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Silence as the "Mother of Speech": Cultivating a Contemplative Orientation for Dialogue and Communion Across Difference

Abstract:

This essay explores the role of silence and a contemplative orientation for religious education that can foster deep dialogue across difference. First, aspects of a Christian mystical tradition of contemplation and the practice of silence are explored through the work of Thomas Merton and others. A review of related contemplative pedagogical theory is then offered. Finally, these considerations are applied towards deepening the commitment within religious education to both honoring the unique agency and subjectivity of self and other and seeking communion within a diversity of perspectives.

The person must be rescued from the individual ... The creative and mysterious inner self must be delivered from the wasteful, hedonistic and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with disguises.¹

Introduction

How can we ever hope for *coexistence in divided societies* and *dialogue across our deep and sometimes incommensurable divisions* if we are each as divided within our own interior being as Merton insists in the above quotation?² How can our inner self be delivered from the destructive and conformist ego that undermines true freedom, dialogue and coexistence? Religious educators are uniquely positioned to prompt and uncover this freedom, particularly as they attend to the ontological level, the very being, of their students, educating in ways that are “humanizing”³ and that engage “all the dimensions and dynamics of human being”.⁴ This ontological concern provides a singularly powerful telos for religious educators that can guide our endeavors towards spiritual and practical bridge building across our differences.

Bridge building out of this ontological orientation can be abetted by pedagogical considerations that cultivate the depth of being-rescuing the person from the individual-that Merton calls for. Contemplative pedagogies hold promising potential to engage this depth of being, simply through their most basic attempts to “place the student in the center of his or her learning so that the student can connect his or her inner world to the outer world”.⁵ At the same time, studies have suggested that training in contemplative practices can also lead to increased prosocial behavior, such as reciprocity and helping behavior,⁶ increased altruistic behavior,⁷ and

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 38.

² Call for Proposals, Religious Education Association Annual Meeting 2019,

² Call for Proposals, Religious Education Association Annual Meeting 2019, <https://religiouseducation.net/rea2019/call/>

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 43-44.

⁴ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Christian Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 85.

⁵ Daniel P Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 6.

⁶ Susanne Leiberg, Olga Klimecki, and Tania Singer, “Short-Term Compassion Training Increases Prosocial Behavior in a Newly Developed Prosocial Game,” *PLoS ONE* 6(3): e17798. (March, 2011), doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0017798

⁷ Helen Y. Weng, Andrew S. Fox, Alexander J. Shackman, Diane E. Stodola, Jessica Z.K. Caldwell, Matthew C. Olson, Gregory M. Rogers, and Richard J. Davidson, “Compassion Training Alters Altruism and Neural Responses to Suffering,” *Psychological Science* 24(7).

a more compassionate response to the suffering of another.⁸ The promises and pitfalls of this introspective subjective/first person approach will be expanded upon below, but if carefully and critically utilized, contemplative pedagogical approaches can provide a powerful tool particularly well suited to the religious education classroom that hopes to be a place of dialogue across difference.

For Christian religious educators, a mystical thread runs through the tradition that provides a lineage upon which to build a contemporary contemplative pedagogical approach.⁹ In her classic text on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill places silence as an essential stage along the path to spiritual union with God. The stage of quiet, she writes, is the stage in which the self “can only surrender itself to the stream of an inflowing life, and to the direction of a larger will”.¹⁰ The surrender to God’s will and the deeper level of consciousness and sources of wisdom accessed in silence help turn us toward both God and others. In this manner, silence becomes a crucial aspect of a spirituality that can foster dialogue, for, as Merton puts it, “if we experience God in contemplation, we experience Him¹¹ not for ourselves alone, but also for others.”¹²

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⁸ Paul Condon, Gaelle Desbordes, Willa B. Miller, and David DeSteno, “Meditation Increases Compassionate Responses to Suffering,” *Psychological Science* 24(10). (2013), doi: 10.1177/0956797613485603.

