

Can Christians Engage in Non-Christian Practices? Eastern Meditations and Contemplative Prayer

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INTRODUCTION

According to the historian Arnold Toynbee, the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism should be considered as the most important event of the twentieth century.² Like never before, it would seem, the East and the West meet in a way that favors economic, political, cultural, and spiritual exchanges. Though the commercial aspects of the exchange might seem to attract the most attention and may well prove to play the greatest role in guiding our future, we must not underestimate the religious impact of the interaction. It is here perhaps that greater changes are taking shape. When an individual is tested in his grasp of the sacred, it is his vision of the world and his way of being in relationship with himself, others, and his environment that become modified.

As Western Christianity encounters Eastern religions, Buddhism represents a particular challenge with its doctrinal refusal of acknowledging the existence of God and the great ease with which it attaches itself to new cultures, as is now the case in Western countries. If these religions present a particular, perhaps unparalleled challenge for Christianity, it is nonetheless this larger assembly of Eastern (non-Abrahamic) religions, including Hinduism and Daoism, that will impact Christianity.

Contact with these religions is most often realized in the adoption of their meditation practices, which have been readily received in the West for several decades. Whether it be forms of Buddhist meditation (such as *zazen*, *vipassana*, or Tibetan meditations³) or diverse forms of yoga, these practices,

each in its own way, answer what is seen by many as the contemporary needs for interiority.⁴ (This is especially true where Christianity is equated with moralism, legalism, ritualism, and dogmatism.) While it is true that some who adopt Oriental meditation practices may be moved to leave their church, others choose to remain and integrate these same practices into their relationship with God. Note that when adopted into a Christian context, the ways of practicing these meditations are varied, as are their implications.

Pierre de Bethune, a Benedictine monk, has identified three approaches to the integration of practices. The first consists of borrowing portions of Oriental practice, extracting them from their point of origin and using them as a preparation to Christian prayer. For example, from Zen Buddhism, one might only use a posture and a form of concentration with no attention to the Buddhist philosophy or anthropology behind them. Therefore, Zen simply becomes a method of relaxation to improve one's regard toward God in preparation to prayer. The second approach seeks to reinterpret Eastern meditations to recapture and give new perspectives to Christian contemplative prayer. The Benedictine John Main follows this approach. While in Malaysia, he received the practice of *mantra* (sacred words or phrases that are often repeated) from his Hindu master, Swami Satyananda, which greatly shaped his presentation of Christian meditation. Finally, the third approach adopts an Oriental practice without rejecting any of its religious origins or its view of ultimate reality. This leads to an interior or "intrareligious" dialogue (Panikkar), where one's way of being Christian in the world is open to the influence of the way of Buddhism or Hinduism. This was the situation of Henri le Saux, another Benedictine monk. Upon arriving in India to introduce the contemplative tradition of St. Benedict, he entered deeply into the practice of nonduality (*advaita*) while encountering a particular practice of silence adopted by Hindu hermits (*sannyasa*).

Regardless of how these ways of adopting an Eastern meditative practice differ from one another, they all communicate the positive impact that Eastern meditations can have on a Christian's effort to regain the best of contemplative tradition and to deepen prayer life.

Though many would testify to the benefits of these Eastern meditations, it is not to say that unanimity exists. Some would, in fact, declare them as non-Christian attitudes and dangerous to the faith. The adoption of these practices is seen as controversial in many Christian denominations and particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, whose leading authorities have strongly warned its members against engaging in them. This distrust is directed specifically against the Buddhist or Hindu practices, which are wrongly linked to Gnostic heresies of Christianity's early centuries as well as to occult meditative practices, to New Age techniques, or worse, to a demonic strategy! But suspicion exists equally regarding the contemplative

renewal in the Church, prompted by East-West dialogues. This view warns against forms of prayer that would seem Christian but are, according to detractors, a replica of Eastern meditations, supposedly masquerading as a Trojan horse to contaminate, from within, authentic Christian prayer.

In this chapter, we will seek to better understand this controversy, its nature, its issues, and implications as we look at two cases within the Roman Catholic Church that arose in tandem with the publication of an official text important for our concern. The first case relates to the monks of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) who were accused of treason by theologians, notably Hans Urs von Balthasar, for having opened their monastery's door to Zen. This resulted in a warning from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued, by way of a letter sent to bishops from Cardinal Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI), regarding *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* (1989). The second case relates to "Centering Prayer" as taught by the Trappist monk Thomas Keating. It was denounced as a New Age practice. The accusations lean heavily on the pontifical document *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* (2003), which tends to blend New Age with Eastern religions. As a way of introducing these two cases, I will describe the contexts in which they arose and the issues that attach themselves to them. This perspective is necessary to show that the controversy we are examining goes beyond a mere examination of meditation techniques.

CONTEXT AND ISSUES

The proposed two cases fall within the contemplative renewal movement observed in the Roman Church resulting from contact with Asian religions since the second half of the twentieth century. More precisely, they fall within the MID, a special though not exclusive vehicle for this contemplative renewal.⁵ This page in the story of monasticism is little known yet is at the heart of the encounter between Christianity and Eastern religions in the area of religious experience. It is therefore appropriate to look at the history of this particular context to better understand the motivations and implications regarding Eastern meditations within the Christian milieu.⁶ These controversies, in reality, go beyond questions of theology and asceticism, concerning themselves with the appropriate way of Christian prayer and therefore with the way of corresponding one's prayer to faith and beliefs. The repercussions extend to missionary, social, and pastoral concerns.

Let us first look at the missionary context. In 1960, the Benedictine, Cistercian, and Trappist orders came together for the first time around a common project—the creation of the Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM), whose goal was to introduce monasticism beyond the West, into countries referred to as "mission field." Even before

the openings created by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–1965),⁷ monks desired to be attentive to cultures and religions, an attitude that drove them to recognize the need for interreligious dialogue. This would eventually be seen especially in Asia, where religion and culture are so interconnected that it is impossible to imagine planting Christianity without first becoming familiar with the religion that lives so deeply within the surrounding culture. How can one interest the people of India or Thailand in the way of Christian contemplation without first understanding the forms of Hindu and Buddhist prayers? It is in being open to the way in which the other relates to the sacred or the divine reality that one can then communicate with him or her, in a language that will be understood, the specific Christian way of praying that opens the way to the God of Jesus.

This process of inculturation cannot ignore the meditative practices that we find at the heart of Eastern ascetic traditions. This is what the AIM Christian monks discovered at the occasion of the pan-Asian congress held in Bangkok in 1968, whose goal was to highlight the challenges of establishing a monastic mission in Asia. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton, one of the participants, clearly established the importance of this dialogue:

And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions. . . . The combination of natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals—and mere this or that.⁸

At the end of the congress, Merton encouraged younger monks to live a few days in a temple with Buddhist monks.

