



QUICK THEOLOGY

# Contemplative Prayer



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*First paperback edition June 2022*

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## Introduction

In this little booklet we will dive into the contemplative tradition and contemplative prayer. I was excited to research and produce this book because I know you guys have been wondering about this for quite a while. It is something that has been talked about in the Christian sphere more recently with the rise of New Age influences, and it is an important topic that we have to address. How do we as Orthodox believers discern between a genuine Christian contemplative tradition and something that is actually influenced by New Age principles? Hopefully this booklet will bring you some clarity.

If you are not familiar with the concept of contemplative prayer, essentially it is a manner of approaching the Christian life, particularly Christian disciplines of prayer, meditation, and the Holy Spirit. Much of the content regarding contemplation comes

out of the Catholic tradition and the Wesleyan Holiness/Charismatic tradition. Charismatic churches are descended from Holiness churches, which are descended from the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition. Essentially these two traditions—the Catholic and the Wesleyan Holiness—are responsible for most of our content on the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation. Of course all Christian traditions talk about and practice prayer, but contemplative prayer specifically finds its root in the history of these traditions, and the Wesleyan Holiness tradition pulled a lot of their content and modeling from the Desert Fathers in the early church and the Catholic tradition.

The Desert Fathers were a variety of nuns and monks in the very early monastic traditions. When monasticism became more popular and accepted, there were groups of men and women who would retreat to the desert like John the Baptist and practice spiritual disciplines. They would practice silence, fasting, and prayer, and then they would write extensively about these things. Those writings and traditions were then passed down throughout church history. They are most read and appreciated in Catholic traditions and in more liturgical traditions. Wesleyanism and the Holiness movement pulled from this when developing their

contemplative tradition.

When you read about this today, one of the primary sources of content is Renovare, which is run by Richard Foster, his colleagues, and his son, Nathan Foster. I have been able to hear Richard Foster speak live, I have read two of his books (one on prayer and the other on spiritual disciplines), and I have read extensively on his website. So I am quite familiar with what he teaches and can in good conscience recommend him as an author. However, I have not read every single thing his colleagues have written, what they are doing, or who they are endorsing. So I cannot speak to all the people at Renovare, but I have found Richard Foster's work to be extremely helpful and powerful in my own spiritual walk. I have checked it against Scripture—because I have been studying the Word as I have been reading it—and I have not found anything to be concerned about in his works. As always, I have pulled directly from the source, and I will use that content to share what we see in the contemplative tradition today, and then I will discuss how we can discern that from New Age material.



## Defining the New Age

Before we talk about what contemplation looks like for a Christian, I want to talk about what it looks like in the New Age because this will give us a foundation to know the difference. The New Age is essentially what we see in the earthy mysticism spirituality that has risen out of Buddhism. There are some people who have been pivotal in exposing the New Age and its teachings. Steven Bancarz is one and Doreen Virtue is another. Both of them were deep in the New Age and practiced many of its characteristic liturgies, such as earth worship, using tarot cards, and practicing mystical earth and goddess-based healings. I am familiar with the New Age because I live in a very agnostic area of the country. I also run in the “crunchy,” health food store type circles because I am a home birth mom. When you are in those circles, you inevitably run across New Age content because it is a big part of the home birth movement. This New Age concept touts connecting



with your inner goddess, connecting with Mother Earth, worshipping the earth, connecting to the earth through your baby, through the placenta—it is a whole thing. I will not get into that here. But essentially, there is a lot of crossover between the New Age and the concept of becoming spiritual and spiritually connected to the earth, even pulling in some Wiccan influences. All of this is a spiritual reality and a cultural reality that we need to reckon with and be aware of as Christians.

Here is the other thing to know. All religions and all spiritual traditions have some kind of mystical aspect, including Christianity. Yes, including Christianity. All of them operate with the idea that you are connecting to some higher power or God. You are communicating with another spirit through prayer, chanting, or whatever it may be. Because of that, each one has some experience with the miraculous, with a spiritual feeling, and things like that. The difference for the Christian is that the Christian is communicating with a Holy God who is historically grounded and who is representing true goodness and holiness. Every other religion is not communicating with that God. Yes, you can have spiritual feelings, you can have spiritual experiences, you can have mystical experiences as someone who is in the New Age. But for the Christian who is looking at that,