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**HOW CAN WE BECOME MORE AWARE OF  
THE TRUE SELF  
IN THIS POST-MODERN ERA?**

**A study on Thomas Keating's understanding of Centering Prayer.**

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## **1.0. Introduction**

### **1.1. Personal background**

During the recent decade I have been observing more and more people searching the church for spiritual guidance. Many of them come because their lives have lost its meaning, their faith is nothing more than a distant way of thinking. Deep down in their inner being they are thirsty and hungry for a living relationship with God, but they don't know how to come into connection with it. Many search for their own true self, because they have a feeling that they are not living the life they were created to live. They have a desperate need both of finding their authentic self and a God they can trust. The image of God many have inherited through parents and peers in the culture around seems not to be trustworthy any longer. To be in a position of both risking trust in themselves and in the God they used to believe in, feels rather scary. There is a great need for finding a way through this existential problem.

For many years I have been searching a deeper spiritual life myself. I started attending silent retreats, especially Ignatian retreats<sup>1</sup> that offered spiritual guidance. During talks with a spiritual companion and during the silent awareness of God's love I began gradually to be aware of false ideas that had given directions in my life. Physically, emotionally and spiritually I experienced some kind of divine therapy starting to grow in my very being. I continued to attend annual retreats and found that God all the time was digging deeper into my existential/spiritual life. I realized that silence was a "place" where I more easily became aware of God's presence. Not that he was absent or in other "places", but silence cleared my mind more easily than a noisy environment, and made me more attentive to him. Often when I started to pray with words, I felt my words somehow came in the way. After many years of receiving spiritual direction, I finally met one who understood that my heart was a contemplative one, more than meditative. This opened up a new freedom both in my prayer life and my whole being. One of the things this spiritual director introduced me to, was the method of "Centering Prayer", taught by Thomas Keating.

Ignatian retreats have been arranged frequently over the last ten to twelve years in Norway and Sweden. Many people join them and benefit greatly from them. We do not often hear about "contemplative" retreats. Some think that this is the same thing. They

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<sup>1</sup> Retreats given in the tradition of Ignatius of Loyola. I first attended several short versions of 5 days, then some 8 days, then the full "Spiritual Exercises" for 30 days.

have much in common, but still there is a difference. In the contemplative way of prayer, there is less meditation<sup>2</sup>, but more non-discursive opening for existential awareness of God's presence. Contemplation is not a technique, it is more a pure rest in God. It is to let go of thoughts and words, just stay in an embrace of God's love. Nothing is supposed or anticipated to happen at a rational or emotional level.<sup>3</sup>

The fruit in a longer perspective of this way of praying seems to be a clearer knowledge of our false and true self and a deeper awareness of who God is, according to Thomas Keating.<sup>4</sup> Is this really trustworthy? This is an important question I want to pose in this thesis. I want to do that because I find that there is a deep connection between this question and the questions many human beings of today are asking, searching for an identity that is trustworthy for their personal inner life.

## **1.2. Postmodern actuality**

Our culture has reached a time many will call the Postmodern period of history. Though experts will discuss whether we should call this time Late Modernism or Postmodernism, there is a broad agreement that our western society has reached a dramatic change in the way of understanding its place in history. Postmodernism is partly a protest against the age of Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> We have gone through centuries of Modernism where the understanding has been that science would find "all" the answers of the universe. God was put on the "shelf" by many of those believing in this postulate. For many of those who continued to believe in God, God had to fit into the great narrative of how the world was created and how man could explain God's work on earth and in heaven.

In this Postmodern era, we see perhaps science is not providing all the answers. Science will always have more questions to ask. By definition, science is expected to explore and push back boundaries of understanding. Stanley Grenz points to Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book "A Primer on Postmodernism", when he says: "According to the postmodern appraisal, science cannot achieve its goal of expelling myth from the realm of knowledge<sup>6</sup>" and further:

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<sup>2</sup> Meditation in Ignation tradition is mostly staying with a text and let images, impulses, new insight or inner challenges rise in my thoughts through the words I read.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.annunciationtrust.org.uk/approaches/meditation\\_contemplation.shtml](http://www.annunciationtrust.org.uk/approaches/meditation_contemplation.shtml), 18.04.2007.

<sup>4</sup> Keating: *Reawakenings*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Grenz: *A primer to Postmodernism*, p.2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Grenz: *A primer on Postmodernism*", p. 47.

Lyotard welcomes a world in which multiple incompatible language games flourish alongside one another. He rejoices that we are no longer ruled by the modern concern that all discussion lead toward consensus.<sup>7</sup>

Realising that science never will find all the answers of any time, neither in biological, philosophical or theological matters, we find that there is not an objective great narrative that can explain who God is for anyone. In this era the human being is “liberated” to search for his own narrative, a narrative where he can find his own “true self”.

This realisation opens new perspectives for the human being in searching more widely than what used to be scientifically consensus in the period of Modernism. It opens again the world wide tradition for exploring the mysterious aspects of life. It connects us with other religions, and we realize that people of “no religion” are out searching for a meaning of life that goes beyond the materialistic and scientific point of view as well. This is a great challenge to the Christian church in our culture and time. We, who belong to the church, may try to close our eyes to this new perspective and go on as we did in the Modernistic time, or we may try to fight against it and meet the new “ideas” as if they were enemies, or we can turn the other way around and see the great chance and possibilities this gives us to show a way to a greater Kingdom of God than we used to offer.

### **1.3. True self and false self**

According to the emphasis of finding the “true self” throughout this thesis, I find it necessary to explain what these terms mean in a Christian contemplative context.

“Who or what am I?” is the most important question of all to ask for a human being. What good are the answers to other questions if we don’t know who or what we are? All too many exist, but don’t live. We see, but don’t watch. We hear, but cannot listen. We eat without tasting. We are only adopting what our surroundings have taught us, and thinking that what tradition says is the same thing as our true self. Being raised by imperfect parents in an imperfect world makes us exposed to criticism as the norm. We identify with the negative thoughts, and think they are who we really are. This leads us to treat others unfairly, in the vain hope that by dragging them down we would be uplifting ourselves. Some will think that the true self is how we feel when nobody is watching. That it is what we ultimately think of ourselves, how we treat ourselves and what we fear others might see inside us. This understanding of a true self is judgmental and undermining

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<sup>7</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, p. 48

goodness and the ability to love unconditionally. It is not the true self at all, it reveals the false self.

Jesus discloses this behaviour of false self when he meets the Pharisees from Jerusalem. He says to them,

(...) you have made God's word ineffective by means of your tradition. Hypocrites! How rightly Isaiah prophesied about you when he said: "This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments." He called the people to him and said: "Listen, and understand. What goes into the mouth does not make anyone unclean; it is what comes out of the mouth that makes someone unclean. (Matthew 15:6b-11, NJB).

This underpins how important it is to know who we are in our inner being, because this is what flows out throughout our lives. What we are adopting from others will build our false selves, until we know who we really are. Jesus said we must die to self. It is the false self he is talking about. The false self always wants to defend itself, it is fearful and lonely, and thinks that it has to earn love and affirmation. This is a lie to life itself. All life is of God. In some way we are a participant in the Divine Being. "To know ourselves in the Divine Creative Love is to find our true self." Basil Pennington, who has also been a known writer on Centering Prayer, states this: "When we find that we are loved by Love itself, we understand that we are not created by what others think."<sup>8</sup> We are made in the image and likeness of God. But sin has come into our lives. We have shattered the likeness of our Creator. But the Love God is, is something more than love. It is mercy. "God's mercy is above all God's works." Love perceives the good and responds to it. Mercy perceives the lack of good, which is what sin is, and makes us good so that we are wholly worthy to be embraced by the Divine Love.<sup>9</sup> Basil Pennington is stating that Centering Prayer is profoundly healing the process from a false self to a true self.

#### **1.4. Research question**

Because of the growing awakening for more authenticity in our culture today, and because of my own experience on Centering Prayer, I want to discuss if Centering Prayer is a way for the Postmodern human being to find his own narrative and his own true self. I will do it from the angle of the contemplative tradition, whose roots come from the cradle of

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<sup>8</sup> Pennington, *True self, false self*, p. 34-47.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.49-50.

Christianity. But since the contemplative tradition is such a huge topic, I will only use it as a background. From the contemplative background I want to single out a contemporary theologian, Thomas Keating, who over the last 25 years has been one of the key figures and one of the founders of a way that seems to fit very well into our time of Postmodernism. The way comes in a new suit, but is rooted in the old contemplative tradition. It might be a “gift” to ordinary people who live a busy life outside of monasteries.

Therefore, I want to do a literature study on Thomas Keating’s writings on the topic ”Centering Prayer”, asking:

**How can Centering Prayer according to Thomas Keating be a way for the human being to find an identity of a true self, and how can this concept be evaluated in our time?**

Obvious subquestions will be:

- Why is it important to find our true self?
- How is Keating defining true and false self? Has this insight any support from the science of psychology and theology?
- Is Centering Prayer really prayer? What connections and differences are there between Centering Prayer and other meditation techniques in the world today?
- How is the Postmodern time a crucial time to offer this kind of practice?

In our time of pluralism, where global religions exist side by side and alternative spiritual movements are growing, I believe it is time to look at the Christian heritage of spirituality, and see if the renewed way of seeking God through Centering Prayer, can be a door that opens both towards God, others and ourselves.

### **1.5. Method and sources**

The method I will use is first of all a literature study of the writings of Thomas Keating on the very subject of Centering Prayer. Thomas Keating has a bibliography that is very long, more than 30 titles are published from his hands, both of him as the only author and where he is a co-author with others. All of them focus on the subject “contemplative life and prayer”, some more than others try to put “Centering Prayer” into the context as a method

to find a contemplative prayer life. Some of the books may at first look seem rather simple to read, written from the aim of making seekers curious and interested in what this is about, but after working with this over time, I can see that these books are distilled writings of the enormous experience the author has of a contemplative life. The gift is to be able to write about such deep insight in a simple way. In these books he points at different aspects of Centering Prayer and contemplative prayer in general, and goes to the depths of them. Other books are written for the special guidance and teaching into the very practice of Centering Prayer, and yet others are written from a deeper academic theological aspect on how to place this tool into a greater context. Hence, I have chosen books from all three categories as my primary source, because they belong to this special aim where Centering Prayer is concerned:

- “Intimacy with God”,<sup>10</sup>  
“The Better Part”,<sup>11</sup>  
“Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit”,<sup>12</sup>  
“Manifesting God”<sup>13</sup>.

All these books give an insight from a theological view.

- “The Human Condition”,<sup>14</sup> is a simple distilled work on “The original sin”  
“Finding Grace at the Center”,<sup>15</sup> is an introduction book to Centering Prayer

- “Invitation to Love”,<sup>16</sup>  
“Open mind, open heart”,<sup>17</sup>  
are informative, practical teaching books that deal with the psychological aspects and the theological traditional teaching of contemplation. I will in addition use articles I have found at internet written by Keating, and some interviews with him, as part of my primary source.

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<sup>10</sup> Keating; *Intimacy with God*..

<sup>11</sup> Keating; *The Better Part*.

<sup>12</sup> Keating; *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*.

<sup>13</sup> Keating; *Manifesting God*.

<sup>14</sup> Keating; *The Human Condition*.

<sup>15</sup> Pennington, Keating and Clarke; *Finding Grace at the Center*.

<sup>16</sup> Keating; *Invitation to Love*.

<sup>17</sup> Keating; *Open mind, open heart*.

I have chosen these books and writings to analyse what Keating is teaching on the subject. They give a picture of the totality of his contribution, which is necessary to be able to evaluate it in comparison with other kinds of prayer and centering.<sup>18</sup> His theological books I will use to find where he places himself in the context both to the history and the theology of the Church. By analysing a broad description of Centering Prayer from the other books I will get a chance to look at it in relation to other spiritual practices of today. Keating deals mostly with practical theological issues. Hence, I will use as my secondary source, authors and theologians who have studied Keating's work from a more academic point of view. Secondary sources will of course always be interpretations, and my own view will be an interpretation of what I read. Secondary sources may also develop the subject, from what originally was Keating's teaching. When I find this, I will mark that in the text.

I have experiential knowledge and understanding of CP having practiced it for the past four years. I am aware of the possibility of viewing this material in a subjective way, with the risk of highlighting what I find important myself, and leaving out what I do not find as essential. But the experience does also give me an insight that helps to understand better what this is about.

What is a real difficult problem in this project is to try to be academic at all on an issue that is supposed to be practiced beyond human conceptuality and academic thinking. But because this is a subject that is almost unknown to the Protestant churches in Norway and the Nordic countries, I find it is necessary to introduce it in order to widen the landscape of spirituality in our Christian culture.

I have decided to give a background for Centering Prayer, first by presenting Mystical Theology, where Contemplative Spirituality has its roots. Without understanding Contemplative Spirituality, Centering Prayer will lose its foundation. Contemplative spirituality and the fairly recent phenomenon of Centering Prayer flow from what we know to be Mystical Theology, including both Kataphatic (positive) and Apophatic (negative) traditions. Therefore, I will give a background on what this view is based upon. I have to include some definitions from this theological background, so that it will be possible to understand what Centering Prayer is about. For this purpose I will use both literature from Keating himself, and secondary sources. I will do that to broaden the description, and to

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<sup>18</sup> Centering is a word used in many spiritualities, meaning concentrating, focusing, etc.

widen the possibility to understand Keating's contribution. It will also show similarities and insights of spirituality today.

To widen my background I have therefore chosen as my secondary sources:

- books from the Bible
- teachings from the early Church Fathers<sup>19</sup>
- St. John of the Cross<sup>20</sup>
- the anonymous writer of "The Cloud of Unknowing" from the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>
- among others, Thomas Merton,<sup>22</sup> William Johnston,<sup>23</sup> and Basil Pennington,<sup>24</sup> from our own time

Having presented the history of Contemplative spirituality, I will introduce the author Thomas Keating himself and show how he became one of the key founders of Centering Prayer.