Vatican II heartily encourages engagement with these, contrary to what many opponents say regarding Eastern meditations. The council's Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, underlines the importance of the contemplative life for evangelization since it "clearly manifests and signifies the inner nature of the Christian calling"⁹ and communicates, depending on the makeup and the particular character of each nation, the mystical riches that are the glory of the tradition of the Church. To this end, the document invites religious persons to "reflect attentively on how Christian religious life might be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions, whose seeds were sometimes planted by God in ancient cultures already prior to the preaching of the Gospel."¹⁰ Council members explicitly encouraged the adoption of Buddhist and Hindu meditations for the main purpose of the inculturation of Christianity, especially in Asia, calling for the birth of a church that would be of Asian character rather than planting a Western church in Asia.

Now we come to the presentation of the social dimension related to the adoption of Eastern meditations in a Christian context. From within the missionary context outlined earlier, Christian monks became gradually aware of two important elements that play a role in the emergence of a global society. They first discovered the ease with which they are able to get along with Buddhist and Hindu monks, dialoguing especially successfully in the area of religious experience whereas doctrinal discussions often lead to obstacles. They also realized that the presence of and interest in Asian religions in Western countries necessitate that a dialogue also be established in the West. This led to the development of dialogue, detached from missionary and conversion interests, dedicated to the development of a culture of peace.

It is in this context that in 1978 the monks of AIM created two commissions for interreligious dialogue, one in Europe and the other in the United States, which, in 1994, became independent from missionary activities. This new movement is called MID. Related to the creation of these commissions, Jerome Theisen, abbot primate of the Benedictine order, encourages all Benedictine monks to work toward a better world: "It is our task to stress the spiritual values of the various world religions in the hope that through knowledge and dialogue we who belong to monastic institutes may contribute to the creation of peace in the world. Pax is Saint Benedict's gift to us and our gift to the interreligious dialogue."¹¹

Note that the affirmation of this separate dialogue is due largely to the prayer for peace initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1986 at Assisi. It was realized, even then, that a convergence of religions would be essential to combating injustice and violence. Monks participate in their own way to this movement. Desiring to contribute in a unique fashion, they engage in a profound dialogue with the spiritual East to build spiritual bridges for a world that is increasingly global.

Far from being proselytization, the action of monks aims at mutual understanding, and, to this end, they create an appropriate space to meet heart to heart as described by the theologian Ewert Cousins:

Now that the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in center to center unions, discovering through interreligious dialogue what is most authentic in each other, releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness.¹²

This profound encounter relies on a practice of hospitality that insists on welcoming the other as much as being received by the other. As of 1979, MID launched a program of exchange that permitted Christian monks to live for some periods of time in Buddhist monasteries in Japan and India and, conversely, allow Buddhists to share in the life of Christian monks in Europe and in the United States. During these exchanges, reference to Eastern meditation practices is frequent. Benedictines and Trappists give

themselves to long hours of *zazen* while spending time in Zen temples of Japan. Some of them integrate the sitting practice in their prayer life, often setting aside a dedicated space for this purpose in their monastery. A particular reflection point naturally follows; that is, how does this type of meditation relate to contemplative prayer as understood by the Christian tradition?

It is to this reflection that the first interreligious assembly at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1996 is dedicated.¹³ Fifty Christian and Buddhist male and female monks and nuns met for five days at the monastery where Thomas Merton lived to dialogue on meditation and contemplation issues. The participants were invited to speak, first of all, according to their personal experiences rather than from their established churches' positions. Note that each day began early in the morning with a time of meditation shared in silence by Buddhists and Christians sitting side by side.

In looking at the adoption of Eastern meditations by Christians we discover at least two things. On the one hand, it is a privileged ground from which a fruitful dialogue regarding religious experience may emerge; on the other hand, it highlights a certain difficulty that Christianity has in meeting the needs of those desiring contemplative spirituality, not that this spirituality is absent, but that it has been somehow neglected in the Western church, especially since the seventeenth century. Several monks are rediscovering a certain sense of interiority, a life of prayer renewed by contact with Asian religions, in particular because of the adoption of some of their meditation practices.

Finally, we look at the pastoral dimension associated with the adoption of Eastern meditations. Already, at the time of the pan-Asian congress of AIM held at Bangalore in 1973, monks had encountered young people from the West who were traveling to India in search of a spiritual experience that did not seem to be available in the Christian society they had left behind. This phenomenon will be acknowledged during the MID foundational meetings in Loppem, Belgium, and in Petersham, Massachusetts, in 1977. Monks felt prompted to engage with these young persons who desired to reconnect with their spiritual tradition while expecting to be understood and accepted with their experience of Eastern meditation.

To respond to this new challenge, the idea was birthed that certain monks would have the task of acquiring theoretical knowledge as well as practical experience in Eastern meditation practices. Western Christians who have had experience in Buddhist or Hindu asceticism and who also wish to integrate a renewal within their churches are, in general, those who have some familiarity in the mystical and contemplative tradition of Christianity. According to the Trappist Thomas Keating, those "who have experienced the peace that emerges out of deep interior silence through some Eastern technique will be disinclined toward a conceptual form of prayer. . . ."¹⁴

In other words, the detour into Asia seeks to turn from prayer that uses many words and favors a return to a Christian spirituality of love and of silence (what is called *apophatic* spirituality, often nonlinguistic or focusing on the way that the divine surpasses all human knowledge or understanding) by the rediscovery of figures seen as the great mystic, or spiritual, authors, from the Desert Fathers to Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, Marguerite Porete, and John of the Cross.¹⁵ This is especially evident in the case of the Trappist monk Thomas Keating, second president of AIM in the United States.

While passing by his monastery, young people often asked for directions to a nearby ashram. He realized how difficult it was for Christianity to meet their longings and hoped, with other Trappist monks (Basil Pennington and William Menninger), to make contemplative prayer more accessible to greater numbers, using a language more suited to a contemporary world with its awareness of modern psychology and receptivity to Eastern practices. This is how centering prayer was birthed, not in the creation of a new way of prayer but in the renewal of a long-standing tradition of prayer.

We can easily understand that the adoption of Eastern meditations, keeping in mind the missionary, social, and pastoral repercussions, places the Church on a road toward radical change. Some consider that the actual connection with Eastern religions is an event as determinative for the Church as was the encounter with Greek philosophies in the first centuries of the Christian era.¹⁶ Henri le Saux maintains in even stronger terms that India, with its experience of nonduality (*advaita*), is the future of the Church in its stage of ultimate development: "For oneself and for humanity at large, and ultimately for the holiness of the Church, India has been chosen by God to clear a path for the human spirit towards the ultimate peak of consciousness."¹⁷ If this is true we cannot predict what Christianity will look like tomorrow.

