ASPECTS OF CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATION

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ESSENTIALLY, CONTEMPLATION IS A GENERAL HUMAN POSSIBILITY RATHER THAN A DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN ONE. It is about seeking to be receptive and truly open to the other, to become aware of and responsive to the depths in every human perception of the world beyond us and the world within us. To be 'truly open to the other' requires that our self-awareness, let alone our self-centredness, in all its subtle forms, be diminished so that 'my perspectives, my needs, my desires' do not intrude on our receptivity of the other. It affirms that there are other ways to engage with reality than those of the human intellect, especially when 'intellect' is closely identified with rational analysis, deduction and construction alone. Those who practice or commend contemplation will also often affirm that contemplation is a necessary part of developing our humanity to the full.

Given this, the challenge is to understand whether there are any distinct characteristics to Christian contemplation. It might be that certain practices would be unacceptable (e.g. with meditation the use of drugs would not normally be affirmed as appropriate for Christian meditation, but are these part of the contemplative tradition anyway?) It might be that certain practices were and still would be encouraged within the Christian tradition as an adjunct to contemplation, such as fasting or solitariness. However, these could hardly claim to be distinct, as they are practiced in many religious traditions. So is Christian contemplation indistinguishable from general contemplation? Part of the answer, to this question of distinct characteristics, lies, I suggest, in the essential Christological focus or ethos for Christian contemplation.[1]

Within the Old Testament there is a recognition of the importance of creation as a source of divine mediation. So, for instance, in Psalm 19 there is a wonderful balance between God's 'availability' in the world and in the law: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (v. 1); 'the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes' (v. 8); 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer' (v. 14).

This balance is paralleled in Paul's striking imagery: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness!" who has shone in our hearts, to give

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NOTES

1. So J Macquarrie in his article, 'Contemplation' in *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed. J Macquarrie; London: SCM, 1967), p. 68: ''There can be no sustained and intelligent Christian action, properly so called, unless it is guided by Christian understanding; and this in turn arises from *the immersion of the Christian mind in the contemplation of the vision of God, granted in Christ Jesus*' (my emphasis).

2. See some interesting observations in R Briggs, *Light to Live By* (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 2005), pp. 71–5.

3. Contemplation and delight belong together. See, R Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 49, 50: 'Another movement we begin to experience [in contemplation] is delight … There is pleasure, friendship, joy, deep joy … John of the Cross calls it "the sweet and delightful life of love of God … that delightful and wondrous vision".'

4. This Psalm clearly conveys the intensity that belongs to contemplation but also covers many of the tones of the contemplative experience – deep longing, self-abandonment, desperation, the pain of transformation as well as love for God and moments of deep peace in God.

5. See Habakkuk 2.14 and Isaiah 6.3; Isaiah 40.5 and Psalm 97.6.

6. 'Only more sure of all I thought was true', from *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged* (ed. E Connery Lathem; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

7. See my *God at the End of the Century: Encounters in Today's Culture* (Swindon: Bible Society, 1996).

8. While Psalm 8 refers to the 'heavens' and we may consider we have not yet impacted the sun we have certainly visited the moon, and done so as a result of human ambition and conflict! We only perceive the stars in any detail through human instruments; even with our eyes we see them through a polluted atmosphere.

▶the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus' (2 Cor 4.6). So the God of creation is also the God who reveals himself in Christ. This verse raises many subtle and complex nuances. Do we see by the light of creation, or do we see God *through* the light of creation, or are *we* illuminated by the light? When God shines in our hearts are we reflecting his revelation or is his light showing up our darkness. These are just a few of the challenges which this verse prompts. But certainly there is encouragement here to contemplate the reality of God both through his creation and his revelation in Christ.