After presenting the background material I want to introduce the method and practice of Centering prayer (CP), and how Keating presents the process going on at the emotional level in a human being. I will also show how he believes there is a connection between the history of mankind, the developmental process in each human being and the growth in our spiritual journey. I will try to show what and how he is thinking according to the development of our false selves by "inner emotional programs of happiness", and how he thinks a true self can emerge.

Authors discussing Thomas Keating's teachings on Centering Prayer, are Cynthia Bourgeault<sup>25</sup>, Paul David Lawson<sup>26</sup> and other authors gathered in two books edited by Gustave Reininger, "Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry"<sup>27</sup> and "The Diversity of Centering Prayer"<sup>28</sup>. These give a research into the authorship of Keating. I want to do this to widen the insight on how Centering Prayer is practiced today and understood. These authors interpret Keating's work, which of course will give a nuanced view of CP than

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<sup>19</sup> Kimbrough jr: *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*.

<sup>20</sup> Kurian: *Ascent to Nothingness, The Ascent to God acc. to John of the Cross*.

<sup>21</sup> Johnston (edit.): *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

<sup>22</sup> Merton: *The Inner Experience, Notes on Contemplation*.

<sup>23</sup> Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*

<sup>24</sup> Pennington: *True self - False Self*.

<sup>25</sup> Bourgeault: *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*.

<sup>26</sup> Lawson: *Old wine in New Skins, centering prayer and systems theory*.

<sup>27</sup> Reininger (ed.): *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*.

<sup>28</sup> Reininger (ed.): *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*.

Keating himself. Some even add elements to its understanding. In a number of cases Keating affirms the work of other authors, when writing the forewords. In other cases he is co-author. By this he supports the variety of sources to create an analysis of his own understanding of CP. In Chapter 3, I will let the secondary sources, acknowledged by Keating, “fill out” the picture of how the practice is supposed to be received. This will be shown clearly in the text. For the most part I will use Keating’s own texts in chapter 3.

Thomas Keating deals with the practice of CP as a means towards contemplative prayer, from psychological and theological perspectives. My question in the discussing chapter (4) will be if he is trustworthy and in harmony with traditional psychology and to the contemporary alternative practices in our time. I want to discuss this from the angle I have presented in the research question: How can Centering Prayer according to Thomas Keating be a way for the human being to find an identity of a true self, and how can this concept be evaluated in our time? Is this really prayer, and what connections and differences are there between CP and other meditation techniques in the world today? When I discuss this theologically, I have to try to do it partly as seen from the perspective of traditional Catholic and Orthodox views, because they are the context where this tradition comes from and where all theology comes from, but I will also try to be true to my own theological background, the Methodist and Wesleyan theology.

I include also critical views of the practice of CP. I have chosen: John Dreher: “The Danger of Centering Prayer”, an article published in “Catholic Answers, Inc.” Nov. 1997, Marcia Montenegro: “Contemplating Contemplative Prayer: Is it really prayer?” published first in Midwest Christian Outreach Journal, Feb. 2005, and others. I selected them because they offer a vigorous challenge reflecting a scepticism toward CP. I will look at the assertions of CP to be part of a Pantheistic theology, if it is a variation of an Eastern meditation technique or a New Age spiritual method. These are grave accusations, which will be decisive in how to deal in CP further on. If these arguments are solid and trustworthy, I will find it difficult to recommend CP as a way of prayer and a tool of finding a true self. I recognize that my personal experience of the practice of CP could present a personal bias on my part toward it. That is why I want to draw on a theological authority like Thomas Merton, who is an recognized and accepted expert on what Eastern Spirituality is about, because he will know much more about this than many others.

In addition to Thomas Merton, I will listen to the theology of John Wesley and others I have mentioned earlier as secondary sources as well, because they discuss in different ways both the practice and the theology of what prayer of “the heart” means. John

Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, is interesting from the perspective that he represents Reformationists' in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As a closing part of the discussion chapter I will try to draw the whole discussion together carrying out whether a search for a true self is possible in CP or not.

I have chosen to use the personal pronoun "he" when I am referring to a human being, not for discriminating motives, but for practical reasons. For me "he" is an expression for both "he" and "she".

My decision to write this thesis in English was based on the fact that I needed a person knowledgeable in CP and the contemplative "Apophatic" tradition, to cast an experienced eye over what I wrote. He does not speak Norwegian, my native tongue, but I write and speak in English.

## **2.0. Background**

It is important to have a clear understanding of the background of Centering Prayer in order to be able to more fully understand it. Contemplative spirituality has its roots in Mystical Theology.

### **2.1. Mystical Theology**

The Bible is the source of Christian mysticism, in the same way as the sutras and Hindu scriptures are the source of Buddhist and Hindu mysticism. William Johnston<sup>29</sup> tells about the prophets in the Bible in his book “The Inner Eye of Love” (Mysticism and Religion), that they were mystics in action. Their “inner eye” was awakened, so that they saw not only the glory of God, but also the suffering, the injustice, the sin of the world. Their prophetic role often led to death, but this role, in many cases, was fulfilled through a solitude and a silence and a self-oblation which spoke louder than words and shook the universe.<sup>30</sup>

An example of this we find in the 48<sup>th</sup> chapter in the book of the prophet Isaiah. Here he reveals the words of God, given him in silence:

Now I am going to reveal new things to you, secrets that you do not know; they have just been created, not long ago, and until today you have heard nothing about them, so that you cannot say, “Yes, I knew about this.” No, you have not heard, you have not known, for a long time your ear has not been attentive (Isaiah 48:6b-8 NJB).

The prophet Isaiah knows that he must listen with his inner ear in order to hear God. Only in silence can the truth and love from God be revealed to him. What is revealed becomes a message to the whole people of God. Isaiah describes it like this:

Lord Yahweh has given me a disciple’s tongue, for me to know how to give a word of comfort to the weary. Morning by morning he makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple. Lord Yahweh has opened my ear and I have not resisted. I have not turned away. (Isaiah 50:4-5 NJB).

The word “mysticism” or “mystica” was introduced into Christianity in the late fifth or early sixth century, by a Syrian monk, Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>31</sup> via one of his works,

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<sup>29</sup> William Johnston, a Jesuit theologian, an authority on 14<sup>th</sup> century mysticism and spirituality.

<sup>30</sup> Johnston: *The Inner Eye of Love (Mysticism and Religion)*, p.10.

<sup>31</sup> Dionysius is also often called Pseudo-Dionysius.

“Mystica Theologia”.<sup>32</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, as he is often called later, had a profound influence on medieval philosophy and theology. He brought together Greek and Jewish concepts of the *apophatic*, a term I will return to in chapter 2.3.1. Later, in the ninth century, “Mystica Theologia” was translated into Latin by an Irishman, John Scotus Eriugena. His book was very much welcomed by theologians like Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure etc. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the work of Dionysus was translated into English of that time by an anonymous monk who wrote “The Cloud of Unknowing”.<sup>33</sup> He also made significant, though small additions to the book. He centered Dionysus’ teaching on love, in the meaning of: It is divine love which guides the soul towards the darkness. Darkness is the “place” of inner silence, where the inner being can be embraced by God’s love. It is love that leads a person beyond thoughts, images and concepts into the world of silence. The “inner eye” is now the eye of love.<sup>34</sup> This has a resemblance to the deep human love that draws lovers into a deep close silence where thoughts and words become unnecessary. This human coming together of souls is similar to the mystical loving silence between God and man, about which was written in the Middle Ages, and later in the writings of St. John of the Cross. In his *Spiritual Canticle* 27:5,<sup>35</sup> he writes:

The sweet and living knowledge is mystical theology, that secret knowledge of God which spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is knowledge through love.

Therefore it is possible to say that: Mysticism is wisdom that is found through love.

Dionysius was deeply contemplative in the meaning of praying beyond his own understanding. His “Mystica Theologia” opens with him describing how the mind ascends to the area above thoughts and concepts (superconceptuality) and into interior silence by going beyond all images and thoughts, entering into darkness.

Do thou, then, in the intent practice of mystic contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operation of the intellect, and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things which are not and which are, and strain upwards in unknowing, as far as may be, towards the union with Him who is above all things and knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love (Mysticism and Religion)*, 1985, p.16.

<sup>33</sup> Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystica Theologia* 1.1.

This state of consciousness is very central both to understand how the Church taught contemplative prayer up to the sixteenth century, how to understand our discussion about Centering Prayer today, and also to understand that this state of being is found in the mysticism of all the great religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and even when there is no theistic background. In Buddhism, concepts are seen as a great obstacle to the attainment of the great goal of enlightenment.<sup>37</sup> This might tell us that contemplation and mysticism are two words for the same search. Dionysius explains his mystical theology by describing contemplative prayer!

Despite the arguments, both in earlier times and recently, to try to nuance and systematize the concepts of contemplation and mysticism, and also to differ the concepts contemplation and contemplative prayer, it is rather obvious that Thomas Keating finds himself at home in the traditional way of thinking where there is a juxtaposition between mysticism and contemplation.<sup>38</sup> That is why I want to stay with that, and not explore too much of the newer views.

## **2.2. The Church Fathers**

When the Fathers of the Church explained the Scriptures from a contemplative perspective, they said they did it from a “spiritual sense”<sup>39</sup>. The spiritual sense was understood to contain much more than allegorical interpretation of a particular text. Keating explains this by showing where the word “contemplation” has its origin:

For the first sixteen centuries of the Christian era, the concept “contemplation” had a specific meaning. They understood it from the Gospel of John,

I am in the Father and the Father is in me, (John 14.10)(...) may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me. (John 17.21, NJB).

Keating understands this as an existential relationship with Christ, the divine indwelling.<sup>40</sup> Contemplation was the gate to this union with God. Later the word acquired other meanings and connotations. When Thomas Keating tries to explain why he puts Centering Prayer into the original way of using the word, he goes back to the two distinct sources where the word “*contemplation*” come from. The two sources are the Bible and the Greek

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<sup>37</sup> Johnston: *The Inner Eye of Love*, p.18.

<sup>38</sup> Keating: *Intimacy with God*, chapter 4, p. 38-45.

<sup>39</sup> Keating: *Intimacy with God*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Gustave Reininger: *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, p 32-33.

philosophy. To emphasize the experiential knowledge of God, the Greek Bible used the word “*gnosis*” to translate the Hebrew word “*da’ath*”, which implies a kind of knowledge involving the whole person, not just the intellect.<sup>41</sup> Keating refers to Ps. 139:1-6 to underline the insight a person receives from God that God’s presence knows all about him. The divine indwelling in one’s entire personality is a wisdom and an experience a person receives through the Spirit.

Keating points also to Paul’s use of the word “*gnosis*” to refer to the knowledge of God proper to those who love God. This intimate knowledge of God is something Paul constantly prayed for, both for himself and for his disciples. “(...) so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God.”<sup>42</sup>

The Greek Fathers, especially Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, borrowed from the Neo-platonists the term “*theoria*”, which originally meant the intellectual vision of truth that the Greek philosophers regarded as the supreme activity of the human person.

While using this technical Greek term, the Fathers steeped in their own spiritual roots, incorporated the meaning of the Hebrew word “*da’ath*”; that is, the experiential knowledge that comes through love. It was with this expanded understanding that “*theoria*” was later translated into the Latin word “*contemplatio*” and handed down to us by Christian tradition.<sup>43</sup>

He refers to St. Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century, who described contemplation as “the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love.” He called it “resting in God”, not so much seeking God, but to “taste” what he has been seeking.

This state is not the suspension of all activity, but the reduction of many acts and reflections to a single act or thought to sustain one’s consent to God’s presence and action at the depths of one’s being during the time of prayer.<sup>44</sup>

This opinion remained throughout the Middle Ages, according both to Keating and most all theologians. Ascetical disciplines (fasting, vigils, solitude, simple lifestyle) and spiritual disciplines (prayer, chanting, rosary, veneration of icons) always included contemplation as part of their Christ-centered goal. Distinct theologians from the Middle Ages, as St.

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<sup>41</sup> Keating: *Intimacy with God*, p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Eph. 3:19.

<sup>43</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p. 39

<sup>44</sup> Gregory VII, St (c. 1020-1085), pope (1073-1085), one of the great reformers of the medieval Church.

Bonaventure<sup>45</sup> wrote: “Mystical theology is the raising of the mind to God through the desire of love”. St. John of the Cross<sup>46</sup> wrote: “Contemplation is the mystical theology which theologians call secret wisdom, which St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>47</sup> says is communicated and infused into the soul through love.” In his *Spiritual Canticle*, 27.5, St. John wrote:

The sweet and living knowledge is mystical theology, that secret knowledge of God which spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is knowledge through love.

## **2.3. Contemplative spirituality**

### **2.3.1. Kataphatic and Apophatic theology**

Contemplation is the normal development of prayer according to the Church Fathers from the beginning of Christianity to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is the total self-surrender, or self-emptying, that Christ showed us through his *kenosis (self-emptying)*,<sup>48</sup> which is reached through two different ways, either through the Kataphatic way (*via positiva*) or directly through the Apophatic way (*via negativa*). The terms, *kataphasis* and *apophasis*, were used by Aristotle to describe categorical propositions as either affirmation or denial, saying or unsaying. *Apophasis* refers to the negation and *kataphasis* to the affirmation.<sup>49</sup>

Kataphatic spirituality was reckoned as Contemplation both in the Western and Eastern Church in the earliest centuries. Dionysius was the first one we know, who wrote about the specific Apophatic way in his “*Mystical Theologia*” in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

*Apophasis* is called *via negativa*, because there is nothing, no words, no images, that can really describe the indescribable God. Pseudo-Dionysius writes in his “*Mystica Theologia*”: “(...), I have praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology, (...), I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive, I have spoken of the images we have of him,(...), The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming,(...), we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.”<sup>50</sup>

When our life in God washes onto the shores of perception, we see no image or shape, no holy pictures or statues, nothing for thinking minds’ comprehending grip. Yet – we may know undeniably, like the back of our hand, the silent resounding of a great and flowing

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<sup>45</sup> Lived 1217-74.

<sup>46</sup> Lived 1542-91.