It is not clear, though, that most Western Christian churches, notably in our examples here the Roman Catholic Church, are prepared to take advantage of all the opportunities in what may be a crucial encounter with Asia and its religions and take on the associated coming changes. Resistance to such changes exists, especially on the part of members of the Vatican, while the same is true in many Protestant churches as well. Some of the debate is around issues of authority, where traditionally, especially the Roman Catholic Church has asserted the concept that, in its hierarchical and apostolic (i.e., its claims to come directly from Jesus's disciples or apostles) structure, it is the one and only mediator between God and humans, the one and only valid representation of the work of Christ on Earth.¹⁸

In light of these statements, we can more easily grasp that the debate on Eastern meditations involves larger issues than a simple matter of prayer and Christian faith; the issues are not simply spiritual and theological but

also involve church structure and necessarily politics. Adoption of these meditations in a Christian context challenges a certain vision of the Catholic Church where it sees itself as the universal church dictating its norms to the diverse local churches, including those in Asia. In other words, wherever these meditation practices are demonized, we must keep in mind that they are at the heart of a larger debate where two great visions of the Church clash: one in favor of a true global and pluralist church,¹⁹ where power would be shared among diverse local churches and not held singularly in Rome, and the other that insists that the Western church is universal.

These few elements that we have highlighted from within the Christian context where reception of Eastern meditations is occurring are important to gain a perspective on the two cases we will now look at.

FIRST CASE STUDY: SOME MONKS ACCUSED OF TREASON

In 1983, Saint Paul Publications (Paris) published *The Banks of the Ganges to the Banks of the River Jordan* (its original French title is *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain*²⁰), a series of articles on the dangers of Eastern meditations, especially in the context of Christian prayer life. Not only did it denounce the techniques as being incompatible with the Christian faith, it claimed to show the way in which a "real Catholic" should pray. In reaction to the success of foreign influences, the authors object to the fact that they seem to no longer generate questioning or opposition among Christians.

Among the persons or groups targeted are the monks of MID. They are explicitly named. Immediately within the introduction, there is mention of religious persons who have allowed themselves to be influenced by the fad of Eastern meditations, "searching in anguish, outside of the Christian tradition, for methods and contemplative experiences which are not always authentic."²¹ More precisely, it states that in certain monasteries, Buddhist monks have come to introduce the entire community to Zen. There is one such abbey in Holland which has a Zen garden-room, more spacious than the Church, and the monks are free to come and substitute the office hour by a time of meditation. Countless are the convents where such techniques pose no problem whatsoever, even including at Segovia where the body of St. John of the Cross lies!²²

These statements were aimed precisely at the exchanges of hospitality, mentioned earlier, that were put into place in 1979 by the European MID.

Though in the case of this program, it was not with "anguish," as it is written in the introduction to the book of 1983, that the monks opened their doors to Zen. On the contrary, it was in the hopes of realizing, for the benefit of all, this major meeting between the East and the West, which is now offered to us as never before. The monks are aware that the interaction of

these two spiritual regions represents a challenge as well as an opportunity for current and future generations. Furthermore, the Trappist Jean Leclercq describes the special role that the monk may have in this endeavor:

Throughout its history the Church has encountered strong currents that at first were foreign to it; little by little these confluences brought about great advances in faith and sanctity. Is it not fitting that monks should be, in the way that is proper to them, the artisans of this historic encounter?²³

The relationship of Christian monks to Zen is understood as part of their mission of leading society into new avenues. This goes beyond a mere search for techniques or experiences. In the history of Christianity, in the East as well as the West, monks have been a powerful agent of transformation, individually and corporately, an active agent in moments of profound crisis. We saw this especially in the early church when, in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, monks found their vocation to be in opposition to a Roman society in decline and a church often lax. From here was born a monasticism that subsequently spread throughout Europe and launched a basis for a new civilization.

The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (a very influential German theologian whose thought was greatly admired by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI) grasped how this encounter with the religions of Asia, initiated by the monks, was not banal and that its impact would be profound though rather than making it an occasion for a positive evolution within the Church, he denounced it as a harmful practice. Among the authors of the 1983 book, he is the one who reacted most strenuously against the monks' actions, accusing them of treason and adultery.²⁴ The Asian methods are here associated with the serpent who operates its seduction on the Church:

Certainly, "Eve" is always prone to let herself be seduced, especially when the serpent presents its "New Gospel" under the guise of cultural assimilation, or when a link is made between Shankara and Eckhart,²⁵ between Jung and John of the Cross; even a Merton and the Benedictines of Bangkok and in Bangalore tried to find equilibrium on such a shaky footing.²⁶

The original version of the article by Balthasar appears in German in 1977, a few years after the occasion of the pan-Asian congress in Bangalore (1973) for which he drafted one of the working documents. That is to say that he was to some extent close to the monks and actually assisted their awakening to the dialogue with Buddhism, albeit for strictly missionary intentions.

Monks did not remain passive in face of such accusations. The secretariat office for AIM requested that Benedictine Pierre Massein, in charge of courses at the Catholic Institute of Paris, give his point of view, which he did in an article published in 1979: "[t]he point of view of the Buddhist and

that of the Christian regarding meditation techniques." Massein attacks the préjudices, still prevalent in Christian circles, which undermine Eastern religions and detract from a just understanding. This effort did not stop the publication, 10 years later, of the letter signed by Cardinal Ratzinger on *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* (1989),²⁷ which, picking up elements of the 1983 document, warns Christians against Eastern religions, which it associates with Gnostic heresies from the early centuries of the Christian era.

But contrary to the book of 1983, the Letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith does not aim at the monks of MID. It actually acknowledges the possibility of gleaning from the Oriental meditations "what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured."²⁸ Actually, it could not have been otherwise since the monks in question have always enjoyed the support of the highest Catholic authorities in their encounters with the spiritual Orient. At the congress in Bangkok (1968), the monks received a telegram on behalf of Paul VI praising them for deepening the contact with non-Christian monastics.²⁹ In 1983, Simone Tonini, theologian and abbot general of the Sylvestrine Congregation, specially named by the Vatican to the Management Council of AIM, inasmuch as he is an expert on interreligious matters, participated in one of the exchanges to the heart of Zen monasticism in Japan. Following this exchange, the Vatican specified this type of meeting as a "dialogue on religious experience," which will make it the fourth type of dialogue to be officially cataloged, together with the dialogues on life, action, and theological exchange (see Volume 1, Chapter 8). The pontifical document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) defines it as a dialogue "where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute."³⁰ We must finally mention that in 1978 the creation of interreligious commissions (MID) at the heart of AIM was supported by Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, president of the secretariat for non-Christians.³¹

We can see that Cardinal Ratzinger's letter is not as radical or negative as the book of 1983, where the influence of Eastern meditation practices within the Church are equated with demonic strategies. For example, in his article in the 1983 collection, the theologian Louis Bouyer makes use of R. C. Zaehner (a very distinguished Roman Catholic historian of religion) to denounce the spread of Zen as a "veritable diabolic enterprise."³² Certainly the letter does not hold the same tone, but it also does nothing to counter the accusation. Both documents do speak of the dangers of Eastern meditations and the errors therein, which must be avoided within Christian prayer. Contemplative prayer is not rejected as such, but there is a strong call for proper interpretation. Six principal attitudes were singled out as problematic: pantheism, spiritual privatism, self-liberation, self-immersion, rejection

of the world, and the empty mind as an abdication to demonic forces. These elements will be discussed in greater detail within the second case study.