In Psalm 1 there is a deep sense that all our contemplation needs its roots in God's revelation in the Torah,[2] but the horticultural image of verse 3 indicates that this world too has been a source of contemplation for the psalmist. Those who delight[3] in God's law 'are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither' (Ps 1.3)

Psalm 119 is equally significant for contemplation. If this psalm is read only as a litany of legalism, it is completely misunderstood. It is a magnificent offering, a poetic architectural wonder, which expresses not only gratitude to God for his gift of 'Torah' but delight in the God whose law it is.[4]

Yet, all of these psalms remind us that at the heart of Christian contemplation there needs to be the focus on the heart of God's revelation – the glory of God.

The Gospels tell the story of glory. We see the glory of God revealed supremely in Jesus: 'The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We *saw his glory*, the glory which he received as the Father's only son' (Jn 1.14 my emphasis; cf. 1 Jn 1.1–4). In the Synoptic Gospels, the Transfiguration is a particular highlight (Mt 17.1–9; Mk 9.2–8; Lk 9.28–36; see also 2 Pet 1.16–18; cf. also Rev 1.12–17). Hebrews also directs us to contemplate Jesus: 'Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb 12.2). The sonorous introduction to this letter indicates that Jesus 'is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word' (1.3 NRSV). 'He reflects the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of God's own being, sustaining the universe with his powerful word' (1.3 GNB).

Glory is the manifestation of all that can be revealed, not the total reality of God. Without the manifestation of God's glory there is nothing to contemplate. The removal of or lack of God's glory indicates the absence of God, his non-availability. Glory both reveals and hides. We can see this sense of hiddenness throughout John's Gospel, where Jesus' glory is made known to some and is hidden from others, and there are certain key events, both miracles and crucifixion, through which this glory is seen most poignantly.

I recognise, of course, that our knowledge of God is essentially incomplete and even distorted; God is the unknowable as well as the one who has revealed himself to us. Paul again affirms this complex truth when he writes, 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part: then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Cor 13.12).

Paul also touches on the issue of the limits of our knowing. Until we become believers and receive the Holy Spirit we have a veil over our minds (2 Cor 3.16–17). Does this mean that as believers there is no 'mystery' left? There is no 'more' to the understanding of God for us? Hardly, why else would Paul pray that the Spirit would increase our wisdom and understanding (Eph 1.17–19; Phil 1.9; Col 1.9-10). It is true that Jesus promises, 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth: for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears' (Jn 16.13). This is not a once for all event but a continuing process.

The imagery of human relationships ('face to face') is perhaps as near as we can get to expressing the knowability/unknowability of God; there is always a mystery, an 'otherness' about any person, such that we can never control the other without diminishing the 'personal' relationship. But while we can never fathom the other completely, our sense as humans is that we shall discover new depths about the *same* person, not discover the person was alien to the one we have encountered. How much more then should this be our expectation with God with whom there is no 'shadow of turning'? So the 'unknown' God is essentially complementary and not contradictory to the God who is revealed to us in Jesus. Jesus knows the dereliction of human experiences, when we seem to be dealing with alien realities, as his cry from the cross indicates (see Mk 15.33–34). Yet, there is an ambivalence in this cry, quoting as it does from Psalm 22, which ends with such confidence in God and his purposes (see also Mk 14.32–37). Indeed, it

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is because of the Christological nature of our faith that we hold on to this ambivalence in the most desperate of times and cannot surrender to the dark side in spite of all appearances.

When we add in the eschatological dimension to God's unknowability (*then* we shall see face to face, i.e. without any intermediary, without any possibility of misunderstanding, with complete openness), we can also follow through on the dynamic of this psalm. The resolution of the tension between our present experience and contemplation of God must await the end; the final revelation will unmask the confusions.[5] However much the reality we are dealing with seems alien, it is our belief that this will be 'more truly' the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, for me, however much we go on to discover or however much remains unknown to us about God, as we journey, it is with the confidence that we will return 'only more sure of all we thought was true'.[6]

