

Christian Meditation – another peaceful revolution

A paper for the fourth plenary session

by

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I was invited to take over this session when Sam Ericsson recently had to cancel his visit. The topic that I offered was Christian meditation, mainly because it is what I am most excited about at present. The title I have chosen also allows me to draw some connections with the topic I spoke to at the first convention, restorative justice, and perhaps in the process throw some light on both topics. Elenne Ford thought that Christian meditation would appeal to Christians in a stressful profession, and she noted that it fitted with the Convention theme of seeking God first. So here we are!

It is a great relief to have Professor Ron McCallum in the chair, with his much greater experience of Christian meditation. I am told that there are about 60 Christian meditation groups in Brisbane alone, so probably some of you are already well and truly on the road. Vi Hall is present at the resources table with details of contacts throughout Australasia for those who are interested. I am very much a beginner, having started with a Lenten course on the subject last year. The Catholic parish group that evolved has met weekly since then for an hour or so, and more recently the Anglican home group I belong to has used meditation as a preparation for intercessory prayer. In both groups we start by listening to a tape or watching a video for about 20 minutes, then we meditate for about 25 minutes and the discussion (or intercession) that follows takes the remaining 15 minutes or so. The tapes we have used are mostly by the Benedictine monk John Main (1926-1982), and I will be playing one of those shortly. First, a few words of introduction.

Christian meditation is a form of silent prayer using a mantra. In his wonderful little book *Word into Silence* (1981, Paulist Press, New York) John Main at pages 53 and 61-64 explains how the tradition of the mantra in Christian prayer has come down to us from the desert fathers of late 4th century Egypt, who in turn

placed its origin back in Apostolic times. This spiritual tradition of the East was brought into the living experience of the West by John Cassian, a pilgrim who learned at the feet of Holy Abbot Isaac, one of those desert fathers. Cassian in turn became the teacher of St Benedict, and by this route a simple, enduring tradition of prayer entered Western Monasticism where it has been nurtured on and off down the centuries.

John Main attributes its more recent rediscovery to Abbot Chapman whose famous letter written in 1920 described the faithful use of a mantra. However it was John Main in the 1970s who started to make the practice of Christian meditation widely known by emphasising its simplicity and its availability to all Christians, and by teaching it in wonderfully clear and simple terms. Fortunately he wrote several books and recorded a number of tapes before his untimely death in 1982.

The connection between the Benedictine order and Christian meditation continues. John Main was survived for about 10 years by the sage Bede Griffiths, whose lively videotaped addresses (made when he was over 80) are most instructive. The current leader of the interdenominational group, World Community of Christian Meditation, is another Benedictine monk, Father Laurence Freeman who has visited both of Australia and New Zealand more than once – and who has also produced some very helpful tapes and other materials. When he was in New Zealand recently he commented to an engineering friend of mine that engineers and lawyers tended to be good meditators because they are such practical people. (I assume he meant that we do not drift off into the higher realms of spiritual thought!)

Interestingly, there is a connection between John Main and the law. Born in England of Irish parents, he became a Benedictine monk after serving in the Far East with the British Colonial Service and teaching International Law at Trinity College, Dublin. The connection with the Far East is significant, as it was there that he first learned to meditate, only later discovering the ancient tradition of the mantra within Christianity itself.

Now it is time to listen to John Main himself. This is side A of tape 3 of the 12-session series In The Beginning which I have found most helpful. It is a 20 minute tape.

[TAPE TO BE PLAYED]

Christian meditation does not seek to replace other forms of prayer, or organised religion. Even so, I believe a quiet revolution is under way, something that has the potential to change our foundations. The title to this session refers to Christian meditation as another peaceful revolution. The 'other' that I refer to is restorative justice, the subject of my paper last year, A Christian Approach to Conflict Resolution. There I noted that restorative justice does not alter the law as set out in our various criminal codes, but changes the way we approach criminal justice. To recapitulate, "restorative justice" is an approach to conflict resolution which seeks to bring together the parties most directly affected by crime (or other form of conflict) and to encourage them with the support of their relevant communities to address the harm done and try and agree what might be done to put right the wrong. Compared with the common western form of criminal justice, the restorative intention is:

- to produce an agreed outcome rather than one imposed by the State,
- to heal the wounds of the parties caused by their conflict, and
- to address ways of avoiding such problems in the future.