⁹ My focus in this essay is on the Christian mystical tradition, particularly in its Roman Catholic iteration, and as it appears in the work of Thomas Merton. As such, I am unfortunately constrained by time and space from enumerating the wonderfully robust mystical traditions that appear in other faiths. Despite my omission here, and despite a pluralism of beliefs and practices, a strong mutual contemplative affinity exists across faiths. On this important note, Wendy Farley writes about how contemplation “moves through beliefs and practices of particular religious traditions to the source of wisdom and healing that animates every religious tradition.” As such, it is my sincerest hope that my omission of other faith traditions does not diminish in any way the potential for dialogue and unity across the diversity of contemplative orientations, and, in fact, I heartily welcome comment towards this point. (*The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 121).

¹⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 317.

¹¹ Merton utilizes male-gendered language throughout his work to describe both humans and God. While the use of such exclusive language is highly problematic, and I would much prefer more equitable, inclusive and gender-neutral language, I have left quotations of Merton in the original language in which he wrote simply for the sake of accurate reproduction of those quotations. It is by no means my intention to exclude anyone from the conversation proposed in this essay and it is my hope that Merton’s work of another age can still resonate today, despite his reliance on the misguided gender conventions of his day. If Merton’s gendered language renders him exclusive and irrelevant today, that is an important point of dialogue and debate for scholars, and one that I welcome in any discussion on Merton’s value to religious educators.

Merton On Silence and Contemplation

Thomas Merton, the Catholic contemplative monk and author writes, “silence is the mother of speech,” it exists in our lives as an orienting stimulus on our speech, it is “ordered to an ultimate declaration, which can be put into words, a declaration of all we have lived for.”¹³ In order that dialogue across divisions of any sort might occur, a careful consideration of the speech we use and what sorts “ultimate declarations” we hope to make with our lives seems urgently due. While turning to silence to find our words might seem counterintuitive at first, there can be no point without its corresponding counterpoint. Utilizing haiku as a metaphor for life more generally, Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast adds further color to Merton’s depiction of silence as giving birth to speech. Steindl-Rast writes that “the center of a haiku is always silence,” and “the words are only a kind of scaffolding around that silence.”¹⁴ For Steindl-Rast, this silent center is the *now*, the “moment we feel particularly in touch with the Source of that great design of life ... in those moments, everything makes sense”¹⁵

Merton and Steindl-Rast are drawing upon their shared Benedictine tradition of structuring silence into the daily rhythm of life in order to better attune oneself to God’s word with “the ear of the heart.”¹⁶ Silence, in this Benedictine tradition, can be traced back to St. Anthony and his fellow Desert Fathers and Mothers of fourth and fifth century Egypt and Syria, who turned away from what they deemed corrupting power and status afforded Christians in the wake of Constantine’s baptism. For these monastic precursors in the desert, “silence and contemplation were constructed in the midst of ordinary society as much as in solitude,” and distinctive solitary and communal forms of monasticism began to flourish within Christianity.¹⁷ One long-developed branch of this monastic tree is that of the Cistercians, also known as Trappists, founded in 1098 in Cîteaux France as a strict reformation of Benedictine life. It is this tradition that was passed down the years to Merton, who lived and wrote in his vocation as a Cistercian monk at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

Silence is a defining aspect of Cistercian life to this day, and monasteries of the order typically observe a “Great Silence” from the end of night prayer until after morning Mass the following day, nearly twelve hours.¹⁸ This aspect of Cistercian life would have been a major

¹² Merton, *New Seeds*, 269.

¹³ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), 258.

¹⁴ David Steindl-Rast, *Essential Writings: Selected with an Introduction by Clare Hallward* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 124.

¹⁶ Benedict of Nursia. *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. Edited by Timothy Fry. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), Prologue, 1.

¹⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York: Viking, 2013), 74-75.

¹⁸ A contemporary daily schedule, including the “Great Silence,” of a Cistercian monastery can be found at: <https://www.spencerabbey.org/our-day/>. For the very similar daily schedule that

influence on Merton's understanding of the importance of silence to the spiritual life. From within the Great Silence of the cloister of his monastery in Kentucky, Merton shared the fruits of a life of silent contemplative prayer with a wide readership, beginning with his best-selling autobiography of 1948, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton had entered the solitude and silence of the contemplative life, turning his back on the world as the early Desert Fathers and Mothers, only to realize that this was the route back into the cares and concerns of his fellow humans. It was this gradual awakening that prompted Merton to keep writing about the inner life of silence and contemplation for others, to "learn in my writing a monastic lesson I could probably not have learned otherwise: to let go of my idea of myself."¹⁹ This is silence as *the mother of all speech*; and charting a course for the rest of us into this storehouse of wisdom is one of Merton's lasting gifts to people of all faiths.

