, suicide as we heard yesterday in many developed countries among the children and adolescents. Clearly the direction we're moving in is proving detrimental to childhood. We are depriving children of that wonderful experience of childhood. We are commercialising them, we're corrupting their minds, we're speeding up their minds unnaturally, and we are infecting them with our own problems

be happening in our meditation but we are changing, is simply that we are becoming more loving people. The Dalai Lama says, "My religion is kindness." And if religion doesn't make you a nicer person then you are not practising your religion properly. Angry, condemnatory, vicious or violent people who are like this in the name of their religion are denying their religion. We always encourage people to persevere with meditation. It is a discipline; it is a practice, and I will say just keep going and the fruits of meditation will appear in your life. The first of these fruits of the spirit is love. So, if after 20 years you find that you are not a more loving person we will give you your money back. Actually, we haven't charged you anyway, so you don't get anything back.

I think if we understand contemplation as this growing in the experience of love and the knowledge that is this love, it becomes easier for us to begin and to keep on beginning, to keep on the journey. The mind is always going to find new questions. The mind is always doubting; the mind is always examining and putting the other point of view or testing. So, the mind is always asking new questions. But the heart, and meditation is the prayer of the heart, is always finding new ways to love, new reasons to love, and new powers of love. Love is what we find at the heart of our being. It is the innate capacity of the human heart, and it is what makes us truly the image and likeness of God who is love. And as this capacity for love is developed as we experience ourselves, both loved and becoming more loving our perceptions are transformed. We change. We undergo a true conversion of heart. We become more free, and our religion is also transformed. Religion without this contemplative dimension becomes sterile; even worse, it becomes negative or fundamentalist or an obstruction to human unity. But a religion that is open to this contemplative core experience of love becomes a force for the relief of suffering, for the expansion of wisdom, and for the celebration of our human unity.



Contemplative Experience

Our theme for the seminar is *The Contemplative Dimension of Faith*. The contemplative dimension of faith is this dimension of experience that lies at the heart of all faith and in the core of the human being. It's a way into the ultimate mystery that awaits us beyond the reach of words or concepts or even beliefs.

The important thing to realise is that this ultimate mystery is a fact. It's not a dream; it's not a fantasy; it's not an idea; it's not a hypothesis. It is a fact. The experience of God in a Christian tradition does not depend on thinking about God. God is. At the beginning of the Bible, the biblical revelation of God, God reveals himself simply as 'I am' and he refuses to give himself a name. Moses to whom this revelation is made in the burning bush says: What is your name, because I'd like to be able to do some name-dropping when I go to see the Pharaoh and ask him to release the people; so, what is your name? And God refuses to name himself. In all our traditions represented here there is the same intuition that the ultimate mystery, however many names we may give to it, there is always the hundredth name which is secret, mysterious, unspeakable, too sacred to articulate. So, it is a fact, a reality.

I was made vividly aware of this quite recently when I was asked by one of my friends if I would meet with a group of his friends for dinner one evening at his home because he wanted to start a meditation group in his parish. Before dinner, I gave a little talk on meditation to a group of maybe four or five people. We meditated together and after the meditation, as usual, I asked would anyone like to share anything, any questions. One of the participants spoke up. I had been introduced to him before and I

knew he had a very important position at a big multi-national company. He had come straight from work. He said, "How long was that meditation?" I said, "20 minutes." So he said, "Well, it could have been 20 seconds or 20 hours. I have never experienced anything like this in my life. I don't understand it. Not only was my whole sense of time changed but also I went to a place which I have never been to before." He said, "I go to church every Sunday and I try to live a decent life and I have heard about things like joy and peace and love, and God is all these things, and so on. I have *heard* about all this stuff but," he said, "I never really understood it." And he said, "I experienced something in those 20 minutes, if you say they were really 20 minutes, which I cannot understand or explain but I know that these words are the best ways I have to describe it: love, joy, peace. I am just speechless."

We listened to him with respect. He was describing a very deep and sacred moment in his life. And then he said, well, what is even funnier, is that I had a terrible day. I have one thing in my life that I am really ashamed of and that is my anger. I cannot control my anger in many circumstances, and I fly into a rage and say horrible things and I treat people terribly. You could talk to my family and they would tell you about this. Even at work I can't control my temper sometimes, and today was one of those days. At beginning of the day I just exploded about something that happened and I was the most horrible and disgusting person all day to everybody I met. So much so that I felt so tired and ashamed of myself I thought I would just go home and not come to this dinner. But I came because I promised I would come. And this is what I find, this place, this experience, this something in me that I cannot explain."