Though the monks were not explicitly targeted in Ratzinger's letter, they felt the need to respond. Their reactions are varied and numerous.³³ Out of all the reactions, however, the one that will be of greatest impact is that of Pierre de Bethune, Benedictine and pioneer of MID. He grants that the letter has a pastoral and doctrinal tone but not a dialogical one. This is precisely its weakness for it addresses itself in reality to Christians engaged in an existential encounter with other religions but not with actual practitioners of meditation techniques. Thus, the author of the letter inadvertently entered into the domain of dialogue. To criticize Christians who practice Zen is to inevitably make a certain judgment regarding Zen Buddhism. According to Bethune, "in disregarding the dialogical dimension, hereafter essential for the life of the Church, the authors of the Letter considerably weaken any influence their intervention might have with Christians."³⁴ He also criticizes this document from the Vatican for not having listened to those who, within the Church, in particular the monks of MID, have extensive experience of the issues associated with the adoption of Eastern methods.

To remedy this gap, Bethune proposes to pursue a dialogue with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He wants to continue the work of discernment by giving voice to those Christians who in their prayer life are influenced by non-Christian meditations and who further affirm having benefited from these in their spiritual journey. The Cardinal Francis Arinze gave his support to Bethune's project by publishing a response to Ratzinger's letter on July 7, 1991. Arinze, whom we have seen opposes Balthasar when the latter denounces the infiltration of Eastern methods into Christian monasteries, takes a different direction. He refers to the enriching experience MID has enjoyed in having made contact with monks from Asia. From there he urges the monks who are in dialogue to evaluate this long-established experience for the benefit of the Benedictine family and of all the church.

This led to the publication in 1993 of the document *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue: References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics*.³⁵ This is a synthesis of some 50 testimonies from the members of MID. It rests on the following principle: "[E]ven when we merely adopt certain spiritual methods, it is always persons that we welcome; the tradition we encounter is elaborated by generations of seekers of the Absolute."³⁶ Thus, within the encounter with Eastern meditations, where Balthasar sees the serpent or the Antichrist, the monks who are in actual dialogue see the urgency of a sacred hospitality,³⁷ an occasion to demonstrate love for the Catholic Church's traditional enemy, the one who believes or prays otherwise. Here, the central issue is church structure; it goes beyond the simple monastic circle and concerns all Christians.

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The document of 1993 aims to bring about a transformation of mentalities, a new conscience at the heart of the Church, founded on the idea that a relationship with another believer is no longer an obstacle to Christian faith but rather a privileged context for its expression.

The Christian character of this concern is reinforced by the 1999 publication of a letter by Arinze, president of the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), which invites bishops to communicate to him their reflections on the "spirituality of dialogue." His goal is to publish a systematic study on the question. This letter follows the plenary meeting of the PCID held in October 1998, which addressed the topic but also concerned itself more generally with another question from the point of view of Catholic theology: is it possible to engage in prayer together with believers of other religions? This question took on more and more importance following the interreligious meeting held at Assisi in 1986 where organizers immediately rejected such a possibility.³⁸ Add to this that a growing number of Christians of our day testify to a "double adherence," Christian-Buddhist, Christian-Hindu, or, again, Christian-Daoist, a theme that for the first time becomes the purpose of a congress in 1999 in Brussels, organized by the *Voies de l'Orient* (Paths of the East) and grouped Christians from various denominations and backgrounds (see Volume 1, Chapter 10, on multiple religious identities).

In what measure can my connection with Buddhism, Hinduism, or some other religious experience bring me closer to the God of Jesus? Why is this connection more of an opportunity than a threat for my faith? How does it favor the deepening of my personal spirituality? The interest of the monks in a spirituality of dialogue is evident; they respond to the Cardinal's call with a publication, in February of 2003, of a special edition of the bulletin of the International Secretariat for the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. At the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the European and American Commissions of MID, the document entitled *Monastic Experiences of Interreligious Dialogue* groups testimonies of men and women monks regarding the manner in which their connection with Eastern religions influences their experience of the divine. The mobilization of monks around the questions reflected in this document falls within an effort that concerns the entire Church. It is in light of all the inputs received, of all the shared experiences, monastic and other, that a synthesis may begin to develop. But the controversy persists. Blocked since 2003 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Arinze's desired synthesis awaits the light of day.

SECOND CASE STUDY: CENTERING PRAYER, A NEW AGE PRACTICE?

In answer to this need for interiority, which only Eastern meditation practices seem to be able to satisfy, American Trappist monks have renewed

contemplative prayer and made it accessible through a language that is understood today. Keating wrote on the subject:

Though thousands were going to India every summer in search of spirituality and a Guru, very few of them thought of inquiring at a Benedictine or Cistercian monastery about whether they could find a form of spirituality there. The Christian contemplative tradition was believed to be locked up in cloisters. Even there, it often existed in a truncated form with an overemphasis on monastic observances rather than on interior transformation.³⁹

Thus, in the 1970s, William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating offered centering prayer to the masses as an alternative to the Zen practice or yoga.

Though this initiative quickly met a grand success with the creation of Contemplative Outreach, it was not unanimously well received. Many will associate it with the New Age, calling it a dangerous practice and non-Christian.⁴⁰ This is the case of the very influential Catholic Mother Angelica who uses her television network (Eternal Word Television Network) to propagate the idea that centering prayer has nothing to do with contemplation and, worse, it is under demonic influence.⁴¹ She is responding to the logic of this "new evangelization," as presented in the pastoral letter, signed on January 7, 1996, by the archbishop of Mexico, Norberto Rivera Carrera: *A Call to Vigilance (Pastoral Instruction on New Age)*. At the end of the document, this bishop urged Christians to use the media, on which he believes the evangelization of modern culture depends, and it is thus that he calls for a defense of the faith that puts pressure on those who promote the New Age.⁴² A few years later, on February 3, 2003, the Vatican published a study on the same subject presenting an identical perspective: *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the "New Age."*⁴³ These reflections become a guide for those who, in defense of their hope,⁴⁴ announce the gospel and teach the faith.

According to this document, in answer to the spiritual thirst of many contemporaries, it is fitting to understand the errors of what is termed the New Age and to recall the doctrine of "authentic"⁴⁵ Catholic spirituality. The impact of the New Age is undeniable in the West. It is a great influence and all the more since it has no easily identifiable leaders and is a rather diffused current of thought that infiltrates all sectors of society. The sources of the New Age are multiple, but Oriental religions are probably among the strongest. This association is often highlighted by detractors of centering prayer. In his article "The danger of Centering Prayer," Catholic priest Father John Dreher states that the New Age is "as ancient as the Eastern religions from which it draws its resources. . . ."⁴⁶ From where does this recurring temptation to identify these religions with the New Age come from? So much so that wherever centering prayer is denounced as a practice of the New Age, Eastern religions are simultaneously targeted. Thus, there is

a convergence between the texts mentioned in the previous chapter, in particular the letter of 1989 on Christian meditation, which is one of the official documents cited by those who denounce the New Age as being contrary to Christian faith.⁴⁷

Consequently, from one document to another, the same errors to be avoided are listed as a help to those who would be looking for an accurate understanding of Christian prayer, with one exception. In the 1989 letter, these errors are applied, though indirectly, to Eastern religions (these being associated with Gnostic heresies of the early Christian era), in an attempt to address those numerous Christians who are tempted to undertake them in one way or another. On the other hand, in the documents on New Age spiritualities mentioned earlier, a Christian prayer is targeted and denounced as having only the appearance of being Christian. When he mentions the influence of Eastern meditations, Carrera writes: "At times an attempt is made to 'christianize' these forms, as occurred, for example, with 'Centering Prayer' and 'focusing', but the result is always a hybrid form with slight gospel basis."⁴⁸ The attack is here more direct than in the letter of 1989.