Merton linked silence to contemplative prayer and the Christian spiritual life in multiple ways throughout his work. He did not necessarily leave a systematic treatment of silence that can be drawn upon as a final summative statement, but there are several (at least) recurrent themes that can be detected in Merton's writing on the topic. First and foremost for Merton, silence is the place of encounter with God. He writes, "we go forth to find [God] in solitude ... there we communicate with Him alone, without words, without discursive thoughts, in the silence of our whole being."²⁰ Second, Merton insists that in meeting God in silence, we also work together, with God, to find our very deepest and most true sense of self there. For Merton, "to be a saint means to be myself ... the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."²¹ And, finally, it is not only a meeting of God or our true self in silence and contemplative prayer that is important to Merton. The discovery of our true self is "also a discovery of one's responsibility to other such selves, one's brothers in Christ, one's fellow men."²² Let us give some attention to each of these themes, for they are helpful additions from Merton to contemplative pedagogy for religious education that we will discuss below.

Meeting God in Silence

As noted above, Underhill cites silence as a crucial practice in a contemplative orientation to God. In Underhill's comprehensive survey of the Christian mystic tradition, she situates quiet as a "stage" along the way to contemplative union with God, as the "surrender to

Merton would have followed in the 1940s at The Abbey of Gethsemani, consult: Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk & Writer: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 2*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 489.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, "First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1989), 16-17.

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 254.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 31.

²² Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 52.

the stream of an inflowing life,” wherein “the self slides into a certain dim yet vivid consciousness of the Infinite.”²³ The sort of quiet Underhill is writing about is not simply refraining from speech or noise, but rather a far more nuanced state that one must take up as a routinized ascetical practice in order to arrive at. Underhill further calls the silent world a “more real world,” a place wherein our conscious discursive and analytical way of being is laid aside for something deeper.²⁴ The stage of quiet, according to Underhill, is a stage from which “the self emerges to the new life, the new knowledge which is mediated to it under the innumerable forms of Contemplation.”²⁵ Silence prepares the soul-makes it more receptive-to God’s initiative towards union with us in contemplation.

Merton’s monastic life afforded him daily practice in just such a form of deep and abiding silence, a silence wherein he could surrender himself and enter *the more real world*. For Merton, “only when we are able to ‘let go’ of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionize our entire inner life.”²⁶ Merton’s contemplatively revolutionized inner life is the subject of much of his corpus, and he is abundantly clear that silence and solitude are the catalyst for this inner revolution. Encountering God in silence is for the purpose of obeying God’s will and worshipping God, “here now, today, in silence and alone, and that is the whole reason for one’s existence.”²⁷ To encounter God in silence is to find God’s Truth, for “silence, then, is the adoration of His truth.”²⁸ Virtue and hope also flow from our encounter with God in silence, as Merton writes, “if we fill our lives with silence, then we live in hope,” and Christ lives in us and “gives us our virtues.”²⁹ The hope we receive from God in silence appears in our lives as profound enlightenment, it is the reassurance that if we “dare to penetrate [our] own silence and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other ... then [we] will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond all words and beyond explanations.”³⁰ And, perhaps at its most elemental, silence is the place where

²³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, 317.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 317.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 327.

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1996), 89.