This man has something to teach us and something of relevance to our inter-religious work. Clearly what he had entered into was what we call experience. It was unpredictable, it was indescribable, but it was overwhelming.

One of the great mystical teachers of the Christian tradition was St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th Century. And St Bernard said that the soul is like an unopened parcel. St Bernard says that this is

apophatic and the *cataphatic*, We can speak about God. We can say things about the ultimate mystery. But at the end of the day, we know that God is not what we think. As *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, we can never know God by thought but only by love. And so we need these two lenses, these two approaches, words and silence, From the silence we come back to the words as we exchange our views and our intuitions and our experience with each other in words, but then those words again have to be dropped as we go back into the silence.

Contemplative knowledge arises first of all in this non-dualistic consciousness of the heart in which we are not thinking about God or trying to know God as an object, but we are simply open to the presence. An idea, three central words of the Christian tradition: God is Love. It's one of the most frequently quoted definitions of God in the Christian tradition, but they are only three monosyllables. Then one day they may explode into meaning for you. And they are no longer an idea but they express, inadequately, but they express an experience, a personal knowledge, an insight.

The existence of this kind of contemplative knowledge is largely ignored by education, by most forms of medicine, by science, by the institutions of business or politics. I think the supreme work of religious people today is not just to develop their own particular denominations but to share, from their own contemplative wells, this life-giving knowledge of contemplation with the world. This knowledge is never far from us. It is close to us; closer to us than we are to ourselves, St Augustine said. And it is not elusive. In a sense, in the Christian tradition, we say that God seeks us as well as we seeking God.

Everything that I have been saying so far about the nature of contemplation can really be summed up in this one idea that meditation is the work of love. Contemplation is the work of love because the knowledge we are speaking about is the knowledge that is love.

And one of the signs that we are growing in this knowledge, one of the signs that actually we are changing even if nothing seems to

become God through a process of evolution. We're in that process of divinisation now at this very moment, if our minds and hearts and bodies are open to it. So we begin to be conscious as these spiritual fruits develop that this process of divinisation is occurring.

Then we can say that we also move to a third level of motivation, and I think this is true in all religions, where we meditate at a very conscious and mature understanding of the meaning of our own religion. For me as a Christian this means that my meditation becomes Christ-centred very consciously and very deeply, and that my union with Christ on his journey to the Father becomes central to my practice of daily meditation. So I've got my cholesterol in shape, I begin to see that I'm becoming a slightly nicer person, or my ego is reducing a little bit anyway, and then I can begin to be conscious of the real mystery of Christ in my spiritual journey. That would be a different experience for the Taoist or the Buddhists or the Jain or the Muslim. Nevertheless the same process, the same evolution is happening in all of us.

Contemplation is the knowledge of the supreme mystery and of the ultimate meaning of life. But it is not a conceptual knowledge. This doesn't mean that it is anti-intellectual. Our minds, our intelligence, are an important part of our journey as human beings. But, as you see, I am wearing glasses. I have two lenses in these glasses. I was reading once, I put on a pair of reading glasses and I was given a shock because I suddenly could not focus on the page. It was just a big blur and I thought: Something has happened to my eyes! They've really degenerated suddenly. I was quite anxious. So I put on more light and still couldn't focus on the page; moving the book closer to my face and further I still couldn't read it. And I thought, this is really serious. So I decided to clean my glasses. I took off my glasses and cleaned one lens, and then I went to clean the other lens, and it wasn't there. It was a great relief, because I'd understood the problem. Then I had to find other lens (that wasn't so easy) and stick it back into the frame. It is the same with our religious knowledge of God or our human knowledge of God. We have two lenses, the mind and the heart. Technically, we call it the

what the soul is like. It is an unopened parcel; we are a mystery to ourselves. It is not only God who is a mystery; we are a mystery to ourselves. There is something unknown at the core of our being. And meditation, you could say, is the work we do to receive the gift of contemplation. Contemplation is a grace; it is a gift. You don't earn it; it is just there, given, like our very existence. We didn't deserve to be created. We didn't deserve to exist, but we exist. Our being itself is a gift. But we have to accept that gift. It is our responsibility to open this parcel, to come to self-knowledge, to discover who we are, even though we will never be able to name ourselves any more than we can name God. And in meditation we trust that this is a gift, that our very being is a gift, something good, that there is an essential goodness in human nature.

