



## **The inner dimensions of contemplation. Paradigms within the Christian tradition**

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### **Abstract**

This contribution investigates the inner dimensions of contemplation and the dynamics of the spiritual process. It focusses on six paradigms taken from the Christian tradition: It firstly discusses the contemplative reader that is characterized by the interpretation of signs, read in a protected space, seeking understanding, but at the end leading to the “other” reading, brought about by the divine-human dialogue. The second type of contemplation refers to “the contemplative warrior” which is about contemplative transformation that provides a spiritual defence mechanism against destructive demonic forces. This type of contemplation is practiced by the desert monks. The article then analyses a third contemplation in terms of the Biblical characters of Mary and Martha who represent two different, but unified positions of the contemplative way. The fourth paradigm belongs to the field of modernity: it is about contemplation in discernment that reflects the desire to discern the will of God amidst as a time of doubting and uncertainty. There is, in the fifth paradigm, contemplation in presence. In this part, Brother Lawrence is presented as an example: His concept of contemplation is living in the presence of the Lord in a simple act of love and being loved. The final paradigm is prophetic contemplation, of which Titus Brandsma is an example. He had Elijah as model of inspiration and as an exemplar for imitation. For him this Elijahan contemplation is unified in three layers. The first layer is the ideal of contemplation, the second one is the realization of this ideal in a life of prayer, the third one is the liturgy of hours.

### **Keywords**

*Contemplation (kontemplasie); Geert Groote; Desert Monks; John Cassian; Origen; John of the Cross; Titus Brandsma; Brother Lawrence*

## Introduction

“Contemplation” is one of the basic words in the field of spirituality, indicating spirituality’s more inward area. Mostly identified with mysticism in modern times,<sup>1</sup> contemplation is a rich and multifaceted phenomenon. It is not easy to determine its parameters.<sup>2</sup> The visible parameters relate to its more outward appearance in terms of, amongst others, place, time, social behaviour, language, clothes, architecture, environment. According to external features, “contemplatives” are people living in a specific setting, in which worldly influences are excluded and an atmosphere of concentration is created by means of, amongst others, fixed times of prayer and ascetic exercises. This represents contemplation as lifestyle. The more inward parameters are the dynamics of knowledge (awe, gazing, loving knowledge, intuition), prayer (oral prayer, mental prayer, aspirated prayer, prayer of rest), virtues (love, justice, humility, hope), spiritual exercises (meditation, solitude, silence), attitudes (action, passion, receptivity, waiting, concentration, distraction) and discernment (ambiguities, uncertainty, procedures, accompaniment). This contribution will focus on these inner dimensions of contemplation and the dynamics of the spiritual process. It will be further limited for more focus to six paradigms taken from the Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. The contemplative reader

The first paradigm for contemplation within the Christian tradition can be named as “the contemplative reader”: The inner movement of this form of contemplation is characterized by the interpretation of signs, read in a protected space, seeking understanding, but at the end leading to the “other” reading, brought about by the divine-human dialogue.

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- 1 Kees Waaijman. *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, Peeters, 2002), 342–345. Contemplation is the classic Christian term for what is later often called mysticism.
  - 2 For a still instructive historical survey, cf. Charles Baumgartner, “Contemplation” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité 2* (1953): 1716–1911.
  - 3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse, Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (Bloomington, The Athone Press, 1994), 103. Although the dimensions may differ in prominence at different times in the history of Christian spirituality, they are not limited to the specific eras and some were constants in it from the beginning. As such the one does not necessarily build or follow up on the next.

This reading paradigm is in keeping with the etymology of the word “contemplation,” composed by the preposition *cum* and the substantive *templum*. *Templum* is an open space in heaven marked out by the augur with his staff, within which he reads the flight of the birds; *cum* means with, together, brought together or seen together.<sup>4</sup> Both elements of the word are complementary. The augur has sectioned off a limited square in the endless space of heaven within which he observes and reads the flight of the birds that is regarded as a sign of the divine will. Contemplation is an act of reading and interpretation, aiming at understanding. The concentrated reading process is brought together in a limited and protected square. The Greek word *theorein* – the equivalent of the Latin word *contemplatio* – has basically the same structure: the carefully arranged square of a theatre, mostly a cultic scene, facilitates the attentive concentration for “reading” the divine drama.<sup>5</sup> Contemplation then is reading attentively the scene offered to the spectators as a divine spectacle.<sup>6</sup>

Two basic ingredients compose this type of contemplation: presenting a “text” within a limited place and time, excluding disturbing elements, combined with gathering strategies concentrated on reading, interpreting and understanding the “text” as a sign of God. Therefore, the reading of texts, particularly of Holy Texts, is in almost all traditions a contemplative act.

One example that illustrates this paradigm of contemplation is the contemplative school of Alexandria, established around 200 and subsequently located in Caesarea Maritima. Gregory Thaumaturgus describes, somewhat flatteringly, the way of things in this school around 240. The lifestyle of the school was not typically “contemplative.” It was not a monastery or a hermitage. It was all about learning and teaching, *paideia*, using dialogue as an important pedagogical method. The students were trained in linguistics and philosophy, entering into “each word, barbarian or Greek, mystical or political, divine or human; they looked

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4 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (eds.), *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, OUP, 1991), 445–446 and 1850–1851.