²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (New York: Harper One, 1999), 249.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 106.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, 259.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), 158. From a letter to Dom Francis Decroix of the Cistercian monastery of Frattocchie near Rome, August 1967.

we encounter God's love, God's "own simplicity," and contemplation is "the union of the simple light of God with the simple light of man's spirit, in love."³¹

Meeting Our True Self in Silence

Merton was also convinced that we find our true self in silence, this his contention named above that to be a saint is to be one's self. For Merton, finding ourselves in silence is inseparably linked with our encounter with God's love in silence, for it is God's creative love to which we consent in silence and through which we become that which we have been created to be. Merton writes, "each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity ... its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now."³² Merton is quick to add that we have freedom to choose our true or false identity, but that we cannot do so with impunity, for "if we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it!"³³ Our task as humans is the co-creation of our true self with God, and silence is the medium in which we can most readily attend to this work. Even in a life of action oriented by and towards God's kingdom of justice, and as important as this work surely is, we need times of solitude and quiet to attend to the inner transformation that God is enacting within us. Recalling the wisdom of a twelfth century Benedictine predecessor, Merton reminds us that "Martha and Mary are sisters [and] neither can approach the throne of God without the other."³⁴

Merton is also acutely aware of the paradoxical nature of *finding* one's true self by *losing* one's true self in God. In fact, for Merton, this paradox is at the heart of salvation. We are "saved," he writes, by being "true to the concept that God utters in me ... the thought of Him I was meant to embody," for in so doing "I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself."³⁵ Merton's pairing of silence, salvation and finding one's true self is a hallmark of Merton's contemporary relevance, a potent mix of ancient monastic wisdom with the modern turn to the subject. In an increasingly fracturing and disenchanting postmodernism³⁶, Merton provides something of a bulwark against the emphasis on the subject simply descending into subjectivism. Merton helps us to find ourselves only in losing ourselves in God; our subjectivity is contingent upon this ultimate reality. Our truest sense of self, then, is "to have a will that is always ready to fold back within itself and draw all the powers of the soul down from its deepest center to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the

³¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 291-292.

³² *Ibid*, 30.

³³ *Ibid*, 32.

³⁴ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 66.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 37.

³⁶ On the phenomenon of disenchantment, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

point of my dependence on Him.”³⁷ Merton’s true self is no subjectivism; we don’t become saints of our own individualized accord.

Meeting Others in Silence

The third ‘meeting’ that must occur in silence if it is to truly be the catalyst for a contemplative orientation to life, is with our fellow humans. As noted above, discovery of our true self in contemplative silence “is also a discovery of one’s responsibility to other such selves.”³⁸ Merton insists, “I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being.”³⁹ Our true self is found not only in our silent encounter with God, but within community. This implies at least a somewhat worldly and active orientation, which is the way the great majority of humans go about their day-to-day lives. Part of Merton’s genius is in how he was able to so readily link silence and solitude to this communal human need.

Merton shared a communal monastic lifestyle with other men who were seeking the same silent contemplative life as he was. He also withdrew (somewhat) from this community to live as a hermit gradually for some time, then permanently for the final three years of his life (1965-1968). Merton’s decision to live as a hermit came about only after a long and arduous discernment process with his abbot.⁴⁰ Akin to the paradox of finding our true selves only to the extent that we lose ourselves in God, we are better able to attend to the other when we take the time to withdraw into contemplative silence and solitude. In his journal, Merton touches on this paradox in his life as a hermit, writing, “I come into solitude to hear the word of God, to wait in expectation of a Christian fulfillment, to understand myself in relation to a community that doubts and questions itself, and of which I am very much a part.”⁴¹ Merton’s silence and solitude were always in support of his monastic community, and the ever-widening circles of correspondents and social concerns outside the monastic enclosure. Again, there is no naval-gazing subjectivism in the silence that Merton espouses, but rather a wholehearted entry into humanity, very broadly writ. How else could Merton exclaim, “I am the world just as you are! Where am I going to look for the world first of all if not in myself.”⁴²

We will carry Merton’s insights on silence and contemplation forward as we engage contemporary contemplative pedagogical theory and finally explore some links to religious education. Before we move on, however, it is important to note that Merton’s contention that we encounter others from within a silent contemplative orientation is a powerful guide for dialogue across our differences. When the gulf of polarization seems to widen as our cross-chatter gets louder, it becomes imperative that we find a way to quiet the din; a release valve for the tensions.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 46.

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation In a World of Action*, 52.

³⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 51.

⁴⁰ Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1995), 271.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, 261.

⁴² Quoted in Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, 239.