If, for Dan DeCelles, this letter directs its warnings to centering prayer,⁴⁹ Keating sees there, for his part, an encouragement to promote it. In his article "Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Tradition," he specifies that the first goal of centering prayer is "to deepen our personal relationship with God through love and the positive fruits that the grace of contemplation brings forth in our lives. Thus, it is a response to the call of Cardinal Ratzinger's *Letter to the Catholic Bishops on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* to renew the Christian contemplative tradition."⁵⁰ In rebuttal, faced with the prospect of being identified with the New Age, he defends centering prayer in light of the criticisms launched against it. This is also what he does in response to the points made by Mother Angelica in an article published in January 1993, "The Christian Contemplative Tradition."⁵¹ He demonstrates that it is not a new practice but rather one that is anchored in the grand tradition of Christian contemplation.

Let us now look at these errors that are so strongly denounced in documents on New Age as well as those on Christian prayers. We referred to six of them earlier: pantheism, spiritual privatism, self-liberation, self-immersion, rejection of the world, and the empty mind as an abdication to demonic forces.

Let us first note what seems to be the origin of all these evils. The document on the New Age gives us some clues: what it basically objects to in centering prayer as well as in Eastern meditations and thus in the New Age is first of all the cult of humanity where "religion is internalized in a way which prepares the ground for a celebration of the sacredness of the self."⁵² It is in this that the following points of controversy are grounded. Keating takes care to demonstrate that each of these points cannot be applied to centering

prayer.⁵³ Indeed, they are questionable, but we will not have the space to elaborate these in this chapter. We can only briefly outline criticisms that centering prayer advocates might face—each, as expressed here, from a Christian (Roman Catholic) stance.

Pantheism

To claim that there is no divine beyond myself is to risk identifying one's self as God, which is rejected as a pantheist notion. In "Centering Prayer: Catholic Meditation or Occult Meditation?" from *The Cross and the Veil*, one can read: "[T]ypical of New Age meditation practice, the soul becomes the center, energy replaces grace, God actually becomes a pantheistic energy."⁵⁴ The absence of otherness is denounced here, and we are reminded of the necessity of maintaining a separation between creator and creature. Giving in to pantheism is to effectively ignore the revelation of God in Jesus Christ who then loses His definite and unique character.⁵⁵ For Ratzinger, relinquishing the mystery of Christ in prayer is considered a betrayal.⁵⁶ Prayer must be, on the contrary, a personal dialogue between the human being and his or her creator. Also, we can read in "The Errors of Centering Prayers," published on *A Catholic Life* blog, where the author identifies centering prayer with the New Age: "Authentic prayer and meditation stem from contact with God. Prayer does not center in one's being as advocates of Centering Prayer claim but rather prayer is a conversation with God from the center of our souls."⁵⁷ Here, centering prayer is reduced to an "[i]mpersonal form of ascetics [that] leads finally to an assertion of the divine principle in the very nature of man."⁵⁸ Giving in to pantheism therefore makes one vulnerable to relativism; that is to say that all religions become worthy on the basis of a religious nature inherent in all human beings apart from any revelation, which Carrera notes,⁵⁹ and is also a denouncing argument that is systematically used by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the International Theological Commission, which was then virtually under the direction of Cardinal Ratzinger.

Spiritual Privatism

Another criticism of centering prayer stresses its egocentric character. The one who practices this arrives at a dead end; it is not God that is found but one's self. It is submitted then that this is contrary to authentic contemplative prayer, which leads to self-transcendence and access to divine transcendence beyond one's self. According to Dreher: "[C]entering prayer differs from Christian prayer in that the intent of the technique is to bring the practitioner to the center of his own being . . . Christian prayer on the contrary centers upon God in a relational way, as someone apart from

oneself."⁶⁰ For its detractors, centering prayer does not meet the criteria for Christian prayer; it is more of a "spiritual narcissism":⁶¹ "Far from simple and sacred, [Centering Prayer] is a codified technique which constructs a psychological and spiritual state of awareness . . . encourages a narcissistic turning-inward and pre-occupation with self-awareness, consciousness-raising and the achieving of preternatural experiences."⁶² Margaret A. Feaster helps us to grasp this point when she refers to the sense of peace that one can experience during the practice of centering prayer. She warns against the illusion that might occur: "To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life."⁶³ In the end, according to these thoughts, centering prayer would only lead to enjoying one's self rather than the presence of God. Not surprising, then, that Ratzinger qualified Eastern meditations as so much autoeroticism (meaning, presumably, that the process itself gave satisfaction),⁶⁴ from which centering prayer would have originated, in *L'Express* dated March 20, 1997. The cardinal expresses an idea already mentioned in *The Banks of the Ganges to the Bank of the River Jordan* (1983): "Though hatha-yoga⁶⁵ leans towards a rigorous chastity, it degenerates into barely disguised eroticism, at least for Western practitioners."⁶⁶ This said, the author of the letter of 1989 does not oppose all forms borrowed from Eastern meditations; they may be useful to the believer as a way of facilitating Christian prayer, which alone leads to a loving dialogue with the God of Jesus; they may actually "constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures."⁶⁷ Here, Eastern meditations as well as centering prayer are reduced, at best, to a simple practice of concentration.

Self-liberation

This is a criticism of the claim that one can simply experience salvation by acknowledging one's true nature. The Gnostic perspective where evil is understood not as sin but as ignorance is denounced.⁶⁸ This contradicts the truth of the fall (ejection of Adam and Eve from Eden) as well as grace being a condition of salvation. The risk attached to the adoption of Eastern meditations and practices of New Age and centering prayer is therefore a "substitution of the means for the end of spirituality."⁶⁹ The technique itself becomes the source of access to God, in which case it is possible to save one's self by one's own efforts. The pontifical documents remind us that this is illusory and that only grace saves. Salvation is not an innate property of the soul. It is not limited to human faculties, contrary to the claims of the denounced techniques. Grace does not rise out of human action. It is a gift from God, and this, according to his choice, not ours. And where this gift

is given, the soul is pulled away from self-absorption. In other words, "[w]hen God calls a person to contemplative prayer the soul is no longer inclined to meditate by itself."⁷⁰ This affirms Ratzinger's points, according to which the "love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be 'mastered' by any method or technique."⁷¹ The idea is to not attach one's self to any particular practice, of which the detractors of centering prayer accuse its practitioners. We note, finally, that for the documents in question, this acknowledging of grace as a gift operates solely in connection to Jesus Christ in the context of the Church and its sacraments.