<sup>47</sup> Lived 1225-74.

<sup>48</sup> Phil. 2:5-10.

<sup>49</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_theology), 02.05.2007.

<sup>50</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (trans.Colm Luibheid), p. 138-139.

vastness that is the core of all. Words cannot express it (2.Cor. 12:4) *Apophysis* can be seen as a type of theology, a mystical practice, a quality of experience or as a hermeneutics.<sup>51</sup>

*Kataphasis* is called *via positiva*. The *Kataphatic* “is the verbose element in theology, it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can,”<sup>52</sup> says Denys Turner, a British academic in the fields of philosophy and theology, who has written widely on the topic “Mystical Theology.” Western Christianity is overwhelmingly *Kataphatic*. The doctrines of creation, *imago dei*, and the incarnation imply that knowledge of God or the divine will is attainable through analogy and metaphor. In philosophy, reason is capable of knowing nature and God. *Kataphatic* knowledge is “common sense”,<sup>53</sup> says David Henderson in “Studies in Spirituality” 2003 on Carl Jung and Thomas Merton, *Apophatic and Kataphatic Traditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*.

Thomas Keating’s opinion is that it is misleading to suggest an opposition between the two ways. “*Kataphatic* contemplation is rather a preparation for contemplation”, he says. His definition on *Kataphatic* contemplation is that it is the affective response to God through listening to the Scriptures, viewing His works in creation or through sacred symbols and a disciplined use of reason, imagination, memory, and emotion in order to assimilate the truths of faith and to develop a personal relationship with Christ. It includes such practices as visualization and meditation.<sup>54</sup>

*Apophatic* contemplation is to him a further stage in that relationship. “It is resting in God beyond the exercise of particular acts, except to maintain a general loving attention to the divine presence.”<sup>55</sup> Real contemplation is found only along the *Apophatic* way, according to Keating. Frederick McLeod<sup>56</sup> states in an article about “*Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?*” in *Spirituality Today* in Spring 1986, where he looks at the differences and connections between the *Kataphatic* “*Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*” and *Apophatic* “*The Cloud of Unknowing*”. He concludes by saying that both the *Apophatic* and *Kataphatic* are in a sense complementary or as being at opposite ends of the same

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<sup>51</sup> [http://www.aip.org.uk/docs/aippub\\_jung\\_merton\\_dh.pdf](http://www.aip.org.uk/docs/aippub_jung_merton_dh.pdf), 03.05.2007.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.aip.org.uk/docs/aippub\\_jung\\_merton\\_dh.pdf](http://www.aip.org.uk/docs/aippub_jung_merton_dh.pdf), 03.05.2007.

<sup>54</sup> Keating: *Intimacy with God*, p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Fr. McLeod, S.J., has a doctorate from the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and is ass. Professor of theology at St. Louis University where he teaches spirituality.

prayer. Nevertheless, they aim at producing different kinds of faith experiences. *Apophatic* leads towards an experience of union with the Lord beyond conscious awareness, and *Kataphatic* is evoking experiences of God's salvific love which may produce an awareness of a dynamic movement towards conversion. *Kataphatic* prayer does not necessarily lead to *apophatic* prayer or vice versa. But by choosing one method over the other, a person will influence the kind of experience that will result.<sup>57</sup> In both cases, it is Christ who lovingly takes the initiative by offering the opportunity and means to enter into a spiritual relationship that cannot be achieved or merited on one's own.

### **2.3.2. The state of unknowing**

To go beyond our concepts, thoughts and words into the state of "unknowing", is central for the desert Fathers and Mothers, and the early Church Fathers (and Mothers).<sup>58</sup> It is also the focus of the work of the 14<sup>th</sup> century anonymous English monk. "The Cloud of Unknowing" and "The Privy Counseling", which have been essential for many contemplatives since then. He points out the fact that it is impossible to find God by reason, it is only possible by love.<sup>59</sup> This is mysticism. "This is the tradition of "mysticism as a love affair between the bridegroom and the bride, between Yahweh and his people. It is here that the deepest significance of Western mysticism is to be found," says William Johnston in the Introduction to his translation of "The Cloud".<sup>60</sup> St. John of the Cross is a considerable theologian teaching about "The dark night", the "nothingness", the "place" where we lose ourselves (our false selves) to be united with God. It was during the hardest passages of his life, he really came in touch with the enormous love that flows from God through darkness.<sup>61</sup>

The first glimpse of the "unknowable" God is revealed in Exodus 33.20. God says to Moses: "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." This is the passage where Moses climbs the mountain and finds himself in a cloud of darkness. He can't see God, but he *knows* God by unknowing: He knows God in darkness! He knows with the inner eye! And he returns from the mountains with a new insight, even written in stone.

When Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray, he says:

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/863815mcleod.html> 06.05.2007.

<sup>58</sup> Johnston (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 23, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Johnston (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 42.

<sup>60</sup> Johnston (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Kurian: *Ascent to Nothingness*, p. 29-37.

”When you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6, NJB).

Thomas Keating will say that “our private secret room” is the place where even the one who prays doesn’t know what is really happening. This is to seek God beyond the words and thoughts and reason.

### 2.3.3. Lectio Divina

The regular practice of Lectio Divina was a normal development of contemplative prayer until the 16<sup>th</sup> century throughout the church. It was first written down in the “Rule” of St. Benedict of Nursia (480-547)<sup>62</sup>. He prescribed Lectio as a sacred reading designed to cultivate contemplative listening. “For it was through such listening that the monks could become aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and minds.”<sup>63</sup> It was practiced in all monasteries, not only Benedictine ones. From the eighth century it became the practice for the monks and for lay people who came to the churches all over the Catholic world. Priests gave the readings from the Bible. Most monks and lay people could not read, very few had their own Bible, so they came to listen to the readings (lectio). The same procedures were always followed.

The “Lectio Divina” went through four stages: (called “four senses of Scripture”)

- *lectio* (a priest was reading slowly from the Scripture, the others were listening)
- *meditatio* (the listeners were reflecting/savoring on the text in silence, opening mind and heart to its message)
- *oratio* (affective prayer, mostly in silence, as a response of what has been seen during meditation)
- *contemplatio* (a time for resting in God, leaving thoughts and perceptions aside desiring, waiting for the gift of Presence)

After the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this type of prayer was recognised, taught, as having three distinct elements, that could be separated from each other:<sup>64</sup>

- Discursive – using senses, thoughts, images to reflect on God’s love
- Affective – using words, emotions in praying and responding to God’s love

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<sup>62</sup> Clement: *Källor*, p. 317.

<sup>63</sup> Wolpert: *Creating a Life with God. The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices*, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> Lawson: *Old Wine in New Skins*, p. 70.

- Mystical – leaving the human conceptualities, surrendering into God’s love, entering the unknown Wisdom of God

This distinction of separate elements or categories of prayer, gave rise to significant influence on how prayer life developed within the Catholic Church, and other churches after the Reformation. Greater emphasis was placed on discursive, meditative prayer, which belongs more appropriately to the *via positiva*, or *Kataphatic* tradition. Lay people experienced this approach rather than the *contemplatio/ apophatic* dimension of *Lectio Divina*. It became accepted that contemplation was suitable, even restricted, to those who chose to live a monastic life. In European universities the *Kataphatic* approach was commonly used to underpin a way to teach prayer to theology students. The emphasis was on understanding, knowing what was experienced in prayer. The integral link between *Lectio* and contemplation was broken.<sup>65</sup>

However, as centuries passed, new emerging influences began to have an effect on all aspects of peoples’ lives. The time of Renaissance prepared the way for the Enlightenment, followed by Humanism, Positivism and Modernism. Human beings were supposed to be in “charge of their own lives”, knowledge and wisdom were insights that they were able to find without God’s help, there was less and less need for listening to God. To be silent together with God became an old-fashioned tradition.

The Reformation gave rise to a new theology, but still, both the Lutherans and the younger reformed churches that were growing up during this period, were much inclined to the *Kataphatic* way of getting to know God. Mystical Theology was neglected. Reason was important. For some of the churches emotions were not encouraged, for others it was the opposite. Affective prayer life was supported and often looked upon as a proof of authenticity. The development in the reformed and protestant churches had much in common with the group identity, that was formed in the political society. The personal impact grew stronger and stronger. And the gaps between groups grew bigger. The church and the rest of the world were divided into different “regiments”, according to the Lutheran doctrine of “two regiments”. The life in the secular world was separated from the life in the spiritual world (church).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Keating, *Intimacy of God*, p. 53-54.

<sup>66</sup> I de lutherske kirker er to-regimentslæren et sentralt begrep. To-regimentslæren er læren om at Gud styrer verden på to forskjellige måter i det verdslige (sverdets) regiment og i det åndelige (ordets eller nådens) regiment. <http://www.kirken.no/?FamID=8329&event=showwordFolder> 09.05.2007. (See next page)

Even when the Methodist Church was founded, who taught that there was only one “regiment”, i.e. the salvation by Christ was given to the whole creation,<sup>67</sup> and even though John Wesley taught his church that the character of a Methodist is a person who lives out the love God has poured into his heart, the mystical spirituality beyond words and deeds was hidden behind locked doors for centuries. The Post-Reformation era resulted in a growing spiritual poverty in the western culture, which the last century also found its way into the churches of most denominations.

In the 1970-s, young people, more than any time before, started to seek alternative philosophies and Eastern religions. What they had learnt at home, did not satisfy any longer. It is during this period that Thomas Keating and his fellow monks started to work to find a tool that could bring people back to a listening attitude to their Creator.

Centering Prayer is drawn from the Apophatic tradition<sup>68</sup>. It is connected with the theology of “kenosis”<sup>69</sup>, the outpouring of mental and emotional contribution from man’s side, just leaving it all to God on his invitation.

#### **2.4. Who is Thomas Keating?**

Thomas Keating was born in New York in 1923 and raised as a Roman Catholic. When he studied modern philosophy as a freshman at Yale, he was forced to confront “the death of God”, arguments given by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. He went through a time of deep questioning of all he had been raised to believe. He read the work of the early Church Fathers and Mothers and their understanding of the four Gospels. As a result of this research it became clear to him that the Christian religion was really about transformation. He became convinced that the contemplative dimension was the heart of the Gospel. But when he started looking around for how to get some help developing contemplative life, he could not find any.<sup>70</sup>

Against the wishes of his family he entered the Trappist Order<sup>71</sup> in 1944, because it was the most austere order he could find. In those days within the Catholic Church it was thought that the more austere the life, the more likely it would lead to a deeper

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09.05.2007 Translated by H. Sanden: “The doctrine of two regiments is central in Lutheran theology. God is ruling differently in the secular world (sword), and in the spiritual world (Word and Grace).”

<sup>67</sup> Kimbrough, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, p. 189.

<sup>68</sup> Reininger, *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, p. 38.

<sup>69</sup> Kimbrough, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, p. 237.

<sup>70</sup> <http://in.integralinstitute.org>, 03.05.2007.

<sup>71</sup> The Trappist order is a stricter version of the Cistercian Order.

contemplative life.<sup>72</sup> Thomas Keating found that more than leading him into union with God, the years of silence, hard work and prayer, first of all led him to recognise his own imperfect motivation in searching for an austere life. As time passed by he became acquainted with his own human condition, which he found is something all human beings have in common.

Personal sin is the ripe fruit of the emotional programs for happiness; it is not the chief problem, but the chief symptom of the problem. And the problem itself is really universal. It affects the entire human condition. In fact, it *is* the human condition.<sup>73</sup>

The term “human condition” is Keating’s term for the doctrine of “original sin” and its consequences. It is central in Keating’s books teaching Centering Prayer. Discovering what caused the emotional programs for happiness and developing our false selves, he found how crucial it is for the human being to be helped beyond these programs to find his true self. Keating acknowledges what contemporary psychology has provided to insight of the unconscious. Even though this discovery is not much more than a hundred years old, Keating sees that it casts an enormous light on all spiritual disciplines. However, he is fully aware that the spiritual journey is more than a psychological process. It is primarily a process of grace. But God speaks to us through nature. The more we know about nature, the more we know about the mind of God, says Keating.<sup>74</sup>

In 1964, Keating became the abbot of a large Cistercian monastery, St. Joseph’s Abbey, in Spencer, Massachusetts. At the same time The Second Vatican Council<sup>75</sup> opened up a completely new era in the Catholic Church. A spiritual awakening was at the doorstep and many questions were raised about the monastic life. Thousands of people throughout the world were flocking to India and other countries in the East in searching for spiritual teachers. Keating wondered why they weren’t looking to the monasteries in their homelands to get help. He decided to find a way to put the contemplative monastic tradition into a form that might inspire those who were seeking spiritual experiences

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<sup>72</sup> Trinity News: *The Magazine of Trinity Church in New York*, Vol. 42, p. 8-11.  
<http://www.thecentering.org/therapy.html> 10.01.2007.

<sup>73</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 26

<sup>74</sup> Keating: *The Human Condition* p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Second Vatican Council 1962-65.

through Eastern meditation techniques to look within their own tradition.<sup>76</sup> How he did that, I will tell more about in chapter 2.2.

In 1981, when Thomas Keating reached retirement age, he moved back to St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, where he is still living. He started to give 10-days Contemplative Retreats there, which are still running. Here he was also one of the founders of Contemplative Outreach Ltd., now an international, ecumenical organization that teaches CP, using a wide variety of resources, workshops and retreats.<sup>77</sup>

### **2.5. The beginning of Centering Prayer in the 1970's**

The journalist Jerry Adler wrote an article about Thomas Keating in Newsweek at Sept. 5, 2005:

To him, as Trappist monk, meditation was second nature. He invited the great Zen master Roshi Sasaki to lead retreats at the abbey. And surely, he thought, there must be precedent within the church for making such simple but powerful spiritual techniques available to laypeople.<sup>78</sup>

Adler tells that it was Keating's fellow Cistercian monk Fr. William Meninger, who found a copy of a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Classic "The Cloud of Unknowing", written by an unknown Carthusian monk. It is regarded as one of the most important writings on contemplative prayer, flowing entirely from the author's grasp of Mystical Theology. Fr. Meninger came across a copy in 1974, and along with the works of St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, he and Fr. Thomas Keating began to formulate the practice which came to be known as Centering Prayer.

