

Contemplative
Resistance:
A Guide to
Christian
Meditation

Anthony Parrott

Introduction

In a world that often feels overwhelming, chaotic, and increasingly anxious, many of us long for practices that can ground us, center us, and reconnect us with what matters most. Meditation is one such practice—but for many Christians, it's been surrounded by suspicion and misunderstanding.

This guide explores the rich history of Christian contemplative practices, challenging some common myths about meditation in the Christian tradition, and offering practical guidance for incorporating these ancient practices into your daily life. Whether you're experienced in meditation or completely new to it, these pages invite you into a tradition of spiritual practice that has sustained followers of Jesus for nearly two thousand years.

The Empire and The Desert: Christianity's Contemplative Roots

When Christianity Became Legal

To understand Christian contemplative traditions, we need to understand the political and social context that gave birth to them.

In 313 CE, nearly 300 years after Jesus lived, the Roman Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, making Christianity legal throughout the Roman Empire. This came after decades of severe persecution of Christians who had refused to worship the emperor or participate in the imperial cult, instead insisting that "Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not."

Whether Constantine had a genuine spiritual conversion (as some historical accounts suggest) or simply saw political opportunity in embracing the growing Christian movement, the result was transformative. Christians were no longer targets of persecution but instead enjoyed protected status within the empire.

By 380 CE, Emperor Theodosius went further with the Edict of Thessalonica, making Christianity not just legal but the official state religion of the Roman Empire—and outlawing other religious practices.

The Danger of Success

For Christians who had endured generations of marginalization and persecution, this dramatic reversal felt like divine vindication. Christianity had seemingly conquered the empire! The gospel had reached the seats of power!

But some early church leaders became deeply concerned about what was happening to the Christian community as it moved from the margins to the center of empire. St. John Chrysostom, whose liturgies are still used in Eastern Orthodox churches today, wrote:

Plagues teeming with untold mischief have come upon the churches. The primary offices have become marketable. Excessive wealth, enormous power, and luxury are destroying the integrity of the Church.

In other words, Christianity's newfound status brought comfort and power, but also the corruption that comes with

privilege. The faith that had begun as a resistance movement following a crucified teacher was now being used to sanctify imperial power.

The Rise of the Desert Tradition

In response to this co-opting of Christianity by the empire, a countermovement emerged: monasticism. Led by figures like St. Anthony of the Desert (a Coptic Egyptian Christian), men and women began leaving the cities and moving into the wilderness to pursue a different kind of faith—one not entangled with political power and social status.

This was not withdrawal for withdrawal's sake. It was resistance. These desert mothers and fathers were saying, in effect: "If the church in the city has been captured by empire, we will create alternative communities that embody the radical way of Jesus."

Central to this desert tradition was the practice of contemplative prayer and meditation. These early monks understood that to resist the values of empire—wealth, status, domination—they needed practices that would transform their hearts and minds from within.

Mythbusting: Christian Meditation Misconceptions

"Meditation is Eastern, not Christian"

One of the most common objections to meditation in Christian circles is the idea that it comes from "Eastern religions" and therefore has no place in Christian practice. This objection misunderstands both history and geography.

Christianity itself is an Eastern religion! It began in the Middle East, and its theology was defined largely by Jewish, Coptic, North African, and Middle Eastern theologians. The idea that Christianity is "Western" is a much later development.

Additionally, meditative practices were part of Jewish tradition long before Jesus. By the time of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jewish mystical practices were already well-

established, and early Christians—who were themselves Jews—naturally continued and developed these practices.

Most importantly, Christians have been practicing meditation continuously for nearly 2,000 years. The desert mothers and fathers, medieval mystics, Eastern Orthodox hesychasts, Catholic contemplatives, and even some Protestant reformers all engaged in forms of meditation. To suggest meditation is foreign to Christianity ignores this rich heritage.