People sometimes say to me – I teach meditation, of course from the Christian tradition – “Do you have to believe in God. Do you have to believe everything that our religion teaches us in order to meditate?” The answer basically is no. But when you meditate, wherever you start from – whether you start as a very committed and experienced member of a religious tradition that you are well informed and well instructed in, or whether you are starting as many people do in the modern world, with absolutely no religious context or religious tradition – the very act, the very fact of sitting to meditate is itself an act of faith because you are accepting that there is this unopened parcel that you are, that is the gift of your being, that you cannot put a label on, and that this is a gift that must be accepted.

John Main once described meditation as “the way we accept the gift of our being”. And as we open this parcel, as we accept the gift, we begin to realise that it is pure goodness. We discover as my friend discovered in that moment of grace, that however horrible we may be at times, however sinful, however egoistical, however imperfect, nevertheless, at the deep core of our being, there is this radiant and pure goodness, indeed this radiant and pure divinity.



The Practice

I have spoken about the nature of contemplation, the universality of this experience of contemplation, but how do we actually make ourselves ready to receive the gift? The essence of all contemplation, the essence of all prayer in fact is attention, paying attention. There is a great deal of research being done, a great deal of concern today about our level of attention. There's a great deal of anxiety about the low, short levels of attention that our children are being trained in. Children or young people, young students themselves are often very conscious how difficult it is for them to concentrate or to pay attention. We live in a society of endemic distraction, of congenital self-distraction. That is why it is so difficult to turn off your mobile phone because we are addicted to the possibility of another distraction coming in with a text message or a phone call. We are constantly tuned into external stimuli, external events.

This state of distraction undermines our very humanity. It undermines our capacity for love because attention is love. If you love someone, you pay attention to them; and if you pay attention to something you are loving them. So, let's focus upon meditation as a way of attention, not thinking about God but paying attention to God, *being* with God. Because to pay attention to someone is to *be* with them, to be present to them as you are to a friend when they come to you with a problem and you just listen. You might say, I wish I could do something for you, but I can't. I don't know how to solve your problem, but I am here for you. I am present for you. That is compassion. It's not just problem-solving, it's not just counselling, but it is compassion in action. Meditation certainly develops this

The Spiritual Fruits

For many people today living in a secular society, we begin to meditate at a very self-centred level. Our motivation is: What am I going to get out of this; is it my better cholesterol, better blood pressure, help to come off my pills for depression, help with my sleep at night? That is how many people will start, for the benefits that meditation scientifically are proven to give. And I don't think that is wrong. In the Christian tradition we say that "grace builds on nature". In other words our bodies and our minds, our psychology, are part of this journey. So I think this is a valid way of beginning. Our motivation might seem rather self-centred at first, but just begin. I think if we do begin in that way, and we are faithful to the practice, we begin to understand the spiritual dimension of our own being, and the motivation for persevering in meditation becomes a spiritual one. We become more concerned about the spiritual fruits – love joy peace patience kindness. These are more important than cholesterol, but get your cholesterol fixed first and then allow these spiritual fruits to become more of your motivation.

As you reflect upon the changes that are taking place in you spiritually – becoming a nicer person, a more loving person, a more peaceful person, you're finding joy within yourselves more than just by looking for pleasure outside, your values are changing, the way you use your time is changing, the way you spend your money is changing – you begin to say where is this change coming from? This is the spirit of God. I am being divinised. That might sound a bit new age to some of you, but actually it's the refrain of the earliest Christian teachers: God became human so that human beings might become God. But we don't become God just like that; we

mystical level of development, personal or religious, that we understand what that really means. It is here in this stage of our evolution that the meeting of distinct religious traditions is most fruitful for humanity as a whole. So this is why I've been saying that it's important for religions and religious leaders and teachers to be conscious of their own contemplative tradition, to teach it to their young members, and to make it a conscious part of their formation and of their community life. Out of that dimension, the relationship with other religions will become empowered for the common good of humanity.

Meditation is of course, as a universal human heritage and human wisdom, a simple way in which we can make that happen by teaching meditation from within our own tradition



capacity for compassion. Stillness is at the heart of meditation in all traditions. "Be still and know that I am God," it says in the Psalms.

When we come to meditate now, I am going to ask you to sit still, physically still, and that physical stillness is going to be your first step into this experience of contemplation. Just be aware of your breathing for a few moments. It gives you a chance to let go of your thoughts or stream of thoughts, because when we meditate we let go of thoughts. Meditation is not what you think. In meditation, we take the attention off our thoughts and we move from the mind to the heart.