This emphasizes how Thomas Keating saw the spiritual hunger outside the monastery life. He understood that the old practice of *Lectio Divina*<sup>79</sup> and the ascetic and austere life he had lived himself in order to seek God was not practical available for most people outside the cloisters. But he could not deny seeing their hunger, and he knew the church had to come up with something that was authentic, more available, something that could bring ordinary people closer to the living well of God. The years that had passed had also let him realize how much *God* yearned for all these people, yearning to be allowed to touch their lives more deeply.

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<sup>76</sup> Trinity News, *The Magazine of Trinity News in New York*, vol 42.4, p.8-11.  
<http://www.thecentering.org/therapy.html> 10.01.2007.

<sup>77</sup> Homepage: [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org), 02.05.2007.

<sup>78</sup> Newsweek, Jerry Adler, Aug. 29-Sept-5, 2005. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9024914/#>. 10.01.2007

<sup>79</sup> Chapter 2.3.2.

At the same time Keating knew how negative the attitude toward contemplation from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and up to his days was among many priests and lay people in the church. Their attitude was that this was so ambiguous, more a lifestyle than a form of prayer, that belonged in cloisters and had no relevance to what they were doing. After the Second Vatican Council many priests and religious were asked to help with prayer in order to meet the renewal in the whole church and to be available to meet all the people who asked for a more authentic spiritual life in the congregations. Many priests burned out. With the best of intentions they had taken on ministries that required a depth of inner resources they just did not have.<sup>80</sup>

Welcoming those who taught Transcendental Meditation (TM) and those attracted to Eastern gurus to the Abbey during the 1970s, Keating began to wonder: How can these people experience significant spiritual experiences without having gone through the penitential exercises that the Trappist order required? They appreciated values of silence, solitude, and fidelity to a regular meditative practice. He saw that their authenticity and spiritual awareness sometimes seemed even deeper than his fellow monks'. Many were having experiences that were very similar to what Christian tradition calls contemplation.<sup>81</sup> Keating knew Thomas Merton, still alive at that time, and was fascinated by his writings about his research and exchanges in interreligious dialogue. As time went by Keating developed an unusually open-minded attitude towards the meditative practices of other traditions and studied teachers from a variety of Hindu and Buddhist origins. From 1982 teachers from diverse paths met regularly to compare notes and evaluate the successes and failures of their respective practices at the Snowmass Interreligious Conference. It is significant to note that, over the past 25 years thousands of Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans and others have been drawn and are still drawn to workshops and retreats both at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado,<sup>82</sup> but also to other places that practice Centering Prayer throughout the world. Up to now there are at least one year waiting lists for such retreats.<sup>83</sup>

I will now go on to chapter 3, asking "What is Centering Prayer?" What is the theology of Centering Prayer? How does Centering Prayer open an insight to our false self, and how does it help us to find our true self?

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<sup>80</sup> Keating, *Intimacy of Love*, p. 14-17.

<sup>81</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p.13-14.

<sup>82</sup> Since 1981, Snowmass is the place where T. Keating is living now.

<sup>83</sup> [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org) 19.04.2007.

### **3.0. Centering Prayer according to Thomas Keating**

#### **3.1. What is Centering Prayer (CP)?**

Centering Prayer is a way designed to dispose the soul to be receptive to the gift of awareness of God's presence through the practice of contemplative prayer. Contemplation is not meant to replace other forms of prayer. However, it can bring new perspectives to other ways. God, - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, - lives in the center of our being. This is in very few words the theological background. Centering Prayer invites us to experience and be aware of God's presence whenever we enter into prayer, to be touched by the Lord where we need it the most, and to be transformed in our inner beings by the God that loves us. The challenge is to be willing to wait upon Him, and surrender ourselves into His hands without wanting to take control of them. CP is a matter of pure faith, and faith is always a gift from God. God shows His love when and how He wants. No prayer can force God to show up. CP is a faith coming into practice believing that God is always there.

##### **3.1.1. The method of Centering Prayer<sup>84</sup>**

The "method" of Centering Prayer is very simple:

It is recommended to set aside 20 minutes two times a day, morning and afternoon. A good posture is to sit in a chair where the body can be kept relaxed but alert. Cynthia Bourgeault gives an illustration of "as if you were singing in a choir".<sup>85</sup> This creates the best conditions for staying present and attentive and for allowing the energy to circulate freely. Keating recommends a comfortable position where we do not have to think about our body. It is good to have the eyes closed. Keating surprisingly does not emphasize the breathing, which should mean that this is not an exercise of breath. In "The Better Part" he illustrates the "sacred breath" as a resting like the Beloved Disciple on the bosom of Jesus. Likewise, he says, "the sacred breath is not a matter of following one's breathing physiologically. It is simply allowing oneself, when thoughts come, to *notice* one's breathing."<sup>86</sup> It is an expression of one's intent.

Thomas Keating gives four basic guidelines:

1. *Choose a sacred word of one or two syllables.*

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<sup>84</sup>Keating, *Open mind, open heart* p. 110.

<sup>85</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, p. 28.

<sup>86</sup> Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 86.

The reason for choosing a word is to help the one who prays to stay with the intention of being with God, when the thoughts are plunging in causing distraction. A “thought,” in the terminology of CP, is any perception whatsoever. It is an umbrella term that includes concepts, memories, plans for the future, feelings, sense perceptions, and reflections. Words to use may be: *God, love, Jesus*. There is no magic in the words. Keating recommends: Ask God for help to choose a word. Do not change it during the time of prayer, because that will only bring distraction..

2. *Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, introduce silently the sacred word you have found. It will help to sit in a quiet place for most people.*

When you have practiced CP for a long time, it is possible to find the quiet within without having quiet around you. Therefore, this is a practice that can be used everywhere, at an airport, in a bus queue, etc.

3. *When you become aware of inner thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.*

Keating often compares thoughts and images that flow through our minds when we quiet down, with boats sailing on a river. If we stand on a bridge looking down at all these boats, we hardly see the river. When in CP we have come with the intention to see the river, that is God in our inner self, we must let the boats float away, not jump into them. It is difficult not to have thoughts when we sit down like this. That is why we are given the sacred word to remind ourselves of the intention why we are sitting there. The intention: To seek God’s love! And to let go of other things!

4. *After 20 (30) minutes take a little time to return to ordinary awareness of the external senses and the usual flow of thoughts. Stay in silence and say a blessing or Our Father as a closing.*

### **3.1.2. What Centering Prayer is not**

This is a point Thomas Keating is eager to underline, we find them in many of his books:

1. It is not a technique but a way of cultivating God’s friendship
2. It is not a relaxation exercise but it may be refreshing
3. It is not a form of self-hypnosis but a way to quiet the mind while maintaining its alertness

4. It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation
5. It is not a para-psychological experience but an exercise of faith, hope, and selfless love
6. It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God’s abiding presence
7. It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer, but simply resting in God<sup>87</sup>.

### **3.2. What happens in the silence?**

#### **3.2.1. Sacred word**

Why is Keating recommending a special word to be used in the Centering Prayer? Isn’t the sacred word the same thing as a “mantra”?

The sacred word is not sacred because of its meaning, but because of its intent. It expresses the intention to open to God, the Ultimate Mystery, who dwells within the person who prays. The sacred word is like an arrow pointing in the direction that is wanted.<sup>88</sup> This is what Keating teaches. God is present and available at every moment, but we have a giant obstacle in ourselves – our own world view. It needs to be exchanged for the mind of Christ, for *His* world view. Our ordinary preoccupations involve unconscious value systems. By training ourselves to let go of every thought or thought pattern, we gradually develop freedom from our attachments and compulsions. The sacred word helps us in this training. Every time our thoughts are circling around a certain issue, we can softly inside say the sacred word “ever so gently”, and remind ourselves that our intention now is only this: To stay in God’s loving embrace, to rest with God, and let all other thoughts just pass by and let go. This is the way to move into contemplative prayer, says Keating.

There is definitively an outer resemblance between a “mantra” and Keating’s “sacred word”. How do we discern among the various meditation techniques? Cynthia Bourgeault<sup>89</sup> has done an academic research especially on the topic of how Thomas

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<sup>87</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p. 138-139.

<sup>88</sup> Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 43.

<sup>89</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault<sup>89</sup>, Ph.D., British Columbia, a teacher in Benedictine monasteries throughout the United States and Canada, while earning her living variously as a college professor, medievalist, editor and parish priest. She is a past fellow of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural research at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. She is the author of many articles and audiotapes on the spiritual life and is internationally known as a retreat leader.

Keating sees Centering Prayer<sup>90</sup>. She says that the various methodologies of meditation can be divided into three main groups:

- concentrative methods
- awareness methods
- surrender methods

### **Concentrative methods**

rely on the principle of attention, where the mind is given a task to focus on something. Depending on the tradition, this might be to focus on one's breath, or a special part of the body, or reciting a mantra either aloud or silently. A mantra is, according to Bourgeault, a word or short phrase of sacred origin, used to collect the mind and invoke the divine presence. This is well known both in Eastern and Islamic traditions, but also in Christian traditions, such as the use of the rosary and the "Jesus Prayer". The mantra in Transcendental Meditation will be assigned by a teacher, and the vibration in the mantra is meant to be as important as the content of the word. A mantra is given to anchor the mind and not allowing the mind to wander, this is a concentration method.

### **Awareness methods**

are much favoured in Buddhist practice.<sup>91</sup> One plays the role of an inner observer watching the play of energy as thoughts and emotions rise. It is important to feel the anger, the pain, the joy or whatever of emotions that rise inside, and learn how to separate from one's psychological being and sink into the field of consciousness itself.

### **Surrender methods**

are simpler than both of these meditation methods. One does not even watch or label the thought as it comes up. As soon as it emerges into consciousness, one simply lets it go. The prayer is "not of attention, but of intention", quotes Bourgeault from Keating.<sup>92</sup> Centering Prayer belongs to this last category.<sup>93</sup> What makes CP different from other methods is that it bypasses focused attention and works directly with intention itself, "the naked intent

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<sup>90</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Bourgeault, *CP and Inner Awakening*, p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> Bourgeault, *CP and Inner Awakening*, p. 20.

direct to God”, as the author of “The Cloud of Unknowing” is saying it.<sup>94</sup> It is a discipline of relaxing, to surrender all to God, to let go of all disturbances. Every time something asks for attention in thoughts and emotions, the sacred word in CP is used only to let it go and re-surrender to God’s love.

Keating is using an illustration: If I hold a ball in my hands, I can let it fall to the floor just by letting it go, slipping out of my fingers. I do not have to throw it to let it go.<sup>95</sup> In similar fashion, the sacred word does not require effort. It only requires the willingness to let go of our ordinary preoccupations. Thoughts *will* come, most of the time, especially when we don’t have too much experience in Centering Prayer. The object is not to get rid of these thoughts, but to let them come and then to let them go. That is the way the psyche gets rid of undigested material: by bringing it to our awareness. If we acknowledge the thoughts and feelings, they normally disappear. Something happens when we are disinclined to fight:

By his secret anointing the Spirit heals the wounds of our fragile human nature at a level beyond our psychological perception, just as a person who is anesthetized has no idea of how the operation is going until after it is over. Interior silence is the perfect seed bed for divine love to take root.<sup>96</sup>

Divine love has the power to grow and transform us. (Keating).<sup>97</sup>

### 3.2.2. Seeking silence beyond words

The French Philosopher Descartes (1596-1650) attempted to identify a principle that nobody could doubt, and what he found was: *Cogito ergo sum* – “I think, therefore I am.” “Thought exists always”, he said. “Thought can not be separated from me.”<sup>98</sup> To seek silence beyond words and thoughts should then be impossible.

How can then Centering Prayer have an intention of going beyond thinking? Cynthia Bourgeault quotes John of the Cross, who said. “Silence is God’s first language”.<sup>99</sup> She is pointing to Keating’s levels of awareness.<sup>100</sup> The following diagram shows different levels of awareness. All persons have the ordinary awareness, which is described below. (This is the outer circle). But all have also the possibility to go deeper

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<sup>94</sup> Johnston (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 50.

<sup>95</sup> Keating, *Open mind, open heart*, p. 44.

<sup>96</sup> Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 45.

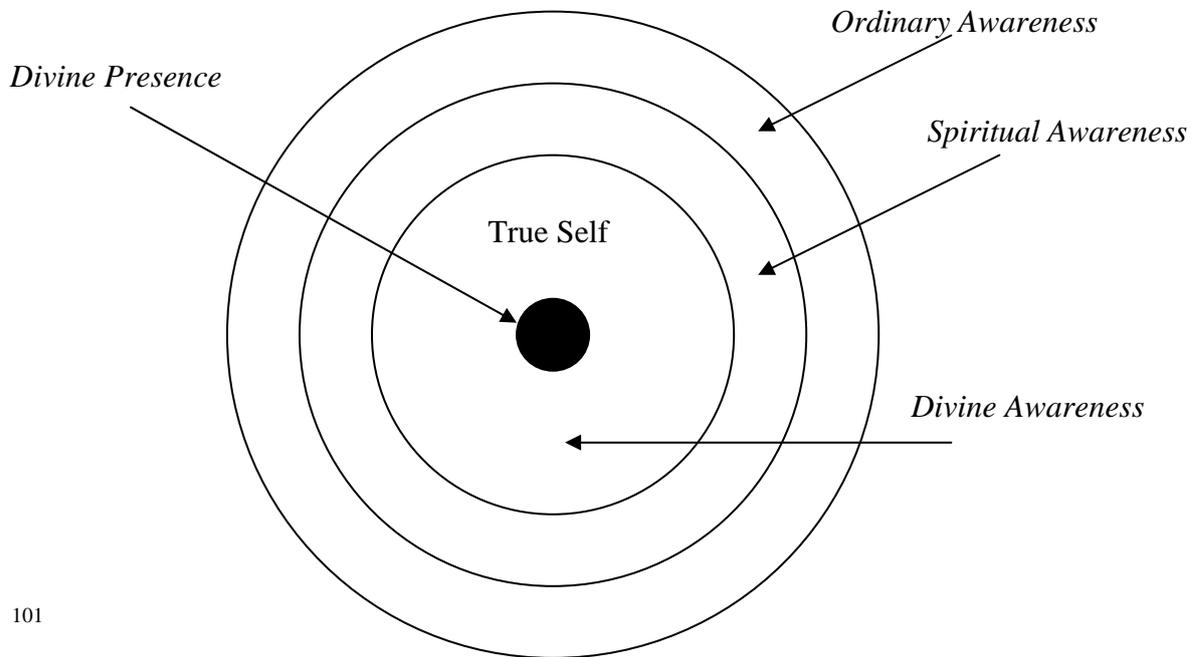
<sup>97</sup> Keating, *Open min, open heart*, p. 45

<sup>98</sup> Descartes, in *Discourse on the Method and Principles of Philosophy*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Descartes#Philosophical\\_work](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Descartes#Philosophical_work) 02.05.2007.