While punishment has a role to play it does not have the primary place accorded to it in the usual court-based system.

I turn now to the parallels between restorative justice and Christian meditation, of which there are at least six. Upon reflection this is not surprising since I am looking at both through a Christian lens.

1. Both can be said to be concerned with peacemaking – the one within society and the other within oneself, though both have aspects of the other.

As I noted last year, one of the most influential books on restorative justice has been *Changing Lenses* written in 1990 by Howard Zehr, a gentle Mennonite Christian from Virginia, USA. Zehr finds some support for restorative justice in the Old Testament concept of shalom, which refers to peace between people and God as well as between people themselves on a variety of levels. He builds a picture of restorative justice as healing justice and as peacemaking in the spirit of shalom. Likewise Christian meditation, by helping us to rest in the infinite gentleness and love of God, builds peace within us and around us.

2. Both can be seen as modern phenomena but have their roots in ancient times.

I have already noted the venerable roots of Christian meditation, and Howard Zehr's writings on shalom illustrate the same point for restorative justice. Many indigenous peoples practice or have practiced some form of restorative justice. Before the days of strong central states and law enforcement authorities, justice necessarily resided in the community and was principally concerned with keeping the peace.

3. Grace has a major place in both.

My paper last year suggested that we should be seeking for our system of justice a means by which the gracious power of love can break the cycle of violence, anger and revenge. At an institutional and societal level restorative justice has something to offer there. Restorative justice allows law to be supplemented by grace.

Similarly, on a personal level grace underlies Christian meditation. I am amazed by the insights Father Laurence Freeman offers in these two sentences from “Letter Twelve” in Web of Silence page 129:

When injustice, cruelty and callousness encounter the unconditional love of God which empowers us to practice in his image, then sin dissolves. It is exposed as no more than the distance between us and reality, the illusion of separateness and self-sufficiency. Union and inter-dependence are realised and grace appears, not as a reward, but as the ever-present force of the divine compassion.

That last sentence could apply equally to Christian meditation and to restorative practices. “Union and inter-dependence are realised and grace appears, not as a reward, but as the ever-present force of the divine compassion.”

4. Like Christianity itself, both are rooted in experience rather than in doctrine.

John Main calls Christian meditation the prayer of the heart, and repeatedly emphasises that it is the practice or doing of it that matters, not reading books about it. It is not an intellectual exercise – indeed it is the very opposite, because the intellect (as well as the imagination) must be stilled to allow the Holy Spirit to enter. It is therefore very different from discursive or word-based prayer – talking with God.

Likewise, restorative justice has a large experiential component. Much of the power of restorative justice to effect change comes from the parties’ experience of each other’s pain and/or shame. Further, it is the person-to-person interaction of those taking part in a restorative conference that explains the creativity so often experienced, producing solutions that no learned book contains and no Judge would think of. Finally, much of the growth of restorative justice in the last decade has been due to the positive experiences - usually healing experiences - of those taking part, both victims and offenders, and the sharing of those experiences through the media.

5. Related to this is the prominent role of ordinary people rather than professionals.

Both restorative justice and Christian meditation are “grass roots” movements. Restorative justice requires the professionals usually involved in the criminal justice system – lawyers, judges, probation officers, and so on - to take a supportive role rather than a controlling one. It is a community-based approach to conflict resolution, where ownership of the process cannot lie with the professionals.

In a similar way, and because it builds community rather than an institution, Christian meditation has a high proportion of lay involvement. Although I have already noted the key historical role of the Order of St Benedict, and it is true that individual clergy can play a leading part in Christian meditation, leadership

does not require theological training or a licence to officiate. This is because the very essence of Christian meditation is simplicity and the emptying of oneself. Sophistication, cleverness, power and position - and all other aspects of ego or self - are renounced in the process of seeking to join in the stream of love between Jesus and His Father which John Main describes as the Holy Spirit.