"Empty Mind, Enter Demons"

Another common fear is that meditation, particularly practices that quiet the mind, creates a vacuum that demonic forces can exploit. This fear often comes from a misunderstanding of what Christian meditation entails.

Christian meditation is not about emptying the mind into nothingness, but about becoming present to the Divine who is already here. It is about creating space to listen rather than always speaking. As the Psalmist writes: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

Far from opening oneself to harmful influences, Christian meditation practices have been understood for centuries as ways of deepening one's connection to God, becoming more attuned to divine guidance, and developing spiritual discernment.

Fear of sudden demon possession is nothing but pure superstition. It also ignores Scripture's encouragement, "For

the one who is in you [God] is greater than the one who is in the world [antichrist or evil]" (1 John 4:4). Practitioners of meditation have nothing to fear.

"Meditation is Selfish Navel-Gazing"

Some Christians worry that meditation focuses too much on the self rather than on serving others. But historically, Christian contemplative practices have been deeply connected to social justice and community service.

The desert monastics weren't just meditating for personal peace; they were creating alternative communities based on radical equality and sharing of resources. Medieval mystics like Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila combined intense contemplative practice with social action and church reform. More recently, contemplatives like Thomas Merton connected their prayer practices directly to work for civil rights and peace.

The truth is that genuine contemplative practice doesn't disconnect us from the world's suffering—it makes us more sensitive to it, more responsive to it, and more equipped to address it without burning out or becoming hardened.

The Neuroscience of Meditation: Why It Matters What God You Pray To

Modern neuroscience offers fascinating insights into why contemplative practices have been valued across spiritual traditions for millennia.

Research by Dr. Andrew Newberg and others has shown that regular meditation literally changes the brain. It can reduce the size of the amygdala (the part of the brain associated with fear and stress responses) while strengthening the prefrontal cortex (associated with empathy, compassion, and higher reasoning).

But Newberg's research revealed something else important: the *kind* of deity we focus on during prayer or meditation shapes our brains in different ways. As he writes:

The personality you assign to God has distinct neural patterns that correlate with your own emotional styles of behavior.

In other words, if you meditate while focusing on an angry, judgmental, vindictive deity, your brain becomes more attuned to anger, judgment, and vindictiveness. If you focus on a God of compassion, love, and justice, your brain becomes more compassionate, loving, and justice-oriented.

This finding has profound implications for Christian meditation. It suggests that the way we imagine God directly shapes who we become. This is why Christian meditation traditionally focuses on divine attributes like love, mercy, peace, and justice—because focusing on these qualities helps us embody them.

Christian Meditation Practices

Now let's explore specific meditation practices from the Christian tradition that you can incorporate into your own spiritual life.

Centering Prayer

What it is: Centering Prayer is a practice developed in the 1970s based on meditation techniques from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th-century spiritual text. It involves choosing a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.

How to practice:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within (examples: Love, Peace, Shalom, Jesus, Mercy, Listen, Let Go).
2. Find a comfortable position and close your eyes. Introduce your sacred word gently.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, emotions, or sensations, gently return to your sacred word.
4. After the time of prayer (typically 20 minutes), remain in silence with eyes closed for a minute or two.

Remember: The goal isn't to stop thinking but to detach from your thoughts and rest in God's presence. The sacred word isn't for constant repetition but as a way to gently return when you notice yourself distracted by thoughts.

Biblical connection: "Be still and know that I am God"
(Psalm 46:10)

Breath Prayer

What it is: Breath Prayer is one of the oldest Christian prayer practices, originating with the desert monastics. It involves synchronizing a short prayer with your breathing, recognizing breath as a symbol of the Spirit (the Hebrew "ruach" and Greek "pneuma" both mean breath and spirit).

How to practice:

1. Find a comfortable position and become aware of your breathing.
2. Choose a short phrase or prayer. Traditionally, many use the "Jesus Prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ (inhale), have mercy on me (exhale)." But you can create your own with whatever resonates with your current spiritual needs.