5 Wilhelm Michaelis, *ὁπάω ktl*, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 5 (1966), 316–326.

6 Rene Arnou, “Contemplation chez Les Anciens Philosophes du Monde Greco-Romain,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 2 (1953), 1716–1762.

in it from all sides and explored it in full freedom. They took advantage of everything and rejoiced in the richness that this meant to the soul.<sup>77</sup> This is the foundation of their learning process. The next step is decisive: the contemplative *paideia*, the training in sensitivity for *allēgoria*, the “other” reading.

In Hellenistic times allegorical reading was an alternative reading of myths, used to avoid the scandalous literal meaning. In Hellenistic Judaism, the allegorical reading was applied to the Holy Scripture, to find out a more plausible reading for legal and cultic texts, but also to discover an “other” reading in the mystical sense, that is, the contemplative reading.<sup>8</sup> In this sense Origen, one of the most famous teachers, states that the reader should attune himself to the voice of God, and “not to the voice of a human being, even though men (sic) should witness that he is the wisest of men (sic), but only to God.”<sup>9</sup> To become attuned to the voice of God the students should change their mind: from an attitude of objectifying Scripture – the text considered to be there, outside me as a thing – to an attitude which sees Scripture as the voice of Another, asking for a dialogical attitude. In the words of William of St. Thierry, who observed, centuries later: the object-reading is oriented on the “word” (*verbum*: sign, content, articulation, reference), the other-reading is touched by the “voice” (*vox*: presence, face, breath, you).<sup>10</sup> The transition of the object-reading to the other-reading can only be made if the reader is touchable and exposes him/herself to Scripture. The reader says speechless: “Here I am” (*ecce*). He has detached himself from Scripture as “he there” (*iste*).<sup>11</sup>

We understand *allēgoria* in the academy of Alexandria as a contemplative act: discerning the Voice of Scripture in and through the words. “May God help us,” prays Origen, “to discover the mystical sense which lies hidden

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7 Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Logos charistērios*, chapter 15. See H. Crouzel, *Grégoire le Thaumaturge. Remerciement à Origène suivi de la lettre d’Origène à Grégoire* (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1969).

8 Friedrich Büchsel, *ἀλληγορέω*, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 1 (1966), 260–264.

9 Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Logos charistēros*, chapter 15.

10 William of St. Thierry, *Expositio in Canticum Canticorum* 141.

11 *Expositio in Canticum Canticorum* 149.

as a treasure in the words.”<sup>12</sup> The “other” reading explores the hidden dimension in the words and becomes contemplative at the moment the text is touching my life, my behaviour, my soul, my spirit: “Here I am.”<sup>13</sup> Trained in this “other” reading students become attuned to God’s voice in Scripture. Scripture guides the ascent of the soul to transformation in God (*theosis*). This ascent, this *anagogē*, is not a higher, broader, longer, or deeper sense of the object, but the “other” reading in the sense of tasting the presence of the Lord in his word.

In the Christian tradition this contemplative reading – named *lectio divina*<sup>14</sup> – is not restricted to the written signs of Scripture. The field of signs to be read as God’s voice is broader. Contemplatives like Bernard of Clairvaux were teachers who helped their students to read the book of nature (*liber naturae*) and the book of experience (*liber experientiae*) in the same contemplative way.<sup>15</sup>

An interesting example is *De quattuor generibus meditabilium*, the booklet of Geert Groote, the founder of the Modern Devotion.<sup>16</sup> In this tractate he describes the four fields of signs which are given to people who wish to follow the way from meditation to contemplation: Holy Scripture, the lives of holy men and women, the writings of the fathers, and the world of artistic expressions. This tractate is but one example. We may say that the field of contemplative reading in Christian traditions is rather broad, encompassing almost all fields of experience. Essential is the reading process itself: from deciphering the signs to hearing the voice of the Beloved One.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Origen, *Commentarium in Ioannem* I, 15.

13 Origen, *Homilia in Exodum* II, 3.

14 Kees Waaijman, “Meditation Towards Contemplation,” in S. Chackalackal (ed.), *Contemplation and Proclamation. Carmelite Charisma for a renewed Indian Mission* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2019), 81–91.

15 Bernard McGinn, *The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism*, in Elizabeth Dreyer & Mark Burrows (eds.), *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 2005), 141–143.

16 We follow the edition of Tolomio (1975). Cf. Ilario Tolomio (ed.), *Gerardo Groote, It trattato “De quattuor generibus meditabilium”* (Padua, Antenore, 1975).

17 Kees Waaijman, “Beeld en beeldloosheid. Een uitdaging aan de devotie,” in K. Veelenturf (ed.), *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse Kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie* (Nijmegen, Valkhof, 2000), 31–41.

We may characterize this first paradigm of contemplation as hermeneutical contemplation. Reading, interpreting and understanding a “text” with the ultimate goal to be touched by its “voice” as the presence of God. The “text” for this contemplative reading process can be an oral or written document, a piece of art, a holy life, an autobiographical fragment, an experience of nature – it does not matter. Essential is the contemplative reading process: Being exposed to the “other” – reading, as a dialogical shift, concisely expressed by the distinction of Emmanuel Levinas between “difference” and “non-indifference.”<sup>18</sup> “Difference” is the objectivizable difference: The reading on the level of content. “Non-indifference” is the dialogical difference: being moved by the Other. It is about compassion with the text!