<sup>99</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Bourgeault: *CP and Inner Awakening*, p. 10-12.

into spiritual awareness. (See the diagram). CP can help us to move into a divine awareness, where we encounter God's presence as it really is. In this encounter of Love, a person can find his True Self.



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\* The outer circle of our awareness is called : **“ordinary awareness.”**

This is the mind as it usually thinks, and our sense of self is tied to that way of thinking. It is known as “self-reflective consciousness”: the capacity to stand outside ourselves and look upon ourselves in the third person. (This is what makes us unique persons.) Every kinds of thoughts pop up here in our mind. Another name for “ordinary awareness” is “egoic thinking.” Our sense of the world and the sense of ourselves will be formed at this level of awareness.

\* Deeper is the level that Thomas Keating and Bourgeault describe as our **“spiritual awareness.”** Its purpose, just like a compass, is for orientation. This may happen in a moment of overpowering emotion, such as being moved to tears by watching a sunset, or a newborn baby or receiving the Eucharist. This is a spiritual awareness that perceives through an intuitive grasp of the whole and an innate sense of belonging.

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<sup>101</sup> The diagram is a combination of Bourgeault's circles of awareness, *CP and Inner Awakening*, p. 8 and Keating's circles in his book *Intimacy with God*, p. 77.

Spiritual awareness is based on harmony, says Bourgeault, therefore it is not a sense of isolation and anxiety that often dominates life at the ordinary level of awareness.

\*Even deeper is the awareness of “true self”, says Keating. Bourgeault calls it “**divine awareness**”. Keating is saying that in the center of our “**true self**” is the “**divine presence**”.<sup>102</sup> As we move toward the center, our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven.<sup>103</sup> Thomas Merton describes this as: “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.”<sup>104</sup> Keating says,

What happens when we hit the center? Since there is no more junk left to hide the divine presence, I presume we are in divine union. Faith believes that God is waiting for us. Such is the meaning of Divine Indwelling.<sup>105</sup>

The Divine Indwelling is the cornerstone of contemplative prayer. Bourgeault refers to Merton saying that “access to this center is not at our command, it is entered only through the gateway of our complete poverty and nothingness.”<sup>106</sup> “Here one turns to God with a burning desire for himself alone and rests in the blind awareness of his naked being,”<sup>107</sup> says the author of the “The Cloud of Unknowing”. Keating has drawn much insight from this old book. The anonymous author from the 14<sup>th</sup> century is also talking about another “cloud”, the cloud of “forgetting”. When thoughts and memories, worries and fear can rise in the silence, the author covers them with the cloud of “forgetting” when he is contemplating. He does not use any effort in rejecting them, but for the time being covers them up with a cloud, so that God can take care of them the way *He* wants.

Keating is convinced that the seeking of silence beyond our thoughts is the best way to get to know and throw off our false self. As long as we repeat our own comprehensions and insights over and over again, we will never get rid of them. It is in the surrender to God in contemplative prayer, we will be able to let them go.

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<sup>102</sup> Keating : *Intimacy with God*, p.67.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p. 82

<sup>106</sup> Bourgeault: *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, p. 14

<sup>107</sup> Johnston (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing* p. 50.

In the deep rest of contemplative prayer the human body receives permission, so to speak, to evacuate the emotional junk of a lifetime. In other words, we have a psychological tummy filled with emotional traumas. We are like persons sitting for ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years, on a meal that we never digested... What we need to do to heal our psychological indigestion is a thorough emptying of the emotional trauma itself. That requires a willingness to feel the primitive emotions of grief, fear, panic, despair, or whatever emotions accompanied the traumatic events (...) of early life. In the purification of the unconscious this healing takes place through the process of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer gradually brings about the liberation of whatever prevents the presence of God from becoming a part of our constant awareness.<sup>108</sup>

### **3.2.3. What kind of thoughts rise usually in silence?**

Keating puts the thoughts that usually comes up when we are seeking God in silence, into five categories:<sup>109</sup>

1. The first kind of thoughts he calls **“woolgathering”**.

Those are the thoughts that come from what we were doing just before we entered into prayer. Or they come from sounds we hear around us or from outside. It may be a vivid memory, or some plans for the future. They are like boats flowing down the stream. To leave these “woolgathering”-thoughts it is enough to mention the sacred word, as easy as a “feather”, to let them go. That is of course if the intention *is* to stay with God. After some training, says Keating, we will think in two levels at the same time. We “hear” the woolgathering, but still we know why we are in silence. Gradually it will not be very difficult to leave these thoughts.

2. **Thoughts of emotional attraction**

They come from the conscious level and are thoughts that we easily are drawn towards. They are emotionally charged thoughts that are not easily resisted. When being aware of this, even the resisting movement inside can be a hindrance to stay in silence. Also here is the same solution: Let go of the thoughts, use the sacred word, and stay with the intention.

3. **Insights and psychological breakthroughs**

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<sup>108</sup> Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 60

<sup>109</sup> Keating, *Open mind, open heart*, p. 81- 87.

When we begin to quieten down and experience a certain peace, another kind of thought might emerge. It could be some bright spiritual insight or some great psychological understanding of our past life. Or we may see some solutions on problems we have. We may even remember someone we ought to pray for. No matter what it is, this is not the time for any of these thoughts. Just now, this is God's opportunity to talk to us.

Keating is saying that to stay with all these "good" thoughts is to be likened with interrupting another person who is trying to tell us something. It is God we are listening to in contemplative prayer, God's silence. Preachers have a special problem here when they in this silence get lots of ideas what to preach or teach about in their churches. In this situation they are only various kinds of tasty bait to take us out of the surrendering to God.

#### **4. Self-reflection**

Even when reaching a deep peace inside, a desire to reflect on what is really happening may arise. Reflection is one step back from experience. It is like taking a picture of reality. As soon as we start to reflect on an experience, it is over. If we choose to let the reflection just pass by, we will go into deeper interior silence. "The presence of God is like the air we breathe", says Keating. "You can have all you want of it as long as you do not try to take possession of it and hang on to it."<sup>110</sup> At this temptation to stay with the blessing, we really understand that this prayer is a learning of self-surrender.

#### **5. Interior purification**

"Any form of meditation or prayer which transcends thinking, sets off the dynamic of interior purification", says Keating<sup>111</sup>. Something happens in our organism. Deep rooted tensions are released. They might introduce themselves with a certain force or emotional charge. We may feel grief, anger, or fear without any connection to the recent past. To return to the sacred word helps to continue the process, the undigested psychological material of a lifetime is gradually released, the emotional

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<sup>110</sup> Keating: *Open mind, open heart* p 113

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

investment of early childhood based on instinctual drives is dismantled, and the false self gives way to the true self.

As we quieten down and go deeper, we may reach a place where the sacred word is not needed anymore, and we find ourselves in a place where there are no more thoughts. That will not last for a long time, usually (and absolutely not every time we pray), but those moments are enough to realize that the core of our being is not thinking. We find that we are something quite different. Our inner self is eternal and indestructible. We are human beings loved by God, invited to share his divine life.

Thomas Keating was interviewed by Anne A. Simpkinson<sup>112</sup> at the website of [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com) last year about Centering Prayer. She asks him if there might happen that serious matters come up in our thoughts during Centering Prayer that would need psychotherapeutic help. He answers “yes” to this, this might happen now and then. And he advises people, “whose psyches are very fragile” to establish contact with some therapists before they enter into Centering Prayer. He does not say that they should not enter into Centering Prayer, but that they might need a therapist to go through what comes up. What happens in deep meditation is that the unconscious probably will release emotions and traumas that would have taken years to unload in therapy. God has been doing psychotherapy for centuries by other names, says Keating. He searches through our personal history and heals what need to be healed, which can be self-inflicted wounds or wounds of childhood. “God preserves whatever was good in each stage of life and brings it to full flowering through the graces of spiritual progress and divine union.”<sup>113</sup>

#### **3.2.4. The practice of Centering Prayer**

It is important to underline the fact that CP is never meant to be an ongoing way of living 24 hours a day, only short periods of the day. As the prayer enfolds in daily life, the consciousness will grow gradually into a more healthy knowledge and understanding of God’s love. A person who daily practices CP, who rests in the embrace of Divine Love,

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<sup>112</sup> Anne Simpkinson is editor of *Common Boundary*, has a long experience for working with the interface between psychotherapy and spirituality, a co-author of the book: *Soul Work: A Field Guide for Spiritual Seekers*, [http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/interviews/int\\_19991006.shtml](http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/interviews/int_19991006.shtml) 11.05.2007

<sup>113</sup> [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/2/story\\_217.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/2/story_217.html), 21.04.2007

will be set free and transformed from his inner center to love others. This is what the founders of CP say.<sup>114</sup>

Centering Prayer is built on the tradition of *Lectio Divina*. Thomas Keating has no intention of questioning or challenging the Kataphatic way of seeking God. The reading or listening to God's word is still given, the affective prayer tradition remains, and meditation techniques are given where they are searched for. But the last part of *Lectio Divina*, *Contemplatio*, was and perhaps is rarely found outside the cloisters. It requires some training and discipline. Most people won't think they have the ability to practice it on their own.<sup>115</sup>

That is why Centering Prayer is concerned primarily with this part of prayer: *Contemplatio*, the contemplation according to the early church's tradition of Apophatic or mystical theology. This does not suggest that Keating implies meditation and reflection on what God does around us and in us, as unimportant or should not be done. On the contrary, he wants to open the way for people to take every aspect of prayer life in use. God is everywhere, and can be met everywhere and in plenty of ways. But Keating wants to open the door that for so long has been closed to so many: Contemplative prayer as a supplement to all the other kind of prayers. Keating says that there has been a misleading distinction suggesting opposition between the two: "In fact a proper preparation of the faculties through kataphatic practice leads to apophatic contemplation, which in turn is sustained through appropriate kataphatic practices."<sup>116</sup>

In this perspective Keating regards Centering Prayer as a door into a new dimension of life: A place where a person can let himself stay for some minutes in order to receive the Love from The source of love. This Love, which is hard for humans to receive by reason, is easier for the soul, body and spirit to receive when the brain does not control the entrance gate.

Centering Prayer is a help to be present to God's presence. To be completely present to somebody else is one of the most difficult practices of all. Our false self tells us that *we* are the center of the universe while everything else is circling around our particular needs or desires. This is how we usually behave in relation to God as well. We are praying out of our own needs, asking God to do what *we* want. We are the center. In CP we are challenged to let God be the center, to forget about ourselves for a while, and be intend to

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<sup>114</sup> Reininger, *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*, Keating's chapter 2, p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p. 113.

<sup>116</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p. 161.

remain at a level of awareness with him and let every other thought or impulse go. In time, along the way we'll find that God's center dwells inside our own center.

### **3.3. The true and false self**

In the Introduction Chapter (1.3.), I tried to describe to a small extent how the false self is built up from the very beginning of our lives. The title of this thesis is asking: "How can we become more aware of our true self in this post-modern era?" Thomas Keating is very concerned about what causes our false self both from a psychological and a theological perspective, and likewise how the true self can be released. In this time of Postmodernism, where people are looking for their own narrative, it is worth while to ask how Keating is trying to meet that need. He states that from early age we are developing "inner emotional programs" and a firm "group identity" in order to survive and hopefully be "happy", which become the foundation pillars in our false identities. By practicing Centering Prayer he believes a truer self will be released.

I will now show Keating's thinking about this matter.

#### **3.3.1. Inner emotional programs**

Thomas Aquinas says in his monumental "Summa theologiae": "Quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur", i.e. "whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver."<sup>117</sup> We receive differently according to who we are. A saying is heard in different ways according to who is listening. A dramatic accident is experienced in many various ways by those who witness it. This individual formation in our personalities starts its process already in the womb. There we are fed continuously, having the same temperature all around us, we are protected against most of what is happening outside of the womb, we normally have all we need. As soon as we enter the world outside our needs might not be met as constantly as they were inside. The parents' love is normally the most God-like things in creation, says Basil Pennington, who also wrote many books about Centering Prayer.<sup>118</sup> Most parents will do whatever they can to meet the needs of a baby. But very often as the baby grows, the parents will begin to trade on their love for the child to get the child to perform in a certain way. They might not say it in words, but they say it through their actions: "Eat this, do that, sleep now, stop crying, then mummy and daddy will love you, etc." The message the little ones get through all of this is that they are not

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<sup>117</sup> Pennington, *True self, false self*, p. 22.

<sup>118</sup> Pennington, *True self, false self*, p. 29.

lovable in themselves. They are lovable only because of what they do. This sense will be reinforced by peers through school, churchlife and adult life. They begin to see themselves the way they think others see them. They think their only value lies in what they do, and how they are affirmed by others. They will try to avoid doing things they know will be disapproved.<sup>119</sup>

This attitude is very often transferred to the relationship we have to God. We think we have to please God in certain ways to be received by Him.<sup>120</sup> When life gets hard it is very easy to wonder: Is God displeased with me for some reason? Is this a punishment? And we might try to increase our time of prayer or intensify good deeds hoping He will give us better days.