Merton's three-fold contemplative meeting (God, self, other) provides just such a means to seek a deep unity with God and within our human diversity. This deep human unity is perhaps best exemplified in one of Merton's most cited and most beautifully literary passages describing a flash of mystical insight on a street corner in Louisville Kentucky. It is an invitation to a contemplative orientation for all of us and it is worth reproducing in large part here:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness ... I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.⁴³

Contemplative Pedagogy

For Merton in his Cistercian monastery, the contemplative life was simply *life*. The whole of the daily round and the entire ethos of this sort of community fosters a quiet contemplative encounter with God. This is the spirit within which all the relationships of the community are set (to greater or lesser degrees, of course, according to the relative health of such a community). What are those of us living in the non-cloistered world outside of such a community to do to foster a contemplative orientation in our own lives and relationships? Can it be done well enough in the busy to-and-fro of life? Can contemplation be taught? Merton seems to think so, but he adds an important caveat that "we should not look for a method or a system, but cultivate an attitude, an outlook," and "we should not expect to find magical methods, systems which make all difficulties and obstacles dissolve into thin air."⁴⁴ It can be taught, it seems, but not necessarily in an overly straightforward or didactic manner. Underhill, too, points to the "art" of contemplation and indicates that growth in "the mystic's effective genius" is intimately connected with growth in the art of contemplation, "and that growth is largely conditioned by education."⁴⁵ Further, Underhill contends that this is open to each and every one of us. She writes, "the germ of that same transcendent life, the spring of the amazing energy which enables the great mystic to rise to freedom and dominate his world, is latent in all of us; an integral part of our humanity."⁴⁶

⁴³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 140-141.

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 34.

⁴⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, 299.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 445.

In order to access the latent *germ* within that Underhill writes of, or to cultivate the *attitude* and *outlook* that Merton points towards, we each need some guidance, some help along the way. Potential troves of good help in this endeavor-particularly for those of us concerned with religious education-can be found in the burgeoning fields of contemplative studies and contemplative pedagogy. According to Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, “contemplative pedagogy uses forms of introspection and reflection that allow students to focus internally and find more of themselves in their courses [with] a focus on personal awareness, leading to insight.”⁴⁷ The emphasis here is the process of learning within any discipline for the sake of learning the subject matter of that discipline in more focused and internally aware ways, and not explicitly about the learning of contemplative practices. However, it is patently evident that introducing students to such practices will also be part of the curriculum unless, of course, students have had the unlikely background of a Cistercian monastery or some similar training.

A wide range of practices-both religious in tone and secular-make up the toolbox of contemplative pedagogy. While the emphasis in this essay is less on the practices themselves and more on the theoretical discussion that surrounds some of the promises and pitfalls of those practices, it may prove helpful to briefly note the range of such practices to provide a sense of context around the terminology. The practices of a contemplative classroom can be the most basic, such as taking a brief moment of silence in the midst of a busy day, simple mindfulness exercises of attention to breath and the present moment, or a free-writing, journaling or art-based assignment within a class session. Practices can also be more complex, with more instruction required to enter into them, such as yoga, meditation, or Centering Prayer. Much will depend on the teacher’s own knowledge, creativity and use of practices. Though the practices can be quite varied, they all have in common the attempt to “cultivate greater focus [and] some lead to insight, wisdom, and compassion.”⁴⁸

Promises of Contemplative Pedagogy

Introducing contemplative practices in a classroom has the potential to “increase students’ discernment and attentive capacity, deepen their understanding of the material of the course, and enrich their relationships with themselves, each other, and the world.”⁴⁹ The promise of contemplative pedagogy is dual in nature, holding both intellectual and relational potential. Intellectually speaking, contemplative pedagogy can foster a first-person subjective approach to course material, mining the rich vein of personal experience. Arthur Zajonc, one of the foremost proponents of contemplative pedagogy writes, “contemplative exercises are a crucial form of experiential learning where time is taken to pause and the individual or entire class drops into silence in order to release their attention from conventional preoccupations, redirect it, and then live fully into the content at hand.”⁵⁰ The broad interdisciplinary appeal of contemplative

⁴⁷ Daniel P Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 89.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 39.