Self-immersion

The official texts regarding the New Age and contemplative prayer also denounce the temptation to try to understand salvation in the way of Hinduism, as immersion into an impersonal divinity. They recall that salvation only makes sense as it relates to a personal God. This cannot be confused with a feeling of eternity that might be sensed in the practice of meditations like Zen or centering prayer.⁷² According to the Dominican, A. M. de Monléon, the "ineffable nature of the divine experience does not come from the dissipation of the subject into its object. . . . The experience is inexpressible not because the soul disappears, is absorbed, annihilated in God, but because it is wrapped in His unique splendour."⁷³ According to detractors of centering prayer, such an experience of lightness is more likely due to self-hypnosis⁷⁴ or again a confused emptiness where the individual is in search of an altered state of consciousness. Christian prayer characterizes itself, to the contrary, by a conversation with God:

In Catholic contemplative practice, we bring all of ourselves to God and enter into conversation or communion, bringing everything with us to lay at His feet. All manner of worries, concerns and thoughts are stepping stones to sanctity as we enter into conversation about them with Him. Letting go in this particular technique (Centering Prayer) does not simply involve a discipline of will . . . but a profound distortion of the use of the will to achieve a practiced dissociation from ourselves and a mentalization of prayer that can foster habitual dissociation, fantasies and ego flight.⁷⁵

Authentic divine love always implies an otherness, a necessity of maintaining the separateness between God and the human. One must guard then against the unidentifiable absolute of Hinduism, which would lead to an abandonment of the Trinitarian God as well as the humanity of Christ. All notions of emptiness are outrightly rejected, recalling that the "Christian concept [of God] is very clear one."⁷⁶

Rejection of the World

The pontifical document on the New Age identifies as "spiritual narcissism" any "attachment to a private world of ego-fulfillment and a consequent (though not always apparent) withdrawal from the world."⁷⁷ For her part, Sister Clair of Jesus denounces in yoga the "distancing from the world of men in order to dive into a greater reality."⁷⁸ We find here a pessimistic conception of the material dimension that some relate to Gnostic heresies of the first centuries of Christianity,⁷⁹ a dualistic approach that we expect to find in Eastern meditations and the New Age and, from there, in centering prayer. If Eastern meditations are prone to finding matter evil⁸⁰ and encourage the denial of body,⁸¹ that is because they lead, according to detractors, to cutting oneself off from one's self, one's thoughts and imagination,⁸² and thus placing no confidence in human nature. Such an attitude is considered as being incompatible with Christian faith and more specifically with the Cross that, on the contrary, reveals a God who approaches us through a physical world. It is in relation to "Someone,"⁸³ the incarnated Son of God in this world which God so loved (*John* 3:16) that I am saved. Furthermore, the Cross is the location of the resurrection of the body,⁸⁴ by which, A. M. de Monl on affirms, we may know that, contrary to Eastern meditations, Christian asceticism has never had contempt for the body.⁸⁵ This, of course, is questionable.⁸⁶

The Empty Mind and Demonic Forces

Let us mention a final alleged error, which consists in substituting a symbol of emptiness for Christian symbols.⁸⁷ The danger here is of exposing oneself to forces of evil. For detractors, Hindu and Buddhist practices resemble occult practices, which call on a spiritual energy contrary to the Holy Spirit, a demonic force we make ourselves vulnerable to as soon as we engage in emptying the mind.⁸⁸ In this, centering prayer represents a real threat since it seeks an empty mind in the same way that Hinduism and Buddhism do to find God within. Thus, one turns away from Jesus Christ as soon as one stops thinking of Him and nourishing affection for Him: "Christ cannot truly inhabit hearts whose thoughts are elsewhere."⁸⁹ To keep Jesus in mind is a guarantee that our prayer remains Christian. Immediately we pass into emptiness, we become prey to occult forces.⁹⁰ This explains the perverse effects of a regular meditation practice. The book *The Banks of the Ganges to the Bank of the River Jordan* refers to physical as well as psychological pathologies in those who are adept in Eastern practices. Though benefits might be noted in the beginning, they soon become problematic when emotional capacity is lowered and aggression and egocentrism increase.⁹¹

As well, many see in centering prayer, when it is associated with Eastern religions, a strategy of the devil that consists in weakening the Church from within. Dreher is clear in this regard:

My hypothesis is that it is Satan's strategy, in all these things, to strip away the physiological and psychological forces that, in our fallen state, are a failsafe protection for the human spirit. . . . The Catholic Church is the major obstacle to the Devil's plan. . . . The rapid spread of Centering Prayer in the past decade into so many areas which are at the very heart of Catholic faith is, I believe, part of the Devil's strategy against the Church.⁹²

Ratzinger's letter remains more poised and measured. Without giving into an exaggerated fear of the devil, the author is contented to simply invite Christians to "interpret correctly the teaching of those masters who recommend 'emptying' the spirit of all sensible representations and of every concept, while remaining lovingly attentive to God. In this way, the person praying creates an empty space which can then be filled by the richness of God."⁹³

As a final note on these six issues, it is probably far too extreme to accuse centering prayer of the faults that are alleged here. Also, the tone of these condemnations that is hostile to Asian religions in general may be said to be contrary to the spirit of texts such as *Nostra Aetate* and others that came from the Second Vatican Council, which stressed the spiritual value that could be found beyond the boundaries of the Church.

CONCLUSION

In the two case studies that we have presented, the controversy around Christian and non-Christian meditations rests on the acknowledgement of a thirst for interiority in the West, as much as on the different options proposed in response to it. In the four principal documents to which we have referred, the authors note at the outset the growing need among Westerners for a form of spirituality that embraces the world. *The Banks of the Ganges to the Bank of the River Jordan*⁹⁴ goes as far as to accept that Christianity has not offered its best in face of "a too long pent up thirst for transcendence . . . a search that is truly mystical."⁹⁵ Furthermore, there is a type of negligence in Christian circles as to the role of the body in relationship to God that could explain the attraction and the success of non-Christian spiritual trends.⁹⁶ The need has thus been felt to rediscover the path of sources of Christian spirituality to move toward the highest religious aspirations as much as to avoid getting lost in the research of its substitutes.

So, in this effort, the documents in question share the same concern—that of preserving the Christian way of praying. In wondering if it is possible to incorporate within Christian prayer that which had been foreign to it,

Ratzinger is contented to outline the nature of the latter. It is, in fact, an opportunity to reaffirm a dogmatic position, the correct way of believing, by pointing to the elements which are incompatible with Christian faith. Completely absent is any reflection on the possibility of dialogue with other spiritual experiential efforts such as those of the monks of MID. It can be suggested that what we find here is a traditional apologetic attitude, which consists of "saying the catechism against someone"⁹⁷ as Henri de Lubac would say, that is to say, it is simply a defensive (apologetic) reaction to what is different by reciting traditional belief in an unchanged and unreflective way. The debate is in fact centered on this foreign influence, Eastern meditations, which then become the real problem to be addressed.