Thomas Keating had through many years of contemplation become familiar with his own inner landscape. He disclosed what his false self was built up from.<sup>121</sup> And he knew that this was something he shared with all human beings. He called it “the human condition”, based both in psychology and theology. Keating calls “the human condition” the original sin. It is an universal illness of human nature recognized by the great religions and by modern psychology.<sup>122</sup> Developmental psychology demonstrates that our emotional life ceases to grow and becomes fixated at an immature level when our personhood and identity are not affirmed. These immaturities cause emotional programs for happiness, says Keating. We feel urged to act in certain ways, hoping to achieve what we are longing for, and which we did not receive in a satisfactory way in our childhood. Unconsciously we are believing this will make us happy. Our culture reinforces the programs for happiness, because everybody is driven by them more or less. These false programs of happiness become centers of gravity, or “energy centers”.

Keating sees a connection between what happens in the individual human being with what has happened in the history of mankind. Individual experience is recapitulating the experience of the human family. Keating puts some “names” on these periods.

He organizes these evolutionary periods with the developmental steps in a growing human being:<sup>123</sup>

- **Security and survival**

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<sup>119</sup> Pennington, *True self, false self*, p. 28-31.

<sup>120</sup> Pennington, *True self, false self*, p.33.

<sup>121</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 14-18.

<sup>122</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 26.

<sup>123</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p.26- 43.

Some five million years ago early humans developed “reptilian consciousness”, Keating says, with no separate sense of self and nature. It is only concerned with survival and the fulfilment of instinctual needs. He compares this stage of development with the first year of a newborn child. He calls this first emotional program “*security and survival*”. A human child is very helpless when it comes into the world. At first we are very happy if our instinctual needs are promptly met. If as infants we experienced bonding with our mother we felt at the same time the bonding force of the universe, which is love, says Keating.

- **Esteem and affection**

The next stage he calls “typhonic consciousness”, symbolized as part human, part animal, which appeared some 200 000 years ago. Here there is some sense of the separation of body-self from the rest of nature. Children need pleasure, affection, and esteem as they differentiate themselves from the rest of the world. This stage is characterized by the worship of earth mother as nurturer and protectress in the history of mankind. The child from two to four experience this kind of consciousness, says Keating. It is difficult to distinguish imagination from reality. That is why they are subject to “terrors of monsters and darkness”<sup>124</sup> at this stage. This emotional program is called “*esteem and affection*”. It will ask for more and more esteem and affection from the surroundings, though it will never be enough, if it was not fulfilled very early.

- **Group identity**

The move to “mythic membership consciousness” occurred 12 000 years ago with the rise of agriculture, reflection, art, ritual, and politics. At the mythic membership level, identification with the community provided the sense of belonging, protection from enemies, and the prolongation of one’s life through offspring. The socialization process of the child according to this stage of being is placed between the age of four and eight. According to Keating this is the level where most of the world’s population, also adults, are operating from. This stage is characterized by the over-identification with the group we belong to, where we think that our true self is situated in the group, and

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<sup>124</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 28.

not in each human being. This creates an unquestioning loyalty to the group's policy.<sup>125</sup>

- **Power and control**

But there is a further step to go. About the year 3000 B.C., with the emergence of reason, “mental egoic consciousness” appeared<sup>126</sup>. Keating leans to anthropologists’ thinking of this period, symbolized in Greek mythology by Zeus slaying the dragon. Zeus represents reason, the dragon stands for domination of the emotions and primitive levels of consciousness. The “mental egoic” level brought a growing sense of alienation from God, oneself, others, and the cosmos. This is the human condition, says Keating. The emotional program of happiness at this level is called “*power and control*”,<sup>127</sup> the need of being prepared for what will happen, the need of not losing control neither emotionally or practically, the need of finding our own way in every matter. We meet this level at about the age of eight. Theoretically, if we think of the age of humankind, this is the stage or the era where we are living now, said Keating about twenty years ago. This is typical the age of modernism. Reason gives us a feeling of being in control of the existence, we don’t need a higher God to be humble to, so we alienate from him.<sup>128</sup>

Whether we agree with the accuracy of these evolutionary period lines or not, the main message from Keating is to show how all the emotional programs for happiness start out as needs, grow into demands, and finally become “shoulds”. As we grow up, meeting hindrances in fulfilling the programs in a sound way, our emotional lives often remain infantile. We may still be programmed by childish expectations that cannot possibly be realized. We use a huge amount of psychic energy to keep these programs running to feel sure and comfortable. The problem, says Keating, is that these programs will never make us happy, only more and more frustrated. They are one of the pillars of our false selves. “All human history is under the influence of the false-self system that easily moves our hearts into our families, communities and nations, and then afflicts the whole human race.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 28.

<sup>126</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 29.

<sup>127</sup> Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, p. 136-137.

<sup>128</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 26.

<sup>129</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 23-24.

Thomas Keating is saying that the way to progress in a good direction for the human being is to consent to all the stages we go through. We are born with no awareness of the divine presence within, so we *have* to develop the emotional programs for happiness. Our innocence as children is the innocence of ignorance. We are searching the ultimate love and security, but do not know where to find it. We have to try out all possibilities, finding that nobody can meet all our inner needs. One day we have to face the possibility of dying as well, where no group can save us from it, no power or control. If we can say “yes” to what we learn during the journey, seeing that God is drawing our attention to him, we will also be able to go one step further in our spiritual journey: The consent to be transformed.<sup>130</sup> The sad thing, though, says Keating, “is that the church mostly will say: “Let’s not rush into this!”<sup>131</sup>

### 3.3.2. Over-identification

The false self is based on two foundational pillars, says Keating in his book “Manifesting God”, one is the energy invested in the emotional programs for happiness, and the other is the tendency to over-identify with the particular group from which we come or to which we belong.<sup>132</sup>

The cultural straightjacket of overidentification with our particular group is something that Jesus invites us to break out of with his strong warning: “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14.26)<sup>133</sup> .

The culture around us (which of course also may be religious!), our parents, our peers, our prejudices, are the factors with which we over-identify and believe is our true self. This group identification can never be a true-self-image, not until what is put there by others is dismantled and we find what is our own true self. According to Keating only God can dismantle this properly, only God can give a therapy that heals all from the ground level, recreating what is an authentic loving attitude towards the whole existence, including ourselves. Love is our true self, says Keating.<sup>134</sup> Where “love” is broken, in any kinds of relations, we develop our false emotional programs for happiness, over-identifying with

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<sup>130</sup> Keating, *Invitation to Love*, p. 44-49.

<sup>131</sup> Keating, *Invitation to love*, p. 46.

<sup>132</sup> Described in chapter 3.3.1. as Group Identity.

<sup>133</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p.88

<sup>134</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p. 30.

those we are dependant upon, - and we get alienated from whom we really are. This is the human condition, which Keating calls the “original sin”. It is to be without the true source of happiness, which is the experience of God. “Here we are”, says Keating, “with an unbounded desire for happiness and not the slightest idea of where to look for it.”<sup>135</sup> In Roman Catholic theology, original sin is an explanation why Adam and Eve lost the intimacy they had enjoyed with God. As soon as they fell into a discriminating mind by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they became self-conscious. They experienced themselves not only as separate from God, but also, because of their sin, as alienated from God.

According to St. Augustine’s theology, original sin has three consequences: 1) we don’t know where happiness is to be found (ignorance), 2) we look for it in the wrong places (concupiscence), and 3) if we ever find out where it might be found, the will is too weak to pursue it. That is the pessimistic view Christianity has offered up to now, says Keating.<sup>136</sup>

The solution is to repent, that is, to change how we look for happiness, to purify ourselves of the false self. The false self will not give up its emotional programs for happiness easily. It manifests itself on every level of our conduct in our ordinary thoughts, reactions, and feelings, says Keating.<sup>137</sup> Paul said to the Romans,

(...), in my natural self, that is – for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want – that is what I do. But every time I do what I do not want to, then it is not myself acting, but the sin lives in me.  
(Romans 7:18-20, NJB)

Keating sees this paragraph in the Bible supporting his own view of what is “the false self”. There is something beyond these programs for happiness in us. The false self needs to be purified, so that our inmost being, laid there by the Creator, can come to the surface and guide us into a redeemed “truer self”. Paul continues,

In my inmost self I dearly love God’s law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law in my mind. So I am brought to be a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body. (Romans 7:22-23 NJB).

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<sup>135</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 10.

<sup>136</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p. 89.

Paul underlines that as long as we stay alien to our inmost self, we are held as captives in our own lives. The false self is deeply entrenched. We can change our name and address, religion, country, and clothes. But as long as we don't ask the false self to change, the false self will simply adjust to the new environment. As an example of this, Keating says that there is no difference between drinking our friends under the table as a significant sign of selfworth and esteem, and entering a monastery, trying to fasting or praying the other monks under the table as a new path to glory.<sup>138</sup>

Developmental psychology aims to rescue fixated unsound tracks in our emotional lives by different kinds of therapy. But the spiritual journey is more than a psychological process. It is primarily a process of grace, says Thomas Keating. Nobody else but God can penetrate the programs for happiness that we develop during childhood. How then do we dispose our lives to this recovery? Thomas Keating is convinced that the easiest way is to seek God beyond our emotions and thoughts, so that our whole being can be open to divine therapy. How can we seek God beyond our thoughts and emotions? Keating's answer is that Centering Prayer is an appropriate way. It is a tool that is possible to use by all human beings, not dependant on the surroundings of life. Paul cries out in the last verses of the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter to the Romans:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? God – thanks be to him – through Jesus Christ our Lord. So it is that I myself with my mind obey the law of God, but in my disordered nature I obey the law of sin. (Romans 7:24-25NJB).

Paul reveals an awareness of both his false self and his true self, and an understanding that he is helpless on his own to integrate the true self into his whole being.

### **3.3.3. How does contemplative prayer deal with emotional programs?**

Awareness of the false self may arise at different stages in life. It may come as a part of a mid-life-crisis, or earlier, for instance when something dramatic happens in our surroundings or with ourselves. When we find that all we depended on does not prove to be what we thought it should be, we might be led to reconsider our view on God, ourselves and the world.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 17.

<sup>139</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p. 90-92.

Those who practice Centering Prayer will be helped directly to enter a process of dismantling their false selves. Contemplative prayer begins to open not only a spiritual awareness, but also a divine awareness. When we are becoming aware of the divine presence within us, we gradually understand where the source of true happiness comes from. When we start to practice Centering Prayer regularly we will learn to taste the peace that comes from God. Something happens to our world of demands and “shoulds”, of aversions and desires that were based on emotional programs for happiness as we grew up. They are relativized, we see that what we thought was our true self, is a false picture, an unreal world.<sup>140</sup>

The questions: “Where am I?”, “who am I?”, “why do I live?” are essential in order to become acquainted with our false-self, and to seek and receive “Divine Therapy” to find the “true self”.<sup>141</sup> This is the good news to a postmodern world, says Thomas Keating and his followers: Contemplative prayer, offered to us through the gate of Centering Prayer, is a good tool to let God heal us from our false emotional programs and for the need of over-identification. The process that starts when we start searching for interior silence, he calls “Divine Therapy”. The purpose of Divine Therapy is to enable us to become who we really are. We may be scared of being who we are.<sup>142</sup> Here the words of Jesus come to mind: Matthew 10.39: “One who wants to benefit from his life will lose it; one who loses his life for my sake will find it”<sup>143</sup>. Thomas Keating interprets this verse as: “If you try to save your life (that is your false self), you will bring yourself to ruin, because the false self has no future. But one who brings himself to nought for me discovers who he is.”<sup>144</sup>

Contemplative prayer starts modestly, but as soon as it begins to reach a certain intensity, it opens up to the unconscious. Painful memories, primitive emotions may come to consciousness. How to handle these afflictive emotions? “By facing them, by feeling them,” says Keating. “Most of the time, they don’t need psychotherapy; they just need to be evacuated”.<sup>145</sup> This does not mean that Keating says that psychotherapy is useless or not necessary, but he knows that the rest we experience during Centering Prayer is so deep that it allows the inner defences to relax, and the body, with its great capacity for health says, “Let’s get rid of these emotional blocks once and for all”. The psychic nervous

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<sup>140</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 26.

<sup>141</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p.26-28.

<sup>142</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p. 93-94.

<sup>143</sup> *Christian Community Bible*, Madrid, 1988.

<sup>144</sup> Keating, *Manifesting God*, p. 93.

<sup>145</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p.25.

system may react in primitive emotions or intolerable memories for some time, but after a while, it will be over.<sup>146</sup>

In mystical theological terms, to let go of inner wounds and surrender all that we are into the hands of God, is an act of pure faith. Can it be as simple as that? Keating never implies that this happens in a second as soon as we enter into contemplative prayer. But what he teaches is that by practicing Centering Prayer regularly, recommended twice a day over 20-minute-periods, gradually a divine therapy will take place. The one who keeps the intention of resting in God's love will be healed of his inner wounds and damage, finding his true self.

### 3.3.4. Divine Therapy

Gustave Reininger,<sup>147</sup> an editor of two books on Centering Prayer, says: "Central to Keating's spiritual anthropology is one of the most provocative concepts of faith in the Christian tradition: the Divine Indwelling."<sup>148</sup> It is provocative, because Keating is talking about a fundamental goodness in human beings, based upon the mystery of Trinity, Grace, and the Incarnation. This is an important part of being created in the image of God, and of the fact that Forgiveness and Grace were given us through the Atonement of Christ. "This basic core of goodness is capable of unlimited development," says Keating, "indeed, of becoming transformed into Christ and deified."<sup>149</sup> Keating says that the center of gravity of our true self is God, in contrast to the false self, whose center of gravity is itself.