Other examples:

- Inhale: "Divine Love"
Exhale: "Fill me"
- Inhale: "My work does not own me"
Exhale: "God, give me courage to rest"
- Inhale: "Not my will"
Exhale: "But yours be done"

- Inhale: "I am God's beloved" /
Exhale: "Nothing can separate me"
3. Repeat this prayer with your breathing for a set time (5-15 minutes is common for beginners).

Remember: The rhythm should feel natural, not forced. Allow your breath to guide the pace of the prayer.

Biblical connection: "In God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)

Lectio Divina (Divine Reading)

What it is: Lectio Divina is a contemplative way of reading scripture that dates back to the early desert monastics and was formalized by the Benedictine tradition. It involves a slow, contemplative reading of a short passage of scripture, letting it sink deeply into your heart.

How to practice:

Lectio Divina consists of four movements:

1. **Lectio (Read):** Read a short scripture passage slowly, perhaps aloud. Notice if a particular word or phrase catches your attention or resonates with you.
2. **Meditatio (Reflect):** Reflect on the passage. What might God be saying to you through this text? How does it connect to your life?
3. **Oratio (Respond):** Respond to God from your heart. This could be a prayer of gratitude, confession, or request based on what arose during your reflection.

- 4. Contemplatio (Rest):** Simply rest in God's presence, without words or specific thoughts. Be with the Divine as you would sit quietly with a dear friend.

Example scripture for practice: Psalm 131:1-2 "My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content."

Remember: The goal isn't intellectual analysis of the text but allowing it to speak to your heart and spirit.

Biblical connection: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105)

Imaginative Prayer (Ignatian Contemplation)

What it is: Developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century, this practice involves using your imagination to enter into a Gospel scene, engaging all your senses to experience the story from within.

How to practice:

1. Choose a passage from the Gospels where Jesus is interacting with others.
2. Read the passage slowly a couple of times to familiarize yourself with the story.
3. Close your eyes and imagine the scene in as much detail as possible. What does it look like? What sounds, smells, or textures might be present? Who is there and what are they doing?
4. Place yourself in the scene. You might be a specific character, or simply an observer. How do you feel being there?

5. Watch how Jesus moves and interacts. What does he say? How does he say it? How do others respond to him?
6. Allow yourself to interact with Jesus. What might you say to him? What might he say to you?
7. Close with a conversation with Jesus about what you experienced.

Example scripture for practice: Mark 8:22-25 "They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?' He looked up and said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around.' Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

Remember: The goal isn't historical accuracy but encountering the living Christ through the gospel narrative.

Biblical connection: "Fix your thoughts on Jesus"
(Hebrews 3:1)

The Examen

What it is: The Examen is a practice of prayerful reflection on the events of the day developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola. It helps you notice where you experienced God's presence and where you resisted it.

How to practice:

1. **Become aware of the Divine presence:** Take a moment to recognize that you are in God's presence. Ask the Spirit to guide your reflection.
2. **Review the day with gratitude:** Recall the events of the day, and notice what you're thankful for.
3. **Pay attention to your emotions:** Notice what feelings were stirred up throughout the day. Joy? Worry? Boredom? Excitement? Where might God have been present in those feelings?
4. **Choose one aspect of the day to pray about:** Select something from your review that feels significant. It could be a strong feeling, an important encounter, or a pattern you've noticed. Talk to God about it.
5. **Look toward tomorrow:** Ask for guidance, courage, or whatever you need for the coming day.

Remember: The Examen isn't about judging yourself but about growing in self-awareness and recognizing God's movement in your daily life.

Biblical connection: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." (Psalm 139:23)

Overcoming Challenges in Meditation

Befriending Silence

Many of us find silence uncomfortable or even threatening. We live in a culture that fills every moment with noise, information, and entertainment. Learning to be comfortable with silence is itself a spiritual practice.