An essential aspect in this reading process is aesthetics, in the sense of being touched and moved, not in the sense of “I like it,” but as the paradox of attraction and transcendence, like in awe and amazement, the biblical *jir’at jhwh*, the spring of wisdom. Pieter de Villiers rightly states: “Beauty is ultimately about contemplation, an awareness in the being in the presence of the ineffable and transcendent. (...) It confronts one with a beautiful object that is at the same time attractive, but also ineffable, beyond human control.”<sup>19</sup>

## 2. The contemplative warrior

The second type of contemplation may be called “the contemplative warrior.” The essence of this variant is that the contemplative transformation provides a spiritual defence mechanism against destructive demonic forces. This type of contemplation was practiced by the desert monks. The struggle of these hermits was “not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12), as a discussion of these warriors will reveal.

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18 Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God who comes to Mind* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), passim.

19 Pieter G.R. de Villiers, “Beauty in the Book of Revelation. On Biblical Spirituality and Aesthetics,” *Spiritus* 19 (2019), 6.

At the end of the third century people went further and further into the desert wilderness, particularly into the lower desert of Egypt. For them the desert was “a place of trial where ascetics encounter inner and outer demons.”<sup>20</sup> The demons were in principle defeated by Christ, but they fled into the deserts and in the deepest areas of the human interiority. There the hermits fought against the spiritual destruction. The desert was the front line. Around the year 400, thousands of warriors, both men and women, were in combat with the outer and inner demons. A hermit asked an older brother: “How can I be saved?” The brother took off his habit, girded his loins and raised his hands to heaven, saying: “The athlete stands naked and stripped in all things, anointed with oil and taught by his master how to fight. So, God leads us to victory.”<sup>21</sup>

The central element in the combat of the desert monk was temptation, being the face of the demon. The desert mother Sarah confesses, that for many years she was fiercely attacked by the demon of lust, but “she never prayed that the battle would have leave her, she used to say only, ‘Lord, give me strength.’”<sup>22</sup> The hermits prayed that temptation continue, for the spiritual struggle had a spiritual value in itself.<sup>23</sup> Temptation represents the face of the enemy. The destructive power no longer lurks in an ambush. In the temptation it shows its face. Now the analysis can start, looking for the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy. This is the reason why the analysis of the *logismoi*, the deepest movements and motivations of the human spirit, is so important. The struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against the destructive forces wherever they are, but particularly hidden in the deepest layers of our personality.

The teachers of the desert developed many exercises to fight with and conquer demons. First of all, “the action of staying in the monk’s cell, even when bored, frustrated, and tempted”; secondly, “the cultivation of honesty and self-awareness – the real meaning of humility – was thought to be a critical means of spiritual progress”; thirdly, discernment, “the most prized of the ascetic virtues (...) often associated with an ability to recognize the

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20 Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Malden, Blackwell, 2007), 41.

21 Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford: SLG, 1986), number 11.

22 Ward, *The Desert Fathers*, 36.

23 Sheldrake, *A Brief History*, 46.

difference between the inspiration of God and the illusionary promptings of the demons.”<sup>24</sup> But the most needed and the highest estimated exercise was: being clothed with the armour of God, the symbol of the inner transformation in God, the contemplative dimension of the warrior.

John Cassian devotes an entire section to “the kinds of weapons and their characteristics with which, if we so desire, we can fight the Lord’s battles.”<sup>25</sup> The section is too long to quote here, but note the first weapon: “Take the shield of faith, says the apostle, with which you are able to quench all the fiery darts of the veiled one. Faith then is that which intercepts the flaming darts of lust, and destroys them by the fear of future judgement, and belief in the heavenly kingdom.”<sup>26</sup> The intertextual allusion to the Pauline Letter to the Ephesians is clear. Like the Ephesians, all hermits are involved in a life-and-death struggle against destructive powers and must therefore put on the armour of God, the armour God himself bears and with which God will clothe his soldiers.<sup>27</sup> The armour of God consists of the divine virtues/strengths of God: faith, hope and love, purity and holiness, and above all the word of God. The desert monks clothed themselves with this armour of God, hoping to be clothed with God Himself: the shield of trust, the breastplate of charity, the helmet of the hope of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. Being clothed with God’s strength is the essence of the monk’s transformation, including the divine gift of discernment. This is the contemplative dimension of this type of contemplation: to become the warrior of God, bearing his armour, and becoming this way invulnerable for the attacks of the destructive power of the demons. The temptation endures, but the destructive power is blocked. “Whosoever is protected by these arms will ever be defended from the weapons and ravages of the foes and will not be led away bound in the chains of spoilers, a captive and a prisoner, to the hostile land of vain thoughts.”<sup>28</sup>

This contemplative dimension of the warrior did not stop with the desert monks. The first Carmelites on Mount Carmel around 1200 had the same

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24 . Sheldrake, *A Brief History*, 47–48.

25 John Cassian, *Conferences*, 7,5.

26 *Conferences*, 7,5.

27 Kees Waaijman, *The Mystical Space of Carmel* (Leuven, Peeters, 1999), 158–162.

28 John Cassian, *Conferences*, 7,5.



armour of God at the centre of their “formula of life.”<sup>29</sup> The armour has to be put on for three reasons: we have to deal with life as temptation, with situations of persecution, and with the beast in us, prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Essential is to be clothed by God’s strengths, his virtues. God who himself wears the armour, may give this armour, loaded with his strength, to the hermits on Mount Carmel.