So, just be aware of your breathing. As you breathe in feel the gift of life coming into you, pure gift, pure grace. And because it is pure gift we cannot turn it into a possession, we can't put it into a bank deposit. We have to let it go, we have to release it. So we breathe out again. And every cycle of our breath is a teaching on this central fact of human existence, that life is a gift and we return the gift.

The basic rule of posture is simply to sit with your back straight. This reminds you that your body is part of this work of contemplation. Put your feet flat on the ground, so you feel both grounded and alert – Jesus said, stay awake and pray – and comfortable. So, your body should not be a distraction to you, but you want to be in a physically alert and relaxed position. Put your hands on your lap or your knees. Relax your shoulders and relax the muscles of your face. Meditation we know relaxes us but that's only the beginning.

Then in this tradition that we teach we follow a very simple way of attention and a way of stillness by taking a single word, a short phrase, a mantra, a sacred word, and by repeating this single word, the same word, continuously we let go of our thoughts, our plans, our memories, our anxieties, our daydreams, our desires, our guilts. We let all of this go. We don't solve our problems during meditation. We take the attention off this stream of conceptual and emotional energy, our thoughts and our feelings. We just take the attention off that stream of conscious mental activity and we put our attention

entirely into this simple, childlike work of saying the word. Say your mantra. I would suggest that you take a word that is sacred in own tradition. I would recommend to a Christian meditator either the word Jesus or the word Abba, or the word I personally recommend is the word, *maranatha*. Maranatha, which could be also used by any person of any faith, simply means 'Come Lord'. It is in the language that Jesus spoke, Aramaic. If you choose that word, say it as four syllables of equal length: ma-ra-na-tha, ma-ra-na-tha. Don't visualise the word because we are already visually overloaded, but listen to the word with your full attention, with the ear of your heart.

When you find you become distracted, which of course we all do, simply return to the word gently, faithfully. Don't evaluate yourself. You don't have to be successful at this. Just be faithful to it. Meditation is about faith, not success. So be faithful to the simple repetition of your word. Say it gently without force. Say it faithfully. Keep returning to it whenever you become distracted. Say it simply without evaluating or analysing yourself. If you do that you will have started this contemplative journey, entering into the present moment, letting go of thoughts of the past or the future. Letting go of abstract explanations and simply entering into the truth of what is present within you.

So, close your eyes lightly, sit as still and quietly as you can, and silently, gently begin to say your word with full attention, wholehearted attention. The word I would recommend is maranatha. Ma-ra-na-tha.



strengthen its identity and its development. Maybe we're not now trying to steal members from each other's religions. We're not trying to convert people by wile or by persuasion or bribery or blackmail or anything else. Hopefully we're not doing that anymore, but our emphasis very often in religious leadership is to defend or to develop that particular identity. That is not a bad thing. We need to belong, we need to be rooted and grounded, just as we need to belong to a particular human biological family. I think we need to belong to a spiritual family and a religious tradition and to grow in that. So particular identity is not a bad thing in itself, until of course it becomes exclusive or it becomes superior – we're better than you;; we are more highly evolved than you; you are wrong; or there is a subtle level of competition. When that happens, then religion begins to atrophy, begins to dry up. It loses its spiritual vitality and energy and therefore it fails to respond to the real spiritual needs of its own members, and it is not able to contribute to the spiritual needs of society in the particular way that it can do.

That level of religious development, social and legalistic, where we set strong frameworks and we have rules that you have to obey in order to remain a valid paid-up member of that religion, that's a stage of development. We have to be conscious of that stage of development and not get caught in it, not get stuck in it.

But there is a further stage both of human spiritual development and of the development of religion. This is the stage that we are seeing more clearly than ever before in history, present to us today, and that is the mystical level. You can call it by other words; let's just call it mystical or contemplative. It's this mystical level of religion. Actually that mystical level of religion has been there from the very beginning. It's even potentially present at the magical stage. Magical is not the same as mystical, but the seeds of that full development of human consciousness, the seeds of the mystical union with God, are present at the earliest levels of our journey. But it's in the mystical stage, when we become conscious of that, that union becomes simple. Mystical union is simplicity. God is "infinitely simple" according to Aquinas. God is infinitely simple. Its only at this

or we are manipulating the forces of the universe in some way for our own benefit making ourselves feel better more secure as if we paid our insurance policy.

