



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion**

## **Contemplation**

Contributors: Donald A. McCown

Edited by: Adam Possamai & Anthony J. Blasi

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion

Chapter Title: "Contemplation"

Pub. Date: 2020

Access Date: April 9, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781473942202

Online ISBN: 9781529714401

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714401.n101>

Print pages: 163-164

© 2020 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

The term *contemplation* holds different meanings across a wide range of religious, spiritual, and social discourses, from specific definitions within Christian ascetical and mystical theology to use as a general category in secular spirituality and academic pedagogy. A view of the term's etymology is helpful in understanding its flexibility and comprehensiveness. Derived through the French *contemplation* from Latin *contemplatio*, it denotes the act of beholding, looking into, studying something, with connotations from the prefix *con* of joining with it, and from the root *templum* (from which the word *temple* comes) of an encounter in sacred space—external or internal. Contemplation is, therefore, active and may be embodied in practices that are expressed in many religious and spiritual traditions and domains of society.

## In Christian Practice

In ascetical theology, the practical branch of theology, *contemplation* is the term used for a direct perception (however defined) of the divine, in contrast to an intellectual comprehension, which is approached in mental practices—discursive or imaginative—that are typically termed *meditation*. In the tradition, the discipline and effort of meditative practice may in time lead to a contemplative state, a nondiscursive resting in the love of God. Contemplation is, in this usage, a state that may be achieved, that becomes available through practice in learning to respond to the Holy Spirit. This differentiates it from a mystical state, which is given unbidden; in mystical theology, contemplation denotes this form of experience.

There is an extremely rich variety of ordinary contemplative practice methods, developed over two millennia by practitioners, from the early Fathers and Mothers of the Church, to the greatly varied monastic thinkers and schools of the Middle Ages to the contemplatives and mystics of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Since at least the 19th century, influences of practice traditions of stillness and silence from Eastern Christianity and religions and spiritualities of Asia have helped shape Western Christian contemplation, with approaches based in Hindu and Buddhist forms in particular finding practitioners in the West.

In the open climate of Vatican II Roman Catholicism, the interreligious dialogues, teaching, and writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, among other practitioners, greatly helped integrate the potential of these wide-ranging influences. This ongoing process, although remaining grounded in Christian history and theology, has brought this contemplative tradition into a new alignment with the broader discourse of contemplative practice and even with current therapeutic application and scientific research.

## The Broader Discourse

Beyond specifically Christian practice, the term *contemplation* has come to be used as an umbrella term to include a wide range of activities that may be identified with spiritual traditions drawn from world religions and also with what is now called *secular spirituality*. A listing of contemplative practices, developed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (formed in 1991), is presented as a *tree* diagram.

The diagram includes practices of stillness, such as meditation and centering; generative practices, such as visualization and loving kindness; creative practices, such as music and contemplative arts; activist practices, such as vigils and social justice pilgrimages; relational practices, such as storytelling and dialogue; practices of movement, such as dance and yoga; and ritual practices in religious and cultural contexts. The whole list is *rooted* in awareness, communion, and connection.

This broad understanding of contemplation or the contemplative dimension has come to dominate popular discourse. The utility and ubiquity of the term might be described by American sociologist Robert Wuthnow as the emerging of a third form of spirituality. He posits *dwelling-oriented spirituality*, which emphasizes local

spaces and communities as dominant through much of America's history.

In the mid-20th century, a *seeker-oriented spirituality* arose, in which individuals may no longer inherit and inhabit a faith tradition but rather choose from available modes, including the therapeutic, to understand and cope with life. Early in the 21st century, *practice-oriented spirituality* is emerging, rediscovering traditional modes and generating new ones. This necessarily moves beyond the conformity of dwelling and the individualism of seeking toward the transformative potential of the contemplative dimension, bringing committed practitioners together in community.

Concurrent with these moves, it is possible to see the effects of what Charles Taylor refers to as the *immanent frame*, in which the culture's main discourse takes place—without reference to the transcendent and with emphasis on reason and science. Spiritual and contemplative impulses (although secularized) may appear in this frame quite strongly. For example, the phenomenon of Herbert Benson's use of Hindu mantra meditation in the medicalized practice of the *relaxation response* in the 1970s, or Jon Kabat-Zinn's influential mindfulness-based stress reduction program, which has dramatically influenced medicine and mental health care since the 1980s through its still burgeoning scientific evidence base.

Taylor does not rule out the transcendent as a category; rather, traditional religious commitments may be seen as choices. Thus, a Christian contemplative practice such as centering prayer, developed in the same time period as those just mentioned, offers a deep grounding in its tradition while at the same time being influenced by the larger Asian-influenced discourse. It has even been applied within the scientific discourse as an alternative to the secularized mindfulness meditation of the mindfulness-based interventions, with outcomes measured in the same ways.

## Academic Validity Arising

Within the 21st century, and particularly since its second decade, contemplative practices and their applications in pedagogy have been coalescing as a discipline in higher education. Courses and concentrations, centers, and institutes devoted to contemplative studies have been formed at universities in North America and Europe for study and research. Conferences and organizations bring these efforts together, such as the long-standing Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (formed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society), and a growing number of specialized academic journals help focus scientific research, such as *Mindfulness* journal, and broader research on application of contemplative practices in the arts, humanities, and teaching in *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. The fit with larger trends in spirituality, medicine, mental health care, and other domains suggest continued growth in the academic sector.

**See also** [Buddhism](#); [Catholicism](#); [Christianity](#); [Hinduism](#); [Mindfulness](#); [Secular Spirituality](#); [Secularization](#); [Spirituality](#)

## Further Readings

- Benson, H. (1975). *The relaxation response*. New York, NY: Morrow.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Bantam.
- Komjathy, L. (2018). *Introducing contemplative studies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- McCown, D., Reibel, D., & Micozzi, M. (2010). *Teaching mindfulness: A practical guide for clinicians and educators*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Thornton, M. (1986). *English spirituality: An outline of ascetical theology according to the English pastoral*

tradition. Cambridge, MA: Cowley.

Wuthnow & , R. (1998). *After heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## Websites

Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Retrieved from <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

Donald A. McCown

- spirituality
- tradition
- theology
- discourse

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714401.n101>

10.4135/9781529714401.n101