The process of being clothed with God’s attributes achieves its end goal when the consciousness dawns that it is God Himself who is at work in all our warrior activities. Being clothed by God’s strength empowers one to defeat the destructive forces.

In this type of contemplation action and contemplation are two aspects of one spiritual process. Action includes all we do to strengthen our defence system: prayer and discernment, practicing virtues and conquer the vices. They all belong to the *bios praktikos*, the active life. For John Cassian, for instance, action does not necessarily mean an outward task, but it was primarily the inner spiritual fight against vices. As later spiritual writers say: vices are removed by the practice and not by the contemplation of virtues.<sup>30</sup> Contemplation is the experience of divine strength in these actions. This is the *bios theorètikos*, the contemplative life. God himself fights my fight, as the psalmist prays (Ps 43:1). Fighting is a contemplative act.

This type of contemplation may be called synergetic contemplation, the synergetic unity between God and the warrior. As the psalmist says: “With you I storm the rampart, with my God I can scale any wall. (...) He alone is the shield of all who take refuge in him” (Ps 18:29–30). This type of contemplation has been practiced in many forms of liberation spirituality.

### 3. Contemplative as Mary and Martha

The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10,39–42) has challenged many spiritual writers to reflect on the essence of contemplation, although the word “contemplation” itself does not occur in the story. Martha represents the active life, Mary the contemplative life. Mary is praised for having

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29 Waaijman, *The Mystical Space*, 162–198.

30 Christopher Bellitto, “To Be Martha and Mary during the Great Western Schism.” *Studies in Spirituality* 29 (2019): 71–85.

chosen “the best part,” the “one thing needed,” Martha is gently chided for being distracted by “many things.” The differences between the two sisters being evident, the question remains: how do they relate to one another?

The superficial reading is the two sisters represent two worlds, reciprocally excluding one another. This is, however, not the reading of the spiritual writers during the centuries.<sup>31</sup> Of course, they see the differences between the two sisters, and they know about the socio-cultural competition between different lifestyles, producing ideological readings. People being involved in health care, education, social action or apostolate do not like to hear that other people sitting down in adoration have chosen “the best part.” But here one can note remarks by some contemplative masters, beginning with Origen and ending up with Eckhart:

For Origen (184/5–253/4) the active life of Martha and the so-called contemplative life of Mary are mutually inclusive. They are stages on the same journey to Christian perfection. Mary and Martha are sisters, living in the same house, and both true disciples of the same master. Mary has made more progress on the way to perfection than Martha, but both are on the way to contemplation.

Augustine (354–430) emphasizes in his sermons that both Martha and Mary cling to the Lord, both serve the Lord admirably, although in different ways. Martha is waiting on the Lord in hospitable service, Mary is waiting on the Lord in listening silence. Martha’s *diakonia* enabled Mary’s enjoyment of the Lord’s teaching.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) saw in the story of Luke the ideal of the mixed life (*vita mixta*). Here action and contemplation are united in Mary, the mother of Jesus, the virgin-mother. The house of Mary and Martha is symbolically Mary’s womb. Martha, the active elder sister, receives the earthly Jesus, Mary, the younger sister, receives the heavenly Christ. The

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31 Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995); Éloi Leclerc, *Chemin de contemplation* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1995). For the late Medieval period see Bellitto, “To Be Martha and Mary”; Christopher Knauf, *Being at Home in Two Worlds. Meister Eckhart on Mary and Martha and the Integration of the Active and Contemplative Life*, [Online]. Available: <https://lifeisthismoment.com/2016/05/21/being-at-home-in-two-worlds-meister-eckhart-on-mary-and-martha-and-the-integration-of-the-active-and-contemplative-life/> [Accessed: 21.5.2016].

busy Martha and the “not idle leisure” of Mary are united in Mary. The “best part,” including both Martha’s and Mary’s parts, belongs to the virgin-mother Mary, in whom the unity of the active and contemplative is perfected.

Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) stressed that the “mixed life” should be united in one soul. Mary and Martha are two sisters living in the same house, meaning that their actions are performed in the same soul. The Cistercian ideal emphasizes the “mixed life” in which action and contemplation coalesce in the same soul.

Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) as a mendicant brother was strongly convinced that Mary and Martha together should build the same house. For that reason, he stated that in each hermitage two brothers should serve as “mothers,” following Martha’s example, while two other brothers should be the “sons,” adopting the contemplative way of Mary. Very important is further that they should change their roles from time to time.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) understands as the “very best part” not contemplation alone, but the sharing of the fruits of the contemplative life through teaching and preaching: “It is a greater thing to give light than simply to have light, and in the same way it is a greater thing to pass on to others what you have contemplated (*contemplata tradere*) than just to contemplate.”<sup>32</sup>

Special attention deserves the reading of Meister Eckhart who discusses the story of Luke in two German Sermons.<sup>33</sup> In sermon 2 he describes Mary as the “virgin”: “as empty as she was when she did not exist,” as pure receptivity, united with God in the “ground” of the soul. Martha represents the “wife,” working fruitfully for God, the pure gift she “receives” from the Father is given back to the Father in gratitude. The virgin-mother – virginal receptivity and motherly fruitfulness – “brings forth many and big fruits, for they are neither more nor less than God himself.” In Sermon 86 Mary represents the “virgin,” possessed by the goodness of God, gripped

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32 *Summa Theologiae* pars 2.2, quaestio 188, articulus 6.