Are we being a bit hard on people? I don't think so. I think we could see it as a valid stage of development, but it is something that we should be questioning ourselves about. And in our inter-religious dialogue, meditation is going to give us the stimulus to discuss these questions with each other.

St Augustine asked this question in the fifth century. St Augustine, one of the great teachers of the early Christian Church, said: Why do we ask God for what we need? Jesus said you do not need to ask your heavenly Father because your heavenly Father knows your needs before you ask, so don't go babbling on thinking that the more you say the more likely you are to be heard. Anyway, Augustine asks why then do we put our needs into words when we go to church or synagogue or temple or mosque? Is it to ask God to change his mind? God is like a CEO – you don't actually get to see him, he's too exalted in the hierarchy, but we can send messages to him and try to get his attention. That doesn't make sense. We don't ask God to change his mind. Do we do that in order to ask God to intervene on my behalf because I'm a favourite? Does God have favourites? St Paul says God does not have favourites. Jesus says God is like the sun who shines on good and bad alike and is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. St Augustine's answer to that question is no these are not the reason we ask God for this or for that petition or intercession but in order to deepen our faith that God cares, that our needs are known to God, and that we can trust that. Deep trust is the answer.

So we have the magical level, the mythical level, and then religion evolves into a social and a legal institution. It's something we belong to, something that gives us an identity. There are 10 officially recognised religions in Singapore. Can you belong to two of those? Not officially, not statistically. In practice, many people do move around, but the leaders of religions, their responsibility and their work is often to serve that particular community and to

The Christian Tradition of Meditation

This morning I spoke about the nature of contemplation. This afternoon I'd like to speak about the tradition of contemplation.

It is important to understand that we all meditate within a tradition, and all traditions belong to one great tradition of humanity. All our traditions, we could say, are connected. They have a root tradition. That root tradition is held in a pre-historical silence, in a very primeval awakening to our human meaning and purpose. As history unfolded and civilisations and cultures developed so did different religions, each one of them giving birth to unique insights and perceptions about this silent mystery. Common to all these traditions is the existence of a practice of silence that takes us beyond words, that takes us from the mind to the heart through the way of pure attention and the way of pure being, meditation.

The word tradition is a dynamic word. It doesn't refer to a museum, or to a set of memories, or to a looking back. Tradition is actually an active transmission from person to person in a dynamic way of an experience or a capacity or an insight.

John Main, the founder of our Community, and one of the great figures in the recovery of the Christian tradition of meditation in our time, said that every time we meditate we enter into a tradition. Every time we meditate we are in this great living tradition. It's wonderful to be here with Mother Mangalam. John Main was first introduced to meditation, as a practising Catholic, when he was in the diplomatic service in Malaya in the 1950s and met Swami

Satyananda, the founder of the Pure Life Society, of which Mother Mangalam is now the president.

The meeting was a formal professional meeting, but in the course of that meeting he became aware that he was in the presence of a deeply spiritual man, a man who was not only committed to the relief of suffering through the Pure Life Society in reconciliation of divisions within the troubled society of Malaya at that time but also a human being of profound spiritual wisdom. As John Main himself was a deeply religious person they began to fall into conversation about spiritual life, about prayer, and eventually they shared with each other their understanding of prayer. It was at that moment that John Main was introduced to the prayer of the heart, to meditation, and he said to Swami Satyananda, "Could you teach me as a Christian to meditate?" The Swami said, "Well of course. Meditation will make you a better Christian." And he said, "I can only teach you to meditate though if you are serious about it." John Main said, "What do you mean by serious?" And he said, "By serious I mean that you do it. And I suggest that you meditate every day, morning before you go to work and in the evening at the end of the day's work and integrate that into your other kinds of prayer. And then once a week if you wish you can come back and meditate with me. We'll meditate together and if you have any questions we can discuss them." And so for about two years, before he returned to Europe and became professor of Law at Trinity College in Dublin, John Main went there every week. Meditating twice a day, once a week he would go and meditate with Swami Satyananda his teacher. He continued to practise his other forms of prayer, and I would like to speak a little bit about these other forms of prayer also today because they are part of our tradition as well.