Against this foreign influence, we see the opposition of parts of the Church, which continues to insist that it has everything and has always had all that is necessary for the complete spiritual flourishing of each and every person, a church that presents itself as being the only power to this end. Carrera writes:

May the Catholic faithful, with our help, discover that everything they yearn for (a real spiritual life, inner healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, an encounter with the unfathomable mystery of the one true God and his saving plan) is already incomparably present in the Catholic faith, into which they were initiated at baptism.⁹⁸

Nowhere does anyone make this challenging encounter with Eastern meditations into an opportunity to examine in a sane and constructive way the practices of the Church. The adopted position, on the contrary, urges us to yield to the recommendations of the Church regarding the way of prayer, without offering a real opening to experiences, good or bad, that may have occurred in adopting Zen or yoga. Instead, it is concerned with stopping all foreign influences and reasserting the central value of baptism and the practices of the Church without really listening to a world that is changing, a world that the Vatican II conciliatory letter *Gaudium et Spes* argued that Christians should be responding to. The defensive effort is centered on the announcement that Christ "is the same yesterday, today and always."⁹⁹

Truly then, it is a challenged and threatened Church that is revealed by this controversy over Eastern meditations, a Christianity in evolution, called to serve a world that is itself experiencing profound change, all the while favoring a return to an evangelical simplicity. Certainly these documents on Christian meditation (1989) and on the New Age (2003) intentionally encourage a return to a "spirit of childhood."¹⁰⁰ But one must question the credibility of such a suggestion: how can one reconcile a desire for this spirit, which is inherently nonjudgmental, innocent, hospitable, loving, and forgiving, with such out of hand condemnation (and damnation) toward the one who prays and believes otherwise?

For Christians who wish to respond openly to Eastern meditation, the question they ask is not whether the Church has reason to question Oriental practices or the New Age; rather they speak of attentiveness to the Holy Spirit that they say invites Christians to welcome the stranger. This call to find the Spirit in the religious experience of the other is anchored in the idea presented by John Paul II, that "every authentic prayer is brought about by the Holy Spirit Who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person."¹⁰¹ For many Christians, there lies the justification and the power of dialogue to which all the baptized and in particular the members of MID are invited: "All Christians are called to dialogue. While it is important that certain individuals have specialized training in this area, others also have an important contribution to make. I am thinking in particular of the inter-monastic dialogue and that of other movements, groups, and institutions."¹⁰²

Nevertheless, to the Christians involved, it is not to say that when they seek to deepen their relationship with the Spirit of Christ by way of dialogue it is easy. The Trappist nun Denyse Lavigne, member of MID, asks herself, following the founding meeting of the American MID: "Do I have the courage to engage in a complete rethinking of monastic life and structures?"¹⁰³ The meeting in Petersham "was for me, not simply 'another meeting' or workshop among many, not a naive attempt at dialogue, not some fad-type involvement with superficial techniques of Eastern or Western meditation. Rather, Petersham was an overture, a threshold into a new kind of monastic adventure: a journey which begins within and reaches out to all nations and peoples. I now view the Acts of the Apostles as my own journey, both within and without."¹⁰⁴

For many Christians today an analogy would be made to the way that Jesus and his message were able to be understood in a Greco-Roman world and flourished. Likewise, today, this same influence encourages a new initiative from Christians, this time toward our global and pluralist world. Here, the matter of Eastern meditations plays a unique role in the development of a universal Christian consciousness, founded on respect for religious differences and on a greater and deeper understanding of the gospel. So much so that for Keating, the meeting between the East and the West is perhaps one of the great moments in history:

Unfortunately, human limitations have too often prevailed over the presentation of the Gospel in its entirety. The purity and simplicity of the Gospel have been diluted by the inroads of the secular culture, with its almost exclusive emphasis on analysis and on the use of technology in order to dominate nature, the world, and the people. Yet, it is at just this present moment that the world is on the threshold of a great spiritual confrontation between the East and Christianity. This confrontation could be one of the greatest

moments in history. Never before have the Vedic and Buddhist traditions confronted the Christian tradition on so broad a scale.¹⁰⁵

Christians believe such changes will not occur unless it operates under the influence of the Spirit. To this end Cardinal Martini suggests seeking, in spite of attitudes of fear and suspicion, reminding devotees that the "Word of God is simple, and seeks out as its companion a heart that listens. . . . Neither the clergy nor ecclesiastical law can substitute for the inner life of the human person."¹⁰⁶ Here the cardinal urges Christians to make loving and free initiatives while resisting the constraints of the institution; the prudent counsel of the church's documents on the subject of Christian prayer and Eastern meditations remains precious in the sense that it reminds us of the need for discernment in all efforts to follow the Holy Spirit. Clearly, though, the issue is fraught with controversy. While this discussion has focused on the Roman Catholic Church, similar debates have occurred in many other Christian denominations.¹⁰⁷ The global spread and size of the Catholic Church, though, means that these debates are clearly seen and analyzed through examples found within it.

GLOSSARY

Advaita/nonduality: referring to the Hindu philosophy of nonduality whereby the human soul and the divine are held to be identical, as opposed to Hindu *dvaita*, duality, where the human soul and God are seen as distinct. It is particularly associated with a figure called *Shankara*.

Apologetics: the use of argument to defend one's own religious position; refers to the practice and to related sets of literature.

Centering prayer: according to Thomas Keating, centering prayer "is a method of prayer that comes out of the Christian tradition. . . . It brings us into the presence of God and thus fosters the contemplative attitudes of listening and receptivity."¹⁰⁸

Contemplative prayer: according to Thomas Keating, contemplative prayer "is a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union."¹⁰⁹

Interiority: here the word "interiority" is used to refer to an attitude of inner recollection and awareness that allows a self-knowledge process through which our true nature can be found.

Mantra: a sacred formula repeated as a support for meditation.

Meditation (zazen, vipassana, Tibetan, mantra): in a Buddhist context, the word meditation refers to practices that aim to tame the mind and calm down the flow of thoughts to have a clear vision of reality as it is. *Zazen* means seated meditation in Japanese. It is a Zen Buddhist practice in which all judgmental thinking is suspended and all thoughts and emotions are let go without getting involved in them. *Vipassana* is a practice from Theravada Buddhism that requires one to be aware, while remaining non-judgmental, of all sensations, emotions, and thoughts to realize the impermanency of

everything and penetrate the true nature of reality. In Tibetan Buddhism, meditative practices often involve gestures (*mudra*), repetition of sacred words (*mantra*), and visualization of deities to awake in us the power of wisdom and reach enlightenment.

New Age: the New Age is an eclectic and holistic spiritual movement started in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century that impacts several areas (music, medicine, psychology, ecology, etc.). Stemming from an East-West encounter, this movement is centered on personal growth and includes various influences (Eastern religions, neo-Paganism, channeling, occultism, transpersonal psychotherapy, etc.).

Trappist: a Catholic monastic order with a particular emphasis on silence and prayer, which is more fully known as the Order of Cistercians of Strict Obedience (OCSO). They come from reforms made by Abbot de Rance (1626-1700) in the Abbey of La Trappe, France, from which they take their common name.