By practicing Centering Prayer, we enter the inner room as an expression of good will towards the love of God, who invites us: "Come to me, (...), and you will find rest for your souls!" (Matthew 11:28-29 NJB). In this basic rest that God offers, healing is central. The assurance of being in a presence of God who is all forgiving and loving we reach a point where we existentially over time will have the courage to drop more and more of our emotional programs of happiness. The need of holding on to our false selves won't be necessary any longer. We can simply let the destructive thoughts pass by, release them through our awareness and let them go! According to Keating this evacuating will happen without us having any part of it. Thoughts that need to be released and discarded might

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<sup>146</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 26.

<sup>147</sup> Gustave Reininger is a founder of Contemplative Outreach Ltd, an ecumenical network that teaches CP in churches, schools, and places of work. He teaches CP and conduct retreats throughout the country. A graduate of the University of Chicago.

<sup>148</sup> Reininger, *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, p. 29.

<sup>149</sup> Keating, *Open mind, open heart*, p. 127.

come through our conscience, then we will know about it and will be in the position to consent to it, but this might also happen unconsciously without our knowing. “The cloud of unknowing” will cover it all. God does his work with or without our knowing. The understanding and effect of the healing process might not appear to us until long afterwards. Certainly, other people will see the effects long before us. They will observe basic structures in our behaviour change over time towards a greater freedom and authenticity and a loving attitude that is growing. This is because Centering Prayer leads to Divine Therapy. However, there is no guarantee of how God will bring the fruits forth.

The desire to find the true self, is of God. Whatever fruits which may be received are, in a way, incidental and ought not to be desired for themselves. No one should practice Centering Prayer because of the effects it can bring. There is only one intention in Centering Prayer. The intention is to respond to the invitation of love given us from God, the willingness of being present with Him in true awareness. If we want to practice Centering Prayer in order to relax, to earn something from it for our own good, to consume God’s love for our selfish needs, then we do not practice Centering Prayer. Then it will only be a technique of magic trying to take power over God, which is impossible in the first place, but will also just fasten our emotional programs for security and control. It will do us no good. The fruits of our lives will show that.

### **3.4. Theological basis of Centering Prayer**

#### **3.4.1. Trinitarian theology**

The theological basis of CP is Trinitarian. “Its source is the Trinity dwelling within us,”<sup>150</sup> says Keating. He states that our baptism confirms the presence of the Holy Trinity within us. “We participate as human beings in God’s life just by being alive, but much more through grace”.<sup>151</sup> The movement within the Trinity, where they empty themselves into each other out of pure Love, is the same love that is given us by grace. We know this by our hunger for God, says Keating. Centering Prayer comes out of the life of God moving within us. We recognize this theological basis from the mainstream of both the Roman Catholic and the Greek and Russian Orthodox church. Though the Orthodox theology has put more emphasis on their Trinitarian aspects than the Western Church, the West has kept their well founded theology on the Trinity. The Pentecost is also important for Keating in this Trinitarian theology. The Holy Spirit was given to us, to let God dwell in our hearts.

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<sup>150</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p. 32.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

When he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into the whole truth. He has nothing to say of himself but he will speak of what he hears, and he will tell you of the things to come. He will take what is mine and make it known to you; in doing this, he will glorify me. All that the Father has is mine; because of this I have just told you, that the Spirit will take what is mine and make it known to you. (Joh. 16.13-15, CCB).

By this saying, Jesus is assuring us of the Trinitarian indwelling of the disciples, when the Spirit comes. He is telling about a knowledge from God, given to those who follow him. This wisdom will be a constant source of strength for those who will listen.

### **3.4.2. Christology**

If the source is Trinitarian, its focus is Christological, says Keating. It establishes in us a deepening relationship with Christ. We relate to Christ through reading the Bible, praying with words, through the Christian fellowship and especially in the sacraments, but practicing Centering Prayer (CP) moves us to new depths and levels of intimacy with Christ. CP comes from an existential relationship with Christ (as we also are with the whole Trinity). As we pray in silence we are connecting with the divine life within us. It is there already waiting, but God is waiting for our consent to Him. It is a commitment to getting closer to Christ and deeper into the Trinitarian life of love. Keating never suggests that we are in any juxtaposition to Christ. The movement inward to the Divine Indwelling suggests that our relationship with Christ is an interior one, especially through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and pours the love of God into our hearts. When we sit there, we are relating to the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, not as something outside of us, but as an experience inside us.<sup>152</sup> To go beyond thoughts, to leave all our conceptual faculties behind, is like a commitment to death. To let go of all our control mechanisms that always want to know what we are up to, is to leave our emotional programs for control and power. For a human being it is not easy *not* to hold on to our thoughts and feelings and images. In this point we can see the Christological aspect in CP. As Christ left behind his divine glory and dwelled among us, we, in CP, leave our position of seeking to be in control towards God, opening for His will instead of our own.

It is also a commitment to take the time to pray every day. When we feel we have so much to do, or that others need us more than there are hours to reach, it might be a hard

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<sup>152</sup> Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p.34.

surrender to sit down and pray. Centering Prayer is mostly not a “felt” blessing when we sit there, most of the time we may feel it’s like a desert, but we know that this is part of growing as a human being and as a disciple. The more we practice Centering Prayer, the more we will understand Christ’s heart. Basil Pennington said in his book “Centered Living”, that a regular practice of CP will not only bring peace, but also a deeper relation to all the suffering in the world. “For we come to love the earth, too – the footstool of God.”<sup>153</sup> If we are wondering where the “cross” is in a Centered life, Pennington assured that we will find it where Jesus found it, because we will become more and more like him. In this we are also touching our true self. We have been “Christed in baptism.”

With him we weep, intercede, and offer up the splinters and beams of the cross that the Father allows to be placed on our shoulders or invites us to carry with the Christ in others, as did Simon of Cyrene.”<sup>154</sup>.

By this we see that the Love we meet in our inmost being, is not a love that makes us selfish or narcissistic. It will always be directed to others. We desire to be more aware of God’s presence within, not daydreaming in silence.

### **3.4.3. Ecclesial theology**

A third theological principle states that any practice moving towards contemplation is ecclesial in its effects. It bonds the people who are doing it together, but also with the whole human family. A realization of oneness with others will grow, both to the past, present, and future.<sup>155</sup>

People of today are not looking so much for doctrinal certitudes as they did before, now they are more looking for meaning in life, says Keating.<sup>156</sup> He can see that this is a natural reaction both because of the history of the Church, but also because of the tremendous flow of information in our time. He also thinks that this might be a movement of the Holy Spirit.<sup>157</sup> He is observing the growing sense of oneness beyond doctrinal differences among members of the Christian mainline churches. And this is also one of the

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<sup>153</sup> Pennington, *Centered Living*, p. 132.

<sup>154</sup> Pennington, “Centered Living, p. 132

<sup>155</sup> Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 70.

<sup>156</sup> Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 72.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

purposes for the Centering Prayer movement to contribute to the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition and make it available to people of every Christian denomination.<sup>158</sup>

#### **4.0. Discussion**

There are many issues to discuss in Keating's writings. There is not enough room for discussing every aspect of it, but I want to pick out the following issues that I believe are central:

In chapter 4.1., I will take a look at the psychological perspectives, both the traditional and the contemporary, to establish whether or not Keating has recognized support from either or both in describing the inner emotional programs of happiness. I will also seek to establish if there is relevance between a solely human psychological process and the evolutionary process of mankind. Both aspects are relevant to establish an understanding of how Keating's view of finding a true self, is logical and actual today. Subsequently, I will ask if it is possible to carry out research scientifically on spiritual experience, by referring to Michael Downey's book: "Understanding Christian Spirituality"<sup>159</sup> This is relevant to the whole work of this thesis to establish the basis of Keating's work on CP as an alternative for human beings searching for God in our time.

The Postmodern time is known by a multitude of spiritual alternatives. If the Christian Church would take the challenge to go out to the market, it has to be assured that it comes with something that is theologically sound and founded in Scripture. Hence, in chapter 4.2, I will discuss and reflect on the theological issues of Centering Prayer when it comes to resemblance of Eastern meditation, Pantheism and New Age Spirituality, to carry out what might be unique in CP according to other meditation techniques, and I will try to establish how CP is founded in Scripture. As I am writing in the context of Methodism, I will explore if the theology of John Wesley is open to the theology in CP or not. Besides, living in an ecumenical world of today, it is relevant to see if CP is available for practice across church denominations.

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<sup>158</sup> Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 73.

<sup>159</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*.

Finally, in chapter. 4.3., I will take an overview to estimate how this age might be ready to receive an alternative as CP in the common search for a true self, and how this might be validated for Christians in the Nordic countries.

#### **4.1. Has Keating a trustworthy psychology?**

##### **4.1.1. Inner emotional programs seen from other views**

Developmental psychology from Freud up to our time has underlined how children undergo different stages in growing, and how the soundness in the transition from one age to the other is dependant on how well their needs are met in the stage they are about to leave. Various types of help are suggested by different scholars for those who are suffering from disharmony in their emotional life. There is much documentation on this subject. What is less known is how the history of mankind has a direct implication for the individual life. Keating's named periods of evolution as a background to seeing the development in each individual, invites further scrutiny. Therefore I will take a look at that first.

Carl Gustav Jung<sup>160</sup> devoted his life to the exploration of the unconscious. Unlike many before him, Jung did not feel that experimenting using natural science was the best means to understand the soul. For him, an empirical investigation of the world of dream, myth, and soul represented the most promising road to deeper understanding. Though he worked together with Sigmund Freud, they differed in the view of what caused neuroses. Jung never adopted the sexual fixation of Freud. The overarching goal of Jung's work was the reconciliation of the life of the individual with the world of supra-personal archetypes. To undergo the individuation process, the individual must be open to the parts of oneself beyond one's own ego. To explore the world of religion and spirituality, and question the assumptions of the operant societal worldview, and not just blindly living life in accordance with dominant norms and assumptions, were parts of Jung's theories. Jung wrote about the collective unconscious, where he theorized that certain symbolic themes exist across all cultures, all epochs, and in every individual.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> C.G. Jung 1875 -1961, a Swiss psychiatrist, a founder of analytical psychology

<sup>161</sup> Fontana press edition of Carl Jung's autobiographical work, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CarlJung> 19.04.2007

Keating and Jung agree upon the necessity to go beyond one's own ego to "undergo the individuation process", or as Keating would say: find the true self. They both believe "spirituality" is a key in the search of the unconscious, and also the fact that there are some supra-personal archetypes behind our emotional patterns. This shows that Keating understands and applies the science of psychology when he is observing what goes on both in his own personal life and in others. His teaching on the connections between the human collective history and the individual seems to be supported by Jung.

But Jung is not the only one. An even stronger support is found in Paul MacLean's classic Triune Brain Model.<sup>162</sup> He defines emotions as the responses of the "Mammalian cortex".<sup>163</sup> Emotion competes with even more instinctive responses from the "Reptilian cortex," and the more logical, reasoning "neocortex"<sup>164</sup>. However, current research on the neural circuitry of emotion suggests that emotion is an essential part of human decision-making and planning, and that the classic distinction made by Descartes between reason and emotion is not as clear as it seems. This shows that emotions have greater impact on us than thoughts. Emotions are sometimes regarded as the antithesis of reason. Emotions can be undesired to the individual experiencing them; he or she may wish to control but often cannot. Thus one of the most distinctive, and perhaps challenging, facts about human beings is this potential for entanglement, or even opposition, between will, emotion, and reason.<sup>165</sup>

In Paul MacLean's "Triune Brain"- model, there are similarities to Keating's teaching on the emotional programs for happiness running beyond the level of will and reason. It supports also the Scriptures, where Paul in his letter to the Romans describes the battle between what he wants to do, but still does not do.<sup>166</sup> Paul MacLean presumes that prior to the mammalian brain, life in the non-verbal world was automatic, preconscious, and predictable. The motor centers of reptiles react to sensory cues of vision, sound, touch, and motion with pre-set body movements and programmed postures.

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<sup>162</sup> Paul MacLean is an American physician who made significant contributions through his research to the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and brain research. Through his research at Yale Medical School and at the National Institute of Mental health, MacLean was instrumental in proposing and defining the triune concept of the brain. MacLean's evolutionary triune brain theory proposed that the human brain was in reality three brains in one: the R-complex, the Limbic System and the Neocortex. MacLean studied also the brain mechanisms of emotion. It was from that time his theory about the triune brain became the foundation of his research throughout his career.

<sup>163</sup> Cortex, is the outer covering of the brain

<sup>164</sup> Neocortex, region of the brain, such as the roof of the cerebral cortex that forms the part of the mammalian brain that has evolved most recently and makes possible higher brain functions such as learning

<sup>165</sup> <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/manuscripts/ead/maclean534.html> - National Library on Medicine, 18.04.2007

<sup>166</sup> Romans 7. 24-25 NJB

This thesis does not set out to document the various historic evolutionary periods, or exactly when the periods prevailed. However, there are supportive theories to substantiate the view that Keating is trustworthy when he points out how there are universal patterns in how each human being matures, depending on experiences along the road. One of Keating's fellow Cistercians (he died recently), M. Basil Pennington, who also wrote on Centering Prayer, named these periods quite differently. He called them Alpha-, Beta-periods and so on<sup>167</sup>, but the main tracks are the same. The Alpha period started long before humankind was created. Pennington says that we are now in the Iota period, which started some three thousand years ago. He observed we are now realizing more and more the need for the speculative dimension of the rational intellect to be complemented by the intuitive, sapiential, contemplative dimension. Now we strive toward the Tau Period, said Pennington, the era of community, integration, and transcendence. From his point of view Jesus Christ is the crowning of the human race, God incarnated, who points to our ultimate destiny: complete union in love with the Triune God.<sup>168</sup> Finally, we will reach the Omega Period, where the human evolution is truly consummated.<sup>169</sup>

It is beyond the limit of this thesis to document assertions like these. Pennington and Keating are convinced that as each individual is maturing in a lifetime, the whole of mankind is growing in a good direction. There is no doubt that Jesus often talked about what "time" it was, to those around him.

The time has come, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Change your ways and believe the Good News. (Mk. 1:15 CCB). You superficial people! You understand the signs of the earth and the sky, but you don't understand the present times. (Luke 12:56 CCB).