John Main returned to Europe, became a professor of Law and taught at Trinity College in Dublin for a number of years, and then became a Benedictine monk in London. When he was talking with his novice master about his personal prayer soon after he had taken the habit, he described this way of meditation and he was looking forward to talking about it with someone who would

Religion itself has evolved,. Religion begins at a magical level. Humanity began with a magical view of religion. We see the problems of the world, we see the need for rain, we see the need for good harvest, and we develop magical rituals that will ensure that the rain comes on time and that we make the earth fertile and we make families produce children. We rely upon these magical rituals or magical spells in order to ensure the well-being of the tribe. Then that evolves into a mythical stage of development where the human mind begins to ask for explanations. Why is the world like this? Why are human beings so varied in their responses? Why do we have good and bad human beings? Why do we have violence at times and yet amazing generosity and selflessness at other times? And so the mythical system the great myths of humanity began to be told and retold as ways of explaining to ourselves the meaning of our own existence.

So we can see these stages of human evolution and the evolution of religious consciousness taking place in the individual human creature. Because we are conscious human beings, because we are self-reflective, we should also be conscious of what stage of development we may have reached ourselves or whether we got blocked. You could be 65 years old and still at a magical stage of development; it's very easy to get stuck.

There are a lot of religious people who look at religion in terms of magical manipulation. We manipulate the higher powers and this is true of every religion. In mosques and temples and synagogues and churches around the world you will find people for whom this form of religion is the primary one. They come to the temple in order to pray for long life, for prosperity, for health, for fertility. These are the things we all want. They're pretty standard; we all want those things – good health, prosperity, care for our children, and so on. It's the most natural thing in the world that we should present those needs, we should be conscious of those needs, and we should relate those needs to what we believe in. But at what level are we doing that? At the magical level we think that if we do this little ritual we are actually gaining God's or some higher power's favour,

The Mystical Level of Religion

When we reflect on meditation and this relationship to inter-faith dialogue today, it makes us aware that religion itself is an evolutionary part of humanity. The human creature, human being, is a relatively new species in the history of the planet; we're a very young species. We represent a certain stage of evolution, a mysterious stage; some kind or form of quantum leap clearly took place in the human being.

Yet there is nothing to say that we're not still in the process of evolution, and we're now probably facing the challenges as well as the opportunities of taking control in some way of our own evolution. We know so much about what makes us who we are, about your DNA, about medicine and biology and neuroscience it has changed the way we know ourselves, at least at a scientific and biological level. So we are facing a unique moment of evolution.

This presents us with great ethical challenges in which the religious traditions are very important partners in the conversation in society. There are other ethical questions such as euthanasia or respect for life; our religious traditions need to be well informed and intelligent, contemplatively intelligent, in the conversation pluralistic societies are having about these difficult ethical questions.

How far we meddle with life, with the structure of life, these are pressing questions that require a new kind of consciousness, a new kind of mind. It is no good just responding to those questions out of a catechism or out of fixed ideological ideas. We have to adapt to the nature of these new questions, and I think that requires an intelligent conversation among religious people of all faiths to be able to respond to these challenges.

understand it, because at that time meditation was certainly not well known in the West, and in the Christian world contemplative tradition had become not completely lost but very marginalised. So he was disappointed when he was told by his novice master that this was not a Christian way of prayer and that he should give it up. In those days monks were very obedient. Although it was a very difficult decision for him to take he gave up his practise of meditation. He said, many years later when he was writing about this time of his life, that it was a very painful moment because he went into a kind of spiritual desert, although he was continuing to pray of course in other ways. The Divine Office the regular times of prayer seven times a day in which he prayed in the monastery, the celebration of the Eucharist, reading of scripture and other forms of prayer were enriching him and nourishing him, but this prayer of the heart that he had begun to learn in the East here was missing.

Then some years later when he was at a very busy period of his monastic life – he was headmaster of a Benedictine school in Washington, he was raising money for the school, he was dealing with problems in the school – a young student came to visit who had just come from a tour of Asia, a young Catholic student. He said: “I’ve been around Buddhist temples and the ashrams of Asia and mosques. I’ve learnt about meditation in all these different places, but I’ve come home now and I go to my parish church and nobody speaks about meditation. Nobody seems to be practising meditation, and if I meet people who meditate it is Catholics or Christians who have to go to another tradition to learn.” So he said, “Do we not really have some teaching on meditation that I can follow?”

John Main was struck by this question, these were words. It was at a time in the late '60s when many people were asking those questions about their Christian faith. He went back to his own roots. John Main went back to study the teachings of the early Christian Fathers, the Christian monks, the Desert Fathers. He went on the trail, led by the Spirit, back to the roots of his own spiritual tradition.