Yoga: physical and spiritual discipline of which the ultimate goal is the liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of death and rebirth. The classical *yoga* of *Patanjali* includes eight stages to reach the full absorption (*Samadhi*). The word *yoga* refers to different paths as *jnana-yoga* (path of knowledge), *bhakti-yoga* (path of devotion), and *karma-yoga* (path of work). *Hatha yoga* is a psychosomatic discipline.

NOTES

1. My special thanks to Jocelyne Wise for her translation from French.
2. William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 1.
3. Each form of meditation is associated with a particular Buddhist school: *Zazen* is associated with the Zen school and literally means "seated meditation"; *vipassana* is associated with Theravada Buddhism; and Tibetan Buddhism has various forms of meditation, often using sacred words (mantras) or visualizations of images of Buddhas or other spiritual beings.
4. In this chapter, the word *interiority* is used to refer to an attitude of inner recollection and awareness that allows a self-knowledge process through which our true nature can be found.
5. Monks are not the only ones working in this dialogue with Asian religions where the relationship with Eastern meditations is central for a mutual understanding as well as a contemplative renewal in the church. Jesuits also play important roles (H.E. Lassalle, K. Kadowaki, W. Johnston, A. De Mello, I. Hirudayam, R. Habito, Y. Raguin, etc.). We also consider members of other religious communities, diocesan priests, as well as laypersons (S. Oshida, L. Massignon, J. Moffit, R. Panikkar, etc.). This being said, monks remain unique players for two major reasons. First, they have been officially recognized by Rome, at the pan-Asian congress in Bangkok as the leaders of an interreligious dialogue in the area of experience. Second, no other group within the Catholic Church has been engaged in a dialogue of religious experience with such depth and structure and for such an extended period of time.
6. For a thorough study of the monastic interreligious dialogue, see Fabrice Blée, *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).
7. This council was of major importance for modernizing the Roman Catholic Church and allowed many practices that had previously not been accepted, for instance, in using local languages rather than Latin for many rituals and allowing scholars to use historical

critical methods to study scripture. Most important in this context, it made clear through texts like *Ad Gentes* that other religions, and other forms of Christianity, have legitimacy as forms of spiritual expression.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 343.

9. *Ad Gentes*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, no. 18.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Jerome Theisen, "Abbot Primate Announces New General Secretariat," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* 52 (1995): 2.

12. Ewert H. Cousins, "A Spirituality for the New Axial Period," in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: A Ecumenical Reader*, ed. Collins Kenneth J. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 89. This is what he sees as an important characteristic of what he calls the second axial period, a controversial theory in the study of religion, which suggests that a major global change is taking place in religions and humanity's religious consciousness.

13. Blée, *The Third Desert*, 141–44.

14. Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 51.

15. These authors belong to the long contemplative tradition of Christianity. See Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert* (Norwich, England: Canterbury Press, 2011); Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990); Marguerite Porète, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, from Whom God Hid Nothing: Sermons, Writings, and Sayings* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996); and John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

16. In his conference, *A New Mysticism*, given in Manila in 1992 at the first Asian conference on Christian contemplation, William Johnston stated: "Christianity now encounters Asia and finds there immense treasures. When the ancient Church dialogued with the Greek world, something new was born. The same thing produces itself now in the dialogue with Asia." *North American Board for East-West dialogue* 46 (1993): 6.

17. Henri Le Saux, *La Rencontre de L'hindouisme et du Christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 216.

18. This ecclesial theology is defended by other authors such as Louis Bouyer: "It is therefore within the Church, true Body of Church, that we must insert ourselves in order to participate in the Spirit of Christ and thereby receive His words, not as a simple dead letter but as words that remain life-giving because they remain alive, forever spoken by the Word of God Himself." Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality* (New York: Desclée, 1961), 15. See also chapter 17 of the pontifical declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.

19. In Roman Catholic terms one important supporter of such a view is the theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984), whose thought has influenced many later figures.

20. The title is a reference to two of the great rivers of India (the Ganges) and the biblical lands (the Jordan), and seeks to set a contrast between them.

21. Hans Urs von Balthasar et al., *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain* (Paris: Saint Paul, 1983), 7.

22. *Ibid.*, 8.

23. Blée, *The Third Desert*, 77.

24. Balthasar et al., *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain*, 60–161.

25. Shankara (eighth century CE) is a very significant figure in Hindu philosophy and spirituality associated with nondualist (advaita) thought that sees God and humanity as identical, and who has often been compared to Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327), often seen as one of the greatest Christian mystical writers of the middle ages.

26. *Ibid.*, 161.

27. Joseph Ratzinger, *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, 1989, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html.

28. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html, chap. 5, para. 16.

29. Blée, *The Third Desert*, 27.

30. See *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, chap. 3, para. 42.

31. Blée, *The Third Desert*, 58.

32. Balthasar et al., *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain*, 152. Here, Louis Bouyer writes: "As far as Zen and its spread are concerned, he [Zaehner] did not hesitate to denounce it, in the most formal way, supported by experiences very well studied, a true diabolical initiative." *Des Bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain*, 152. However, this probably misrepresents Zaehner who, although relegating Zen to what he saw as a lower form of "mysticism" than Christianity, saw it as a form of religious quest. He was, though, critical of a contemporary writer, Aldous Huxley, who experimented with hallucinogenic drugs (especially LSD and mescaline) and claimed this led him to have genuine spiritual experiences and claimed Zen supported his ideas. Zaehner, as such, criticized his use and appropriation of Zen. Most notably, though, in a late work, *Our Savage God: The Perverse Use of Eastern Thought* (London; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), he argued that the sense of going beyond right and wrong, or good and evil, which he believed lay in many Asian philosophies, could lead Westerners astray; however, he was careful not to say that Zen or any other system actually justified such actions. As such, Bouyer's words can be seen to go beyond what Zaehner himself would have countenanced.

33. Blée, *The Third Desert*, 118.

34. Unpublished report.

35. See <http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=363>, accessed August 24, 2013 (account is now suspended).

36. *Ibid.*, 2.

37. Pierre-François de Béthune, *Interreligious Hospitality. The Fulfillment of Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

38. See Blée, *The Third Desert*, 130.

39. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 113.

40. Margaret A. Feaster, *A Closer Look at Centering Prayer*, <http://annefeaster.accountsupport.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/centeringprayerlong.pdf>.

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65. A form of *yoga* that stresses bodily posture.
66. Balthasar et al., *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain*, 55.
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81. Balthasar et al., *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain*, 61.
82. Carrera, *A Call to Vigilance*, para. 33.
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84. *Ibid.*, 117.
85. *Ibid.*, 132.
86. Among Christian monks, several testify the fact that their contact with Eastern religions helped them to rediscover the relevance of the body in the spiritual path. See Pierre-François de Béthune, *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue. References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics*, <http://www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=363>, part III, subsection B.
87. Balthasar et al.; and *ibid.*, 104.
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