33 Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigte*, 2 and 86. For the translation see *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O’C Walshe (New York, Crossroad, 2009).

by “unspeakable longing,” and finding “sweet solace and joy” in the Lord’s presence. Martha represents “the virgin who is a wife,” she has the wisdom to know how to perform outward works “perfectly as love ordains.” Martha is worried that her sister might progress no further on the contemplative way, saying: “Lord, tell her to help me.” Martha should not be concerned for Mary’s progress, Jesus says in reply, for she is perfectly on the contemplative way as a “virgin.” Being at this stage she has chosen the best part. She has reached the stage of mystical receptivity, she is able to work according to the will of God: acting receptively, receiving God by working. This is the stage where Martha as the virgin-mother is. Therefore, the Lord calls her twice “Martha. Martha”: as virgin-mother she is both receptive in working and working in receptivity. Her contemplation is perfectly reciprocal: “seeing God without means in His own being,” that is: “To see and be the seen.” Here “temporal work is as noble as any communing with God, for it joins us to him as closely as the highest that can happen to us.”

A reflection on these spiritual commentaries reveal their understanding of contemplation. As stated earlier, they know very well the differences between Mary and Martha, and, of course, they know about the social-cultural tensions: who is the best contemplative, Mary or Martha? But beyond this ideological interpretation they try to discover the contemplative common ground, as we have seen in the different readings: being on the same way, living in the same house, having the same soul, being disciples of the same Master. They lay bare the common ground in such a way, that Mary and Martha belong to the same contemplative field. Within this field the masters are balancing the two different positions of Mary and Martha, using underlying concepts like complementarity, interdependency, stages of growth, reciprocity. Moreover, they do not fix the two positions on two points in a linear process, but they think the contemplative way as a spiral way: nobody has arrived on a perfect position, everyone is on the way, being now further, but the next moment being back on almost the same point. The story of Maria and Martha is a picture to reflect on the contemplative way as a unity: the two sisters are both on the contemplative way, seen from different moments of growth.<sup>34</sup>

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34 Cf. also S. Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

#### 4. Contemplation in discernment

The *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* discusses contemplation under the entry *Beschauung*. Right from the beginning, the author states that contemplation is a form of inner prayer, consisting of a simple, loving gaze at God, in which the soul receives God's graceful presence.<sup>35</sup> This is a typically modern approach: the phenomenon of contemplation is conceived as the highest stage of mystical transformation. We are in the field of modern mystics like Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Francois de Sales.

These mystics belong to the field of modernity, a time of doubting and uncertainty. This has been expressed in the area of philosophy by a thinker like René Descartes. In his methodological meditations he questioned everything. The only thing that survived his doubting experiment was the act of doubtful thinking and thoughtful doubting as such: "Thinking and doubting I am sure to be (*cogito ergo sum*)." To say it more precisely: my doubtful thinking itself produces my being.

In the field of modern spirituality this philosophical process of doubting as a way of thinking and becoming sure about my own being, is reflected in the process of discernment. The act of discerning is the contemplative way to become sure about God's will for me. The core-question is: how can I be sure about God in my life, particularly in the higher area of contemplative knowledge?

John of the Cross wrestled with this crucial question in contemplative life. In his tractate of the *Dark Night* he describes contemplation as "science of love, loving knowledge infused by God, illuminating and kindling the soul in love."<sup>36</sup> Every word is important. For John of the Cross, contemplative knowledge is a science, a science of love. This loving knowledge is infused by God. This step is decisive: science is infused in contemplation. It is not produced by phantasy or illusions, by projection or memory, by dreaming or any mystical operation. The science of love is infused by God, the result being that the soul is illuminated and kindled in love. The question remains: how can I be sure, that God is truly infusing loving knowledge.

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35 Heinz Schuster, „*Beschauung*," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2 (1958), 288–289.

36 John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, II, 18,5.

The answer of John of the Cross is clear. The only way to know that God is truly working, is this: the soul has to be brought in the dark night of all its faculties, both the sensory perceptions and the spiritual activities of understanding, memory and will, and above all our supernatural presumptions and insights. Every form of ascetic training or mystical effort has to be excluded. There is no outer hold, no protecting wall, no timetable, no meditation, no skill, no liturgy, nothing but the grace of God's infused loving knowledge. The only way is nada, nada, nada, nada, nada, nada, and also on the mountain of contemplation: nada.<sup>37</sup> "Nothing" is the only sure way to God's loving science.

Contemplation is this: by passing by all sensory impressions and motions, all spiritual faculties of will, intellect and memory, all supernatural phenomena and mystical extraordinary things the soul will find its way in the dark night of God's absence, being led by no other light than what is burning in my heart, as John of the Cross sings in his famous poem of the *Dark Night*.

On a moment of pure grace in this dark night the Beloved One awakens in the most inner space of the soul. This is the aspirated prayer, about which John is not able and not willing to say anything.<sup>38</sup> Here Saint Paul is the guide: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know what and how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with inexpressible sighs" (Rom 8,26). For John of the Cross contemplation is a marvellous grace in the night. The night itself is the background against which the praying Holy Spirit inside me is experienced as loving knowledge. The science of love has become a true science without any doubt, because it happens completely without any intervention of myself. Contemplation is a desert rose flourishing on the mystical nada.