In the writings of John Cassian, who distilled the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and brought it to the Western church, John Main

found two great Conferences on prayer dating from the early 5th century. In the Ninth Conference, Cassian speaks about the many forms of prayer in the Christian understanding, and I think everyone of our traditions could list different aspects of prayer or different aspects of meditation. This is what Cassian does in his Conference, and it's a beautiful description of the multiplicity of forms of prayer and yet their essential unity.

I often use the symbol of the wheel. The wheel of prayer and the different spokes of the wheel are like the different forms of prayer. We have devotional prayer, we have liturgical prayer or ritual prayer, we have forms of mental prayer or petition or intercession, we have many different schools of different kinds of spirituality. So there is a great richness of forms of prayer. I think today many people who don't even think themselves as religious find forms of prayer in jogging or in walking in nature or in art or music. Prayer really is any art of attention that makes you more present to yourself and to the mystery that you are part of. Any art or discipline because there is always discipline in every art that teaches us to be present to be focused to be attentive is something we can call prayer or an aspect of prayer.

So these spokes of the wheel are like the different forms of prayer but where do they meet? They meet in the hub of the wheel, in the centre of the wheel. And what do we find in the centre of a wheel? We've all come here today probably on wheels. We wouldn't have been able to drive here if the centre of the wheel had not been still. If the axle of the car or the vehicle had not been solid so that the wheel can turn around it. So at the centre of a wheel, we find this dynamic stillness which is the source of the motion and the activity of our lives. The art of a spiritual life is to balance your contemplative and your active dimensions. One of the tragedies and one of the diseases of our modern culture is that we have lost this art of keeping the balance, of keeping the harmony between our contemplative and active dimensions. When that harmony is lost we begin to experience stress, we begin to experience a sense of disconnection, a sense of loneliness.

a church or a mosque or a temple or a synagogue or wherever, as institutions they are all imperfect. Nevertheless, for all their imperfections, our religious beliefs systems and the institutions that teach them and allow us to be formed by them are an important and necessary vehicle for our way of faith.

This distinction between faith and belief is a vital one for us (I find it vital anyway) to reflect on in an era of dialogue that we have entered. And it is possible I think when you see that distinction between faith and belief, to say that we can create a global community of faith from people of different beliefs. So we can be in a community of faith even though we believe very differently.

The important thing about a tradition is that it is always being renewed. It is never fixed, never frozen. Religious people can sometimes be quite conservative when it comes to their religious forms and institutions and traditions and rituals, and some level of continuity some predictability and connection with the past I think is a real aspect of tradition too. Nevertheless, we have to be constantly adapting, and it is our contemplative dimension of faith that allows our religious institutions and our religious belief systems to be updated frequently, and because change is so rapid today we need that updating more and more regularly. Often you turn on your computer Microsoft or Mac interrupt you and say we're now updating your system you have to wait for something to be installed. Well in the same way I think our religious traditions need this regular infusion of an updating to the contemporary world, but it's the same tradition that is being renewed. Without this contemplative dimension, we might be frightened of that updating; we might be frightened of that adaptation to the contemporary world. But if that happens then our religions become irrelevant or they become museum pieces; they become just ceremonial escape. They become Disney worlds rather than places that are truly nurturing the human journey into wholeness.



your relationship with the community so you can start again.

Meditation itself is a way of faith not only as a daily practice that becomes more and more integrated into your ordinary life but even in the time of meditation itself you are as it were exercising the muscle of faith through this act of pure attention that I described in the way that we meditate. It's a specific form I was describing, but in every form of meditation we are faithful to an act of attention. We are faithful during that-half hour to the stillness, to the silence, to the simplicity, and to the particular discipline of attention. We may not feel we have done it perfectly but we have done it, we have been faithful to it. And we find the fruits of that practice appearing in our life in our relationships in daily life. So meditation is a way of faith.

We practise that way of faith probably within a particular religious tradition. That religious tradition may teach certain different forms of meditation although they have many similarities. But certainly those different religious traditions will also have different beliefs systems, will describe what is happening. They will describe what is at the centre of the wheel in different terms. So we have a belief system attached to or linked to a way of faith. Some people might say we don't really need a belief system then. But it seems to me the belief system is an important aid, a necessary aid, for a vast majority of people. We need beliefs which express our values, that are inspirational symbols, that give us insights beyond our ordinary rational understanding into the meaning of our life experience and what we are doing on this way of faith.