⁵⁰ Arthur Zajonc, “Afterword,” in Daniel P Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 205

pedagogies evinces a desire to take up Zajonc's enthusiasm and to link the discursive rational approach to academic learning with the cultivation of interiority and a contemplative awareness. A marked difference exists between a conventional teaching approach that helps students "think about" a subject matter and a contemplative approach that brings students to "know from within."⁵¹ Contemplative pedagogy can re-center this *knowing from within*, which has been too often dismissed within the rational and objective emphases of much teaching and learning.

Regarding the relational potential of contemplative pedagogy, we can discern echoes of the three studies cited above regarding increased helping behavior,⁵² increased altruistic behavior,⁵³ and a more compassionate response to the suffering of another;⁵⁴ all associated with contemplative practices. The building of capacities of attention and awareness that can arise with contemplative practices can also help students to emotionally regulate, thus building "students' sense of agency and resiliency," which can "encourage their flourishing as individuals who can in turn build humane communities."⁵⁵ The working definition of contemplation that has been developed through practice by the faculty and students in Brown University's undergraduate concentration in contemplative studies also captures the potential for contemplative pedagogy to foster relational acumen. Harold Roth, the founding directors of that program, states their definition of contemplation, in its more relational part, as "the basis of other-regarding virtues such as empathy, compassion and love which provide a crucial foundation for social engagement."⁵⁶ Such goals align contemplative pedagogy well with the humanizing and transformative potential that lies within religious education. These relational goals also echo Merton's call to turn deeply within in order to turn back out to our fellow humans.

While this very brief survey of the promises of contemplative pedagogy is far from exhaustive, it provides a small glimpse into its potential to be a useful aid to religious educators who hope to inculcate in their students the intellectual and relational dispositions to be builders of bridges across difference. For, as with Merton's insight that *silence is the mother of speech*, contemplative pedagogy can help students to more readily make their own declaration of what it is they hope to learn and live for. In this manner, it can be a transformative experience for

⁵¹ Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), xvi.

⁵² Susanne Leiberger, Olga Klimecki, and Tania Singer, "Short-Term Compassion Training Increases Prosocial Behavior in a Newly Developed Prosocial Game."

⁵³ Helen Y. Weng, Andrew S. Fox, Alexander J. Shackman, Diane E. Stodola, Jessica Z.K. Caldwell, Matthew C. Olson, Gregory M. Rogers, and Richard J. Davidson, "Compassion Training Alters Altruism and Neural Responses to Suffering."

⁵⁴ Paul Condon, Gaelle Desbordes, Willa B. Miller, and David DeSteno, "Meditation Increases Compassionate Responses to Suffering."

⁵⁵ Karolyn Kinane, "Critical, Creative, Contemplative," in *Religious Studies News* (June, 2019): 21, <http://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/contemplative-pedagogy/editors-introduction>.

⁵⁶ Harold D. Roth, "Contemplative Pedagogy," in *Religious Studies News* (June, 2019): 31, <http://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/contemplative-pedagogy/editors-introduction>.

students. Contemplative practices can aid our endeavors in religious education to foster what Parker Palmer calls an “authentic spirituality,” a spirituality of depth and interiority, which “encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox.”⁵⁷

Pitfalls of Contemplative Pedagogy

Despite the rich promises that contemplative pedagogy holds, it is not without its potential pitfalls, and these can be discerned, in part, as the inverse of the promises. To begin with, the promise of a first-person subjective way of knowing and learning can devolve into subjectivism and relativism. How tempting to misconstrue insights and awareness that arise for me in the midst of my own contemplative practice as having more universal application than they truly do? Additionally, this first-person emphasis within contemplative pedagogy can too easily be placed over-against critical-technical-rational approaches to education. Such critiques, writes Kathleen M. Fisher “seem to overlook the depth and complexity of critical thinking ... Analysis does not reject the personal viewpoint of the knower, but guides him or her to a greater awareness of it so as not to be constrained or misled by it.”⁵⁸ Contemplative pedagogy can be an aid to good critical reasoning, but we must be careful not to dismiss too easily the good wisdom that also rises in that mode of learning.