Ignatius of Loyola is struggling with the same contemplative challenge: how to recognize the traces of God's will in my life? For this discernment three attitudes are indispensable. First, an attitude of unconditional receptivity, openness without prejudice. Second, the "motions" of God must be distinguished from non-divine influences by repeatedly weighing

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37 Kees Waaijman, *De mystieke aanraking* (Kampen, 2008).

38 John of the Cross, *The Living Flame*, 4, 17.

the so called euphoric and dysphoric reactions. Third, the hints coming truly from God should be chosen: a choice in which being chosen by the greater glory of God is realized in the human being making himself more fully available. Contemplation is the choice to be chosen, empirically tested by carefully registered positive and negative reactions.

The essence of this discernment process is the experience of being moved by God Himself and nothing else, the so called “consolation without preceding cause.” Ignatius says: “By ‘without a preceding cause’ I mean without any previous perception or understanding of some object by means of which the consolation just mentioned might have been stimulated, through the intermediate activity of the person’s acts of understanding and willing.”<sup>39</sup> All human acts of intellect and will are unreliable. If in the self-analysis it has been stated that some previous act of perception or understanding was at work, or that some inner impulses of my own will played a role, then we are sure that these “causes” are stimulated through intermediate activities. All these should be excluded. The contemplative has to be patient and unconditionally open for the will of God, revealing itself as a “consolation without a preceding cause.”

This way of discerning – excluding, for the sake of certainty, every created influence – can be compared with the dark night of John of the Cross. The soul is waiting until God Himself gives his sign of presence. “Without preceding cause” means strictly: caused by God alone and by nothing else. Ignatius says, “Only God our Lord can give the soul consolation without a preceding cause. For it is the prerogative of the Creator alone to enter the soul, depart from it, and cause a motion in it which draws the person wholly into love of his Divine Majesty.”<sup>40</sup> Here again contemplation is a desert rose, flourishing this time in “without preceding cause.”

These insights of contemplative masters seem very severe. And they are. But notice their end goal. They tried to find an answer on the question of certainty regarding the science of love. Their answer is, you can trust nothing, but God alone. Then the following question is about how God works. The answer is: He is not in correlation with our action. This is the

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39 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 330.

40 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 330.

knowledge the contemplative has to endure. For those who do not search for this empirical certainty, the shortest way is the instruction of St. Paul: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5,22). Science is painful.

For the modern experts in contemplation, contemplative life is a continual act of discernment, in order to experience the loving will of God “with certainty.” In order to get this certainty, the contemplative is involved in a continual process of detachment: getting rid of every finite – social, political, but above all psychological – influence. All spiritual trainings are meant to detach the soul from finite influences and to attach the soul to the loving will of the Creator, contemplative discernment in function of the loving science of God, of God alone. We may call this type of contemplation empirical contemplation.

## **5. Contemplation in presence**

The great spiritual masters of “suspicion,” like John of the Cross, presented a rather complicated type of contemplation. It is therefore not strange that in modern times some counter voices were heard, pleading for more simplicity, as was the case with a simple contemplative sister such as Thérèse of Lisieux.

Less famous, but very influential was brother Lawrence, living two centuries earlier (1614–1691). He was a simple lay brother of the Discalced Carmelite Order who grew up in France during the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). An injury during his service in the army, left him permanently lame. In 1640 he entered the Discalced Carmelite Priory in Paris as a lay brother. He had to do the lower tasks in the kitchen, amongst others, repairing the sandals of his confreres in his old age. His contemplative experiences and advices became popular among Catholics and Protestants alike, particularly in the United States. From brother Lawrence one learns more about the contemplative way. He distanced himself from the mainstream sophisticated spirituality and dedicated himself totally to God in a simple act of presence. Brother Lawrence was not interested in the methods and practices presented by contemplative experts in books about contemplation:



Having found in many books different methods of going to God, and diverse practices of the spiritual life, I thought this would serve rather to puzzle me, than facilitate what I sought after, which was nothing but how to become wholly God.<sup>41</sup>

Brother Lawrence distanced himself not only from theoretical insights, he also gave up important practices, devotions and prayers:

I have quitted all forms of devotion and set prayers ... I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an actual presence of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes in me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them, and prevent their appearance to others.<sup>42</sup>

Brother Lawrence was not at all intimidated by accusations of quietism:

I know that some charge this state with inactivity, delusion, and self-love: I confess that it is a holy inactivity, and would be a happy self-love, if the soul in that state were capable of it; because in effect, while she is in this repose, she cannot be disturbed by such acts as she was formerly accustomed to, and which were then her support, but would now rather hinder than assist her. Yet I cannot bear that this should be called delusion; because the soul which thus enjoys God desires herein nothing but Him. If this be delusion in me, it belongs to God to remedy it. Let Him do what He pleases with me: I desire only Him, and to be wholly devoted to Him.<sup>43</sup>

Lawrence is not afraid of any suspicion: “For my part I keep myself retired with Him in the depth of the centre of my soul as much as I can; and while I am so with Him I fear nothing.”<sup>44</sup> Distancing himself from

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41 Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (San Leandro, Bristol, 1994), 10.

42 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 11.

43 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 12.