6 Each movement is international and reaches also across other boundaries.

Restorative justice has gained a foothold in various countries on all continents of the world. It speaks an international language, which is the language of peacemaking and peace building. It is a growing force in resolving conflict not only within communities but between communities – as in Northern Ireland and South Africa – and potentially between countries. Because it now has the backing of the United Nations (following the 10th UN Congress on Crime, 2000), restorative justice can also provide an international approach to justice issues with strong linkages across national boundaries. (It would be wonderful to see a Christian agency capable of offering such services in the Middle East at present.)

Meditation based on the use of a mantra is not confined to Christians. Bede Griffiths in *The New Creation in Christ* explains how every religious tradition has a word for the transcendent, the unseen reality behind appearances. Jesus called that reality the Kingdom of God. For us that is the reality of Christ within us, the Christ of the resurrection, the Christ who has left us but who never left us because he sent his Holy Spirit to dwell within us. That is the reality with which meditation unites us.

I have to take Bede Griffiths' word for it, but in China there is the Tao (the way or river of the universe), in India there is the Brahman, in the Muslim tradition Al Haqq, and so on. The John Main Seminar in Northern Ireland last decade was apparently given by His Holiness The Dalai Lama. In meditation, western Christians can share something of the traditions of the East, including Eastern Orthodox Christians - for whom the constant repetition of "the Jesus prayer" (Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner") goes back many centuries. And at a time when the battle against terrorism threatens to develop into a wider war, the ability for different faiths to be able to look at their points of similarity and communicate across ethnic and national boundaries is all the more crucial.

While acknowledging that we do not have a monopoly on God, and as Fr Laurence Freeman said in Auckland recently, since Vatican II the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions, Christian meditation is nevertheless firmly rooted in the Christian experience. In another wonderful little book, *Word Made Flesh* (1993, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London), John Main quotes from St Paul (page 9):

"For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine', has caused his light to shine within us, to give us the light of revelation – the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

And he continues:

This light and glory [of Jesus Christ] are to be found in our hearts if only we will learn to be still, to be silent and to be humble. That is the exact purpose of the

mantra.

The internationalism of Christian meditation is seen in the existence of a World Community for Christian Meditation which John Main inspired and Laurence Freeman now leads. It has been described (on the back cover of *Word Made Flesh*) as “a monastery without walls with members on every continent”. The choice of the term “community” signals that it does not seek to become a competing religious structure but rather is the coming together of Christians in and through prayer.

Well, is the word “revolution” over-doing it a bit? I leave it to you to decide. My last quote is again from Bede Griffiths in *The New Creation in Christ* (pages 80-81). It contains a wonderful vision of the unity of all people through the death and resurrection of Jesus:

We have to see the Holy Spirit working in the world, in the Church, in our lives, transforming us day by day. If we respond to it the new age will dawn.

It is only in the awakening of the contemplative spirit, of a transcendent consciousness, that we come to this vision of unity. The method of realising this vision has been close at hand in the way of meditation taught by Father John Main. I really feel that he made a breakthrough that has opened the way for Christians to go beyond the world of the senses and of concepts to the divine mystery itself, and to allow that mystery to penetrate our lives and to transform them. It is a simple method, and yet it is so radical and fundamental that it really can change the world. ... All human beings have a point in the depths of their being where they are open to God himself. That is where contemplation takes us, to that point of communion with God. That is the goal of the monk and of every person who follows the calling to be one with God. There is no other way. It is not exclusive to Christians, because the grace of God is open to all. Jesus died for all humanity. He is the new man, the new Adam, who reconciles humanity with God and opens up human nature itself to the divine.

So there you have it. Personally I see both restorative justice and Christian meditation as a quiet revolution. Neither demands that we overthrow the established order of things, but each is having a growing influence on the minds and hearts of people. One is overtly Christian, the other applies Christian principles. Each is a force for unity, for involving ordinary people, for breaking down divisions, for building up community, for promoting healing, for experiencing grace, for advancing the Kingdom of God.

But more than that, each is a peaceful revolution because Jesus Christ is a peaceful revolution.