Regarding the relational promises of contemplative pedagogy, the more mindful and thoughtful encounters with self and others that can arise, caution is also due. To begin with, many students will have no formal experience with contemplative practices and may approach such practices with fear or skepticism that rightly demands a respectful response. Relatedly, “students have often been led to avoid and deny their personal responses to class material, adopting instead an abstract and more objective attitude” which may also make them tentative about contemplative pedagogy.⁵⁹ Students may also find the religious traditions that are behind many contemplative practices to be an impediment if the tradition is not their own. Candy Gunther Brown names the fact that socio-cultural perspectives and particular worldviews are in the background and continue to inform any contemplative practice-even when they are secularized-and students should be provided with a chance to “opt-out” of performing such practices as a way to “respect cultural and religious diversity.”⁶⁰ If such concerns are not adequately addressed, the deep encounters with self and others that can arise in contemplative practices will inadvertently become null and, in fact, an opposite effect may result with students experiencing a sense of alienation at the prospect of such practices.

⁵⁷ Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education As A Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), xi.

⁵⁸ Kathleen M. Fisher, “Look Before You Leap: Reconsidering Contemplative Pedagogy,” *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 20, no. 1 (January 2017): 11.

⁵⁹ Daniel P Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, 68.

⁶⁰ Candy Gunther Brown, “Why I Do Not Use Contemplative Pedagogy in the Public University Classroom,” in *Religious Studies News* (June, 2019): 9, <http://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/contemplative-pedagogy/editors-introduction>.

Conclusion: Contemplating and Educating Our Deepest Being

Merton and contemplative pedagogy can come together helpfully for religious educators who hope to honor the unique agency and subjectivity of self and other, while seeking dialogue and unity within a diversity of perspectives. How is this possible if we are each as divided within our own interior being as Merton insists when he claims that *the person must be rescued from the individual*? True freedom, dialogue, coexistence, and certainly unity, seem impossible when we are operating from a false and interiorly divided sense of self. Contemplative pedagogy can be helpful in the religious education classroom precisely for the manner in which it can center the agency and subjectivity of the student. This is not a pedagogical innovation that is unique to the contemplative orientation by any means, and contemporary religious educators have embraced experiential learning and the ‘turn to the subject’ in good measure. Education that takes up the contemplative emphasis on uncovering and cultivating the true self is even more likely to engage students on the level of their very being. Additionally, and crucially, as Merton insisted above, this discovery of our true self is “also a discovery of one’s responsibility to other such selves.”⁶¹ A powerful starting place for dialogue across division is revealed in this dynamic of turning inward in order to better turn outward.

What business do we have as religious educators in asking our students to engage their deepest interiority or relate to one another on this level? Of course we leave the decision to our students to freely go there or not. And yet, this is when education becomes most transformative, when it takes as its purpose “to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world-not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself.”⁶² This gets us closer to Freire’s *humanizing* education. This is also education that reflects an “ontological turn,” a pedagogy that can “engage all the dimensions and dynamics of human being.”⁶³ Surfacing such a complete and authentic engagement with one’s being may be the pedagogical goal most needed for our fractured and polarized times. If we hope for dialogue, we must know intimately the affirmations of our own *being* that we will bring to the table and have our powers of reception well tuned to the *being* of all the others at the table. And, if we hope to build bridges, we must know the person who will cross that bridge to meet the other and be ready to be transformed in the encounter.

To give Merton the last word here, we’ll draw on John Laughlin’s paraphrasing of the way Merton summarized our greatest spiritual needs in his 1968 book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Those needs revolve around “genuine community; ultimate meaning in understanding ordinary life and human problems; a whole, integral experience of body, mind and spirit; [and] freedom from the extremes of self-consciousness and self-awareness.”⁶⁴ Such spiritual needs are met, to a good degree, in the adoption of contemplative practices and a contemplative orientation

⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 52.

⁶² Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, Eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 3.

⁶³ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 85.

⁶⁴ John Laughlin, *Reading Thomas Merton: A Guide to His Life and Work* (self-published, 2000), 51.

to life. Education that can shape the very deepest identity of people, contribute to an authentic dialogue across human diversity, and ultimately find a sense of unity within that diversity, could find no better charter than Merton's list.

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