44 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 16.

the contemplative experts and not disturbed by attacks from the outside, Lawrence created an inner space of holy freedom:

But when we are faithful to keep ourselves in His holy Presence (...) it begets in us a holy freedom, and if I may so speak, a familiarity with God, wherewith we ask, and that successfully, the graces we stand in need of. In fine, by often repeating these acts, they become habitual, and the presence of God is rendered as it were natural to us.<sup>45</sup>

This is his inner sanctuary: “We must serve God in a holy freedom.”<sup>46</sup> He characterizes this free space as switching-off and splitting open the stream of oral prayers, spiritual reading and devotional practices: “We should stop all these activities to adore God in our heart, to taste Him casually and so to say stealthily.”<sup>47</sup>

Lawrence practiced only one exercise in his holy freedom: living in the presence of God. Speaking about himself in the third person singular he confessed:

You must know, his continual care has been, more than forty years of his Carmelite life, to be always with God; and to do nothing, say nothing, and think nothing which may displease Him; and this without any other view than purely for the love of Him, and because He deserves infinitely more. He is now so accustomed to that Divine presence, that he receives from it continual succour upon all occasions. For about thirty years, his soul has been filled with joys so continual, and sometimes so great, that he is forced to use means to moderate them, and to hinder their appearing outwardly.<sup>48</sup>

His concept of contemplation is living in the presence of the Lord in a simple act of love and being loved,

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45 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 10.

46 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 16.

47 Broeder Laurentius van de Verrijzenis, *De beoefening van de tegenwoordigheid Gods* (Amsterdam-Antwerpen, Standaard, 1954), 59–60.

48 Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 13–14.

an elevation of his heart towards God, or by a meek and fond regard to Him, or by such words as love forms upon these occasions; as for instance, My God, here I am all devoted to Thee; Lord, make me according to Thy heart. And then it seems to him (as in effect he feels it) that this God of love, satisfied with such few words, reposes again, and rests in the depth and centre of his soul.<sup>49</sup>

This contemplation is simple, but not without knowledge:

Let all our employment be to know God: the more one knows Him, the more one desires to know Him. And as knowledge is commonly the measure of love, the deeper and more extensive our knowledge shall be, the greater will be our love; and if our love of God were great, we should love Him equally in pains and pleasures.<sup>50</sup>

From an anthropological point of view brother Lawrence was a marginal: bodily disabled, socially inferior, intellectually uneducated, but at the same time spiritually strong and experientially rich.<sup>51</sup> This type of contemplation can be characterized as a form of counter-spirituality.<sup>52</sup> In Christian spirituality this type of spirituality is well represented. It is a double-sided phenomenon, as we have seen in the life of brother Lawrence. On the one hand, he does not fit in the Carmelite community: he does not like books of the experts, he does not follow traditional methods, he does not practice common exercises. His spiritual life is on the margins. But on the other hand, he knew enough about living in the presence of God, he practiced this exercise during more than forty years, and he wrote very consistent letters and gave wise advices. And, as people witness, he was in the centre of a contemplative network.

We often see this type of contemplation at historical moments of renewal and reform: outside mainstream spirituality, but received by simple people longing for contemplation, as we see in the reception of brother Lawrence,

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49 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 14.

50 *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 22.

51 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 125–128; Victor W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1975), 231–271.

52 Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 212–303.

after his death. The contemplative experience entered in heart of a new generation, thirsty for new ways in contemplation.

## 6. Prophetic contemplation

The last paradigm is named prophetic contemplation, because in this type of contemplation the transformative power of God's word (*dabar jahwe*) is at work in a human being. This type of contemplation can be illustrated by the example of Titus Brandsma, a Dutch Carmelite, born in Friesland. In 1923 he became professor in philosophy and mysticism at the university of Nijmegen. He openly resisted the national-socialist ideology. For that reason, the *Sicherheitsdienst* transported him to the concentration camp Dachau, where he died.

Titus Brandsma presents his vision on contemplation in his book *Carmelite Mysticism*, a series of nine lectures in the United States in the year 1935. The model of his concept of contemplation is the prophet Elijah: "As in daily life, so also in spiritual life, it is of the greatest importance to have a model of inspiration, an exemplar for imitation. Carmelite spirituality has such a model."<sup>53</sup> This model is Elijah. Brandsma describes this Elijahan contemplation as the unity of three layers. The first layer is the ideal of contemplation, the second one is the realization of this ideal in a life of prayer, the third one is the liturgy of hours. This triad and the connections between them, requires more attention now.

The first layer has its centre in the unity of two kinds of contemplation: action-and-contemplation on the one hand, and meditation-and-contemplation on the other hand. This double-sided contemplation embodies the "double spirit" of Elijah, handed on to his true disciples.

Regarding "the marvellous mixture of contemplative and active life in the great prophet," God called him "many times from his contemplation to the active life," but he "always returned to the solitude of the life of contemplation."<sup>54</sup> Regarding the "harmonious union" of the human endeavour of meditation and the divine grace of contemplation, "our

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53 Titus Brandsma, *Carmelite Mysticism* (Chicago: Carmelite Press, 1936), 7.

54 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 10.

sufferings and sacrifices, our labours and exercises in prayer and virtue will be rewarded by God with the contemplation of his love and greatness.”<sup>55</sup> Titus Brandsma calls this double woven contemplation – both fuelled by action and by meditation – “the ideal,”<sup>56</sup> not in the sense of an idealistic idea, but as a “guiding principle” in the practice of life.<sup>57</sup> As an artist, in an intense dialogue with his material, Brandsma is led by the practical idea of what he is making: contemplation.