It is, of course, good that we admit (and understand the implications such as humility, respect towards others who see differently, openness to change our stated understandings) the limitations of our grasp of who God truly is – limits which arise not only because of the vastness and otherness of the reality of God, but also the limitations of our minds (in all their functions) together with the distortions which arise within us and which are projected onto all we know, think and, indeed, contemplate. But part of our Christian response is the objectivity of revelation primarily in Jesus Christ and secondarily through the scriptural witness to Jesus. Without the scriptural witness we, in contrast to the first disciples, would not be able to contemplate Christ (see Jn 1.14 and 1 Jn 1.1–4). Another component in this armoury is the role of the Holy Spirit enabling us to grasp who God is (Eph 1.17–19). In furthering our transformation we distort what we are shown less, and contemplate God's image rather than project our distortions on God, thus making him in our image. Our perspective is not that there is some light and much darkness; rather, 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (Jn 1.5). This applies not only to the darkness of all that opposes God, but also the mystery of God himself.

Within Christian contemplation, we will also take into account the recognition that the biblical understanding of sin implies the distortions in our perceptions and those threaded through the whole of creation. So when aspects, or indeed the very existence, of the 'natural world, become a source or starting point for our contemplation, Christian contemplation will always wish to make allowance for the view that in seeking this way we may not end up finding God but engaging these distortions. Contemplation that focuses on these sources alone thus runs the risk of becoming idolatrous, exchanging the image of the Creator for the creation, or some aspect of it.

Sometimes contemplation that focuses on the natural world can seem naïve and lack any sensibility because the natural world has been impacted by human technology. Recognising the distorted reality of 'nature' frees us to recognise, more positively than is often the case, the potential of culture and human technology as a lens for contemplation.[7] Within the Christian world of contemplation it is inappropriate to denigrate human achievements, appointed as they are by God (Gen 1.27–29) and reflecting the image of those who are made in the image of God. This tendency may account for the overemphasis on the natural compared with human achievement, in contrast to the vision of the 'New Jerusalem' as a city and not a garden (Rev 21; vv. 23–27 are particularly pertinent here).

So, within the Christian tradition, we should not dismiss either the created world (even though all we know it has been modified by sinful human beings either directly or indirectly[8]), nor the developments of this world by human ingenuity. Yet we see all of this through the filter of our primary source of contemplation, Jesus Christ.

There are many adjuncts to this Christological focus. Iconography and Christian art will assist many. But the insight of iconography that we look through the icon and not remain on the icon is vital. For some sacramentally focused contemplation will play a vital part. Christian music may also assist our attentiveness and sharpen our perception of the one we contemplate. However, as with the words of Scripture, so the music fails unless it carries us beyond itself to the source. They only contribute to contemplation if 'they bear witness to me'. In engaging our emotional being, they can assist us in freeing us to contemplate with our fuller self than is possible for some of us when contemplating through the text of Scripture alone.

Perhaps there is one more distinctive, or at least emphasis, which pertains to Christian

contemplation, namely that to be truly Christian, contemplation will have a transformative impact on the contemplative; this transformation will have a 'Christ-like shape' to it. It can never be enough to be absorbed by the adoration of the other. The other will change us into his likeness. So while contemplation involves a deep resting in and receptivity to God, and in that sense is passive, because it is this God it is never without its change in us which requires our willing affirmation. Whatever the interpretative challenges of 2 Corinthians 3.18, this seems to be a central point: 'And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord … are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.'

As Paul indicates elsewhere, such transformation involves knowing the 'sharing of his sufferings' (Phil. 3.10) or even more daringly 'completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (Col 1.24). Thus, the contemplative will anticipate a challenging experience as he or she is moved into the deep likeness of Christ. The dark night of the soul, even despair and suffering may be part of this process; but so also might the challenge to live in a fully Christ-like way in a fallen world, with the consequences that follow.

I am convinced that if we are to avoid a shallow Christian presence in our contemporary world we need to rediscover the practice of contemplation. Equally, however, I suggest that we need to explore a distinctively Christian approach to contemplation. Here I have suggested a number of aspects to consider. I would encourage others to develop this further.