We also learn certain basic moral precepts from this belief system which we need to practise in order to maintain our balance. The belief system is a valuable and sacred aspect of our human journey as well. If you have no belief system – in the modern world there are many people who will say “I have no religion; I'm not religious; I don't believe in anything, but I am spiritual” – that's possible, but also there are many people who are in that position who find themselves in a crisis. They find themselves spiritually orphaned, unsupported, and very often exposed to false kinds of spirituality. None of our religious institutions is perfect. Whether it's

We find this stillness at the centre of the wheel of the prayer, but if we were to try to describe that stillness more specifically every one of our traditions would have different terms. As a Christian it seems to me that at the centre of this wheel of the prayer we find the mind of Christ. We find the person of Christ praying at the centre. His prayer is not words or thoughts. His prayer is pure worship, what he calls worship “in spirit and in truth”. It is pure worship of God his Father. It is this prayer of the Spirit in the Christian understanding that pours out of Him into the human heart, into every human heart. The Spirit of Christ universally has entered and touched the human heart in a non-sectarian way.

That's a perspective, my perspective on what we find in the hub of the wheel of prayer, which is to say also in our own human hub, our own heart. We find the spirit of God praying in us deeper than words as St Paul says. Here we have an understanding of prayer that is both universal but has very specific denominational differences according to the different traditions. But we all belong to a great tradition, and within that great tradition we all need to find our own tradition.



4

Faith and Belief

In a dialogue like this, it seems to me very important to make a distinction between faith and belief. Every tradition is made up of these two aspects and I've pondered these two words for many years and I wrote a little book about them recently.

Faith it seems to me is different from belief, and we can tell what it means just by the way we use the word in ordinary language. We speak about a faithful friend, or being faithful in your marriage, or being faithful to a promise that you have made. When we make those kind of commitments or promises, we may do so in a moment of enthusiasm or a moment of romance. Later circumstances change difficulties are faced and that first commitment is tested. Circumstances are very difficult, you feel like giving up and running away, and if you *can*, you remain faithful to that commitment, faithful to that promise. You are constantly being tested about it. You're constantly being asked to re-commit yourself to it and to make sure that it was the right commitment.

This is what we mean by faith. Faith is an innate human capacity for relationship and for commitment, and therefore for self-transcendence; that means the transcendence of our ego. The ego always wants an easy life. The ego always wants to be romantically in love, or always to have its desires fulfilled. It always wants to be well thought of, and to be well respected, and to be applauded; when the ego doesn't get what it wants it looks for some other way of getting it. So we have to transcend the ego in order to grow in faith. If you look at any stage in your life, the quality and the depth and the authenticity of your life will depend upon the level of your faith: How faithful have you learnt to be to the deepest promises

and commitments that your life has led you into. How faithful are you? We are all aware of times of infidelity, times where we feel we've broken a promise, or we've let somebody down; and then we have to be healed, we have to be forgiven we have to start again. That is an essential aspect of life.

I'm not speaking about perfectionism. I'm speaking about fidelity, the fidelity that allows us to become more and more deeply integrated as human beings. Every act of faith we make deepens our integration; this is what makes us a more whole person. By the end of our lives we will evaluate our lives, as we lie on our death bed, by the measure of faith that we have lived by, and the most obvious aspect of that will be love. I have a friend doctor who has worked for many years with dying patients and palliative care and hospice movement, and he says in 30 years he has never met anybody on their deathbed who said to him: Doctor, I wish I had spent more time at the office. But there are many people on their death bed who will say: I wish I had spent more time with this person or that person, or with my family; or I wish I had stretched out my hand to reconcile with my brother or my sister or my mother or my father; and is there is a chance of doing that even now at this last moment? So this is, I think, the measure of a good human life, how faithfully we have lived and how that faith expresses itself in love.

There is an expression in St Paul where he speaks about faith growing and faith becoming active in love. So faith is really our capacity for love. You cannot love without enduring, without extending that commitment you make to another person or to a promise through time, good times and bad times. We see this for example in the practice of meditation itself. People often begin to meditate with a certain enthusiasm, a certain gung-ho attitude; meditation seems easy and sometimes you get some good experiences at the beginning of the practice. Then it is more difficult and most people, myself included when I began, give up. You give up after a few weeks, or a few days or few months and you may give up for a short time or you may give up for a long time. Something may bring you back to it, maybe a friend who is meditating, maybe