The double woven contemplation – contemplation-in-action and contemplation-in-meditation – is, secondly, steeped in a life of prayer, as Elijah’s life was: “But after all, prayer is the chief characteristic of the great Prophet. His life was steeped in it.”<sup>58</sup> A life of prayer “should be woven into our lives, grafted into it, so that our prayer is proof of our life and conversely our life proves the sincerity of our prayer.”<sup>59</sup> This life of prayer is founded in a three-fold basis: living in the presence of God combined with solitude and detachment.<sup>60</sup> Living in the presence of God is the realization of Elijah’s principle of life: “God lives, I am standing before his face.” For Titus Brandsma, a life of prayer – particularly the exercise of living in the presence of God – is the “realization” of the “ideal” of contemplation.<sup>61</sup> Such as a piece of art is the “realization” of an “ideal” in dialogue with the rough material, so a life of prayer – living in the presence of God – is the realization of the ideal of contemplation: contemplation-in-action and contemplation-in-meditation.

The third layer is liturgical prayer. Titus Brandsma states: “We see in the prayer of Elijah a providential union of oral and liturgical prayer with the prayer of meditation and contemplation.”<sup>62</sup> This liturgical prayer is based in “continual prayer” which is one of the most repeated commandments

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55 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 10–11.

56 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 11.

57 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 9 and 18.

58 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 14.

59 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 64–65.

60 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 11–14.

61 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 12.

62 *Carmelite Mysticism*, 14.

of the New Testament.<sup>63</sup> It is an attitude of complete and uninterrupted orientation towards God. It is living in the presence of God, and as such both the realization of double woven contemplation and the foundation of liturgical prayer. The contemplation in action is realized in the liturgy by its prophetic dimension: being drawn into the future of God's people from the viewpoint of God, "the gift of prophecy."<sup>64</sup> This prophetic view is rooted in the availability of the prophet: "Here I am. *Hinneni*. At your service." The contemplation in meditation is realized in the liturgy: "St. Teresa in her love for liturgical prayer would so impregnate it with holy thoughts, that it, too, in a sense, would become contemplative prayer, prayer of active contemplation."<sup>65</sup>

The originality of Brandsma's vision on contemplation is, that staying before the face of God, as in his days the prophet Elijah, is the action of all actions, both meditation and commitment. "Elijah was called to a life of prayer in the midst of a life of intense activity, yet he is one of the greatest Prophets of the Old Testament."<sup>66</sup> Living in the presence of God, strengthened by liturgical prayer, is in itself the prophetic act, which is the foundation of contemplation. It is its realization. Contemplation is an act: contemplation in action and meditative contemplation. To understand prayer as prophetic act we may reflect on the meaning of "living in the presence of God." The preposition "in" has the same strength as the Pauline "being in Christ," expressing a strong unity. The presence of God realizes itself in the "being" of the prophet. The prophetic *hinneni* – Here I am – expresses the willingness of the prophet to be the presence of the Lord. This is hearing the *dabar* of the Lord. The prophet presents the word of the Lord by hearing and doing and living it. He lives the presence of God.<sup>67</sup>

Brandsma was deeply involved in social activities, in education, peace work, journalism, ecological commitment, building up a university. His

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63 Kees Waaijman, "Uninterrupted Prayer – A Spiritual Challenge." *HTS* 75 (2019).

64 Brandsma, *Carmelite Mysticism*, 15.

65 Titus Brandsma, *Carmelite Mysticism*, 15.

66 Titus Brandsma, *Carmelite Mysticism*, 26–27.

67 K. Waaijman, "Contemplative in Action," in S. Chackalackal (ed.), *Contemplation and Proclamation. Carmelite Charisma for a renewed Indian Mission* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2019), 41–52; G. D'Souza, "Contemplation and Prophetic Proclamation in Carmel," in *Contemplation and Proclamation*, 53–63.

commitment was a contemplative act, a prophetic *dabar*. It was for him: living the word of the living God. This contemplative act was at the same time his prayer. For him contemplative prayer itself was action. His originality is: contemplation as action in real life, living the presence of God as God's action, prophetic availability as action.

Prophetic contemplation can be characterized as performative contemplation: contemplation as “speech act”<sup>68</sup> of God, realized in the frail life of the prophet.<sup>69</sup> Speaking, thinking, meditating, praying, acting, and liturgical prayer, they belong all to the same field of spiritual performance, holy pragmatic.

## 7. Final remark

This essay explored six paradigms of contemplation. It touched on the inner dynamic of the phenomenon. The paradigms are meant as “essays” in the literal sense of the word: attempts, trials, tentatives. They tried to fathom the depth of contemplation, but at the same time they make one aware of the multifaceted richness of the phenomenon and confess the limitedness of our knowledge. The paradigms are also “essays” in the material sense of the word. We limited ourselves to the inner dynamics of contemplation, knowing that the outer contexts reveal their own insights. Moreover, we investigated the Christian tradition, and did not speak about biblical contemplation or contemplation in Jewish, Islamic and non-western contexts.

Hopefully these six paradigms may have sharpened our thinking about contemplation and stirred up the awareness of its richness. This is the intention of the paradigmatic method: providing “springboards” which, on the highest point of the leap, offer a glimpse of the treasure of contemplation.<sup>70</sup>

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68 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969).

69 Mary Frohlich, *Carmelite Wisdom and Prophetic Hope* (Washington, ICS, 2018); Chackalackal, *Contemplation and Proclamation*.

70 Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Subject*, Bloomington, Atholone, 1994, 103.

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