Start small—perhaps just 2-3 minutes of silent meditation. Notice what emotions or sensations arise during silence. Are you anxious? Bored? Itchy? Instead of trying to suppress these responses, simply notice them with curiosity and gentleness.

Remember that silence isn't empty—it's full of possibility. As the Sufi poet Rumi wrote, "There is a voice that doesn't use words. Listen."

Normalizing Boredom

We live in a culture that treats boredom as a problem to be solved with constant stimulation. But spiritual traditions have long recognized boredom as a threshold to deeper awareness.

When you feel bored during meditation, try not to immediately seek distraction. Instead, get curious about the boredom itself. What does it feel like in your body? What assumptions underlie the feeling that "nothing is happening"?

Many contemplatives report that when they stay with the experience of boredom rather than fleeing from it, something shifts—often opening into deeper peace, insight, or presence.

Reframing Distractions

Distractions during meditation are inevitable—whether external (noises, interruptions) or internal (thoughts, worries, to-do lists). The key is not to eliminate distractions but to change your relationship to them.

When distracted, avoid self-criticism ("I'm terrible at this") or frustration ("This isn't working"). Instead, simply notice the distraction without judgment, and gently return to your meditation focus. Each time you notice a distraction and return, you're actually strengthening your contemplative "muscles."

Some traditions even suggest using distractions as part of the practice. If you keep thinking about a particular worry,

for example, you might briefly hold that concern in God's light before returning to your meditation focus.

Remembering That Prayer Forms Us, We Don't Master It

Western culture conditions us to approach activities as skills to be mastered or achievements to complete. But contemplative practices aren't about achieving a particular state or becoming an expert.

Prayer and meditation are more like breathing than like mountain climbing—they're ongoing practices that sustain us rather than achievements to conquer. No one "wins" at meditation. Even experienced contemplatives continue to encounter challenges in their practice.

The point isn't perfection but transformation—allowing these practices to gradually shape our awareness, our hearts, and our way of being in the world.

Trusting That the Divine Awaits Us

Many people hesitate to begin or return to spiritual practices because they fear judgment—from themselves, from others, or from God. This is especially true if it's been a long time since you've engaged in intentional spiritual practice.

Remember the parable of the prodigal son: the father doesn't wait with crossed arms and a lecture, but rather runs out to meet the returning child with joy and celebration.

Whatever name or image you use for the Sacred, trust that you are met with welcome rather than judgment when you turn your attention toward the Divine.

Conclusion: Meditation as Resistance and Renewal

In our current cultural moment, Christian contemplative practices offer both resistance and renewal.

They resist the frantic pace, constant distraction, and productivity obsession of modern life. They resist the commodification of attention and the exploitation of anxiety. They resist both religious nationalism that worships power and secular materialism that denies depth.

They offer renewal by reconnecting us with ancient wisdom, with our own bodies and hearts, with the natural world, with authentic community, and with the Ground of Being that many of us call God.

The Christian mystic and civil rights activist Howard Thurman wrote: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what

makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

May these contemplative practices help you come alive to the fullness of your humanity, to the sacredness of all life, and to the transformative power of love. And may that aliveness flow outward in service to a world in need of healing and hope.

Resources for Further Exploration

Books:

- *The Way of the Heart* by Henri Nouwen
- *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *Contemplative Prayer* by Thomas Merton
- *Sacred Resistance* by Ginger Gaines-Cirelli
- *Healing Our Broken Humanity* by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill
- *Black Liturgies* by Cole Arthur Riley

Apps:

- Centering Prayer

- Live From Rest
- Pray As You Go
- Lectio 365
- Insight Timer (contains many Christian-oriented meditations)

Websites:

- contemplative.org/contemplative-practice/centering-prayer/
- Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation (shalem.org)
- Center for Action and Contemplation (cac.org)
- Black Liturgies (blackliturgies.com)