The Bible is very clear about a direction of time. History will not only repeat itself, it will go towards an end and a fulfillment.

We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too, who have the first-fruit of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free. (Romans 8:22-23, CCB).

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<sup>167</sup> Pennington, *True Self, False Self*, p. 53.

<sup>168</sup> Pennington, *True Self, False Self*, p. 57

<sup>169</sup> Pennington, *True Self, False Self*, p. 58

There is a consensus within Christian theology about God's renewing his creation from the first coming of Christ. "Divine Therapy", sanctification, "theosis", "perfection of love" are different labels on the process God through the Holy Spirit is working in the inner being of man as soon as he consents to God's will. It starts with baptism, when a human being "consents" to be given into God's hands.<sup>170</sup> Keating is strengthening the hope of progress, when he opens the door of Centering Prayer to ordinary people around the world. If more and more people find their true self in their inner being, where Love is to be found, the transformation of the one will lead to transformation of others. The will of God is to bring Divine Therapy to the entire world.

#### **4.1.2. Alternative views on emotions**

Contemporary psychology is attentive on what we call "emotional intelligence – EQ". When people were asked to undergo IQ-tests some years ago to prove their intelligence and fitness for particular positions, the trend today is more and more to focus on EQ-tests, which seem to be better predictors on how well people may be suited to cooperate with others and produce better work together.<sup>171</sup> That is interesting compared to Thomas Keating's teaching on how our "emotional programs" influence our whole lives, and how Centering Prayer can lead into a healing of our disordered emotional programs, so that we may dismantle our false selves and find our true self. In psychological terminology it would be to say to heal our "EQ".

Not only traditional psychology is attentive to this perspective, but also alternative research movements are dealing with the same. Valerie Hunt, the founder of BioEnergy Fields Foundation,<sup>172</sup> says that Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is not a new concept. It was around as long ago as Socrates, who had these wise words of advice: "Know Thyself".

Studies show that EQ is the best predictor of a child's future achievement, better than any other single factor. EQ is a better predictor of success than IQ and technical skills combined.<sup>173</sup>

Dr. Maurice Elias, a leading child psychologist, researcher and expert on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) from Rutgers University in the U.S., says that emotional well-

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<sup>170</sup> Kimbrough, *Orthodox and Wesleyan spirituality*, p. 143

<sup>171</sup> <http://www.eq.org/> 04.05.2007

<sup>172</sup> BioEnergy Fields Foundation was established in 1985, a non-profit organization for the research and education of the patterns of biofields in life's transactions. [www.bioenergyfields.org](http://www.bioenergyfields.org). 14.04.2007

<sup>173</sup> Valerie Hunt at the website [www.bioenergyfields.org](http://www.bioenergyfields.org).

being, the integrated true self, is predictive even of better physical health.<sup>174</sup> He works with school programs to educate children into a better EQ. His conviction is that self-understanding and greater emotional management will have a great impact on people's every-day-life and on their interaction with others.

While many alternative research programs find that ordinary people need help in developing emotional health, and more traditional therapy is focusing on "secular" problems as obstacles for a sound life, I find it very interesting that Thomas Keating is viewing the same challenge "Know Yourself" from a contemplative perspective, where God is the one who can heal disordered emotional programs and give ability to find a "true self". The question is: How can this be "proved" scientifically?

#### **4.1.3. Spiritual experience**

Michael Downey is in his book "Understanding Christian Spirituality" refers to Karl Rahner, one of the most significant theologians of the last century<sup>175</sup> (1904-1985), who once remarked that "the Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic, or not a Christian at all." He worked with charting the contours of a specifically Christian spirituality within the context of the universal striving for personal integration.<sup>176</sup> He was dealing with personal integration in terms of self-transcendence: giving oneself and finding oneself in the experience of knowledge, freedom and love. Not only did Rahner develop a full-blown systematic theology based on this insight, but he also generated a distinctive spirituality and a method of reflecting on spiritual experience.<sup>177</sup> He found that the spiritual dimension of a human being enables him to transcend or break out beyond himself and the limits of self-isolation, self-preoccupation, and self-absorption. By nature, all human beings are spiritual, said Rahner. Events and history, human life and activity, are capable of disclosing the presence and action of God, that is God's grace, according to him.<sup>178</sup> Systematic theologians in the postconciliar period<sup>179</sup> have recognized experience as the locus of revelation and the relationship of God.<sup>180</sup> Many continue to argue that spirituality is a specialization within the larger province of moral theologies or ethics. Downey asks: "If spirituality is to find its own footing as a distinctive area of inquiry and study after

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<sup>174</sup> [www.bioenergyfields.org](http://www.bioenergyfields.org). 14.04.2007

<sup>175</sup> Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>177</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, p. 33.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>179</sup> After Second Vatican Council 1962-65.

<sup>180</sup> Among these are: Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Gustavo Gutierrez, (Downey: *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, p. 117.

years of subdivision of moral theology at least one crucial question must be answered precisely: Just what is it that the study or the discipline of Christian spirituality studies?”<sup>181</sup> He ends up with four basic dimensions:

- Because it is Christian: Theological insight and accuracy
- Because it is spiritual: The human spirit and the Spirit of God
- Because it is about life: The whole life as an existential project
- Because it is about experience: The whole range of human experience<sup>182</sup>

Is Keating dealing with all these dimensions? After describing his theological basis of CP, his psychological understanding of the human spirit and the existential development through the emotional programs, and revealing the experience from false self to true self through divine therapy, I think he is dealing with the different disciplines of Christian spirituality in a trustworthy manner. I find he has a validated support from the psychological fields according to how emotions are developing during a lifetime, and how necessary it is to deal with them in order to mature towards the true self. This validated insight makes it possible for him to explore the last three questions from Rahner, as mentioned above.

#### **4.2. Critique and reflections on the theology of CP**

It is not too difficult to find support for the way Keating thinks about emotional psychological development. What is causing more discussion is the practice of Centering Prayer as a tool both for healing inner emotional programs and to name it “prayer” from a Christian point of view. Is this sound theology?

I will try to show what the critique is about, and where CP is challenging traditional theological views. This is essential to decide where we “place” CP in relation to all the spiritual alternatives today. To discuss it I will draw on different theologians. Among them are Thomas Merton, who was very familiar with Eastern Mysticism, and Gerard Hughes who is well-known from the Ignatian tradition. Also Augustine from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, The anonymous Author from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and John Wesley from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, will be listened to. The different aspects of theology they bring throw light on the theology of CP. From that perspective I will try to establish an insight of how CP can be a good way or not

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<sup>181</sup> Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, p.117.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118

in finding a true self. I will also reflect on what implications this can bring to ecumenical and inter-religious work.

#### **4.2.1. Is CP a mixture of Pantheism, New Age and Eastern meditation?**

Within the Roman Catholic Church, critical comments can be found. One comes from the Rev. John D. Dreher (Pastor of Our Lady of Czenstochova Church in Coventry, Rhode Island), who uses strong words about CP not being prayer at all, and not at all compatible with Catholic tradition. He says this is all about human faculties, and not from God. He warns that the dangers can be grave.

Centering prayer is essentially a form of self-hypnosis. It makes use of a "mantra," a word repeated over and over to focus the mind while striving by one's will to go deep within oneself. The effects are a hypnotic-like state: concentration upon one thing, disengagement from other stimuli, a high degree of openness to suggestion, a psychological and physiological condition that externally resembles sleep but in which consciousness is interiorized and the mind subject to suggestion. Centering prayer claims for itself the experience of God, while setting aside external realities and overcoming the "otherness" of God. It takes these characteristics not from Christian tradition but from Hinduism, through the medium of Transcendental Meditation.<sup>183</sup>

Rev. Dreher's warnings can be viewed on many Catholic websites. The debate has lasted several years, there are other shorter warnings, but most of them say more or less the same as Dreher. Therefore, I presume he is a representative of many. He claims that he is supported by many, even the Archimandrite Sophrony of Mount Athos, an authority in Orthodox spirituality, who says:

This impersonal form of ascetics leads finally to an assertion of the divine principle in the very nature of man. Man is then drawn to the idea of self-deification, the cause of the original Fall. The man who is blinded by the imaginary majesty of what he contemplates has in fact set his foot on the path to self-destruction. He has discarded the revelation of a personal God. The movement into the depths of his own being is nothing else but attraction towards the non-being from which we were called by the will of the Creator.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> John Dreher, *This Rock*, Vol. 8, No. 11, November 1997. [www.catholic.com/thisrock/1997/9711fea1.asp](http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/1997/9711fea1.asp), 19.04.2007

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

“My hypothesis”, says Dreher, “is that it is Satan's strategy, in all these things, to strip away the physiological and psychological forces that, in our fallen state, are a fail-safe protection for the human spirit.”<sup>185</sup>

By “self-deification” the Archimandrite uses a language of God being at the centre of our centre, suggesting that “we” are “gods”. This is not a necessary conclusion in believing that there is a “divine principle in the very nature of man”. Acts 17.28 states that “,(...), it is in Him that we live, and move, and exist ,(...),” without saying that “we are gods”. And John is quoting Jesus, who said: “(…)you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.” (John 14.20 NJB). Jesus prayed: “May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.”(John.17.21 NJB). I will come back to this discussion in chapter 4.2.4.

There are many responses to Dreher’s article. One, Richard J. Vattuone, from La Jolla, California, responds at the website “This Rock”:

After reading Fr. John Dreher’s critique of centering prayer (“The Danger of Centering Prayer,” November 1997), I had to dig up my retreat notes and books to see if he could possibly have been discussing the same contemplative prayer preparation method I have experienced. After scouring the books of Fr. Thomas Keating, I was unable to locate any of the "bogyman" dangers identified by Fr. Dreher. Nothing is easier than to build a straw man and then knock it down. I was relieved to discover that Fr. Dreher was obviously referring to some imaginary construct of his own making rather than the prayer method taught by Fr. Keating. Readers who spend just a few hours reading any of Fr. Keating’s books will readily see that his teachings do not resemble Fr. Dreher’s description.”<sup>186</sup> .

Another critique observes:

The term "centering prayer" is unfortunate. "Centering" is one thing, and "prayer" is another. Centering is an effective exercise in concentration; it trains the mind to remain focused. Centering, as a technique, is a good thing. The problem comes when the benefits that come with centering are attributed to something other than an increased ability to concentrate. It is well known that the valid asceticism of pantheistic theologies is used to lure Christians away from the Church. Transcendental Meditation, taken as a whole, is pantheism and therefore leads us away from the Gospel.<sup>187</sup> .

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/1998/9802ltrs.asp> - 19.04.2007

<sup>187</sup> Rev. Federico Higuera, Cobden, Illinois, <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/1998/9802ltrs.asp>, 04.05.2007

It is true that TM uses a similar method of centering. But TM is not theistic in its objective. Cynthia Bourgeault describes TM as a “Concentrative method”, which is described earlier in chapter 3.2.1. In TM a mantra will be assigned by the teacher to resonate with certain aspects of the student’s inner being, and the vibration of the mantra is as important as its content.<sup>188</sup> It is a centering on a word, not centering towards God, such as how the sacred word in CP is supposed to be used.

Marcia Montenegro, editor of the website: “Cana – Christian Answers for the New Age”,<sup>189</sup> wrote an article:”Contemplating Contemplative Prayer; Is it really prayer?” Her final words were:

People promoting CP often present a false dilemma between "neatly packaged" evangelical Christianity oriented toward logic and reason, versus the experiential, mystical aspects of CP. This idea is becoming more common now with the influence of postmodernism. This has been shown to be a false dilemma. By supporting reason and thinking as part of communication with God, one is in harmony with the biblical text; one is not discriminating against silent prayer, feelings or experiences. Nowhere in the Bible is prayer a technique or a way to go beyond thinking. Creating a whole theology of prayer apart from the Bible is dangerous, precisely because we are entering an area fraught with subjectivism, truth based on experience, and therefore, an area where we can be deceived. CP teachers tell us that prayer is listening to and having "divine union" with God, but the Bible presents prayer as words and thoughts. CP tells us to focus inward, but the Bible admonishes us to focus outward on the Lord. An evaluation of CP reveals it to be a *mélange* of New Age and Eastern-tinged techniques and concepts that exist outside the Bible. CP is a misnomer, since it is neither contemplation nor prayer as found in the Bible.<sup>190</sup>

Marcia Montenegro says that the Bible teaches us to focus outward on the Lord, not inward. I find it hard to consent to that. The Bible says that the “Kingdom of God is within us”, that “the Spirit comes to dwell in us”, and the words of Jesus, “I am in you, and you are in me”. It can not be an “either-or”- question as far as I can see. Montenegro states that CP is a “*mélange* of New Age and Eastern-tinged techniques and concepts that exist outside the Bible.” This is the danger John Dreher points to as well. It is a central question, which I will discuss in the coming chapters.

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<sup>188</sup> Bourgeault, *CP and Inner Awakening*, p. 20

<sup>189</sup> [http://cana.userworld.com/cana\\_ContemplativePrayer3.html](http://cana.userworld.com/cana_ContemplativePrayer3.html) 19.04.2007

<sup>190</sup> Marcia Montenegro at the website Cana – last modified 03.05.2001. I got her permission to quote her 14.05.2007. She has not changed her mind

#### 4.2.2. Is Centering Prayer really prayer?

A criticism levelled against Centering and Contemplative Prayer is that it resembles Quietism.<sup>191</sup> Quietism<sup>192</sup> in the broadest sense is the doctrine which declared that man's highest perfection consists in a sort of psychical self-annihilation and a consequent absorption of the soul into the Divine Essence even during the present life. In the state of "quietude" the mind is wholly inactive; it no longer thinks or will on its own account, but remains passive while God acts within it. Its doctrine was put forth and defended in the seventeenth century by Molinos and Petrucci. Out of their teaching developed the less radical form known as Semiquietism, whose principal advocates were Fénelon and Madame Guyon.<sup>193</sup>

The significant distinction between Keating's work and Quietism, is that Keating in the traditional way describes contemplation as a way of praying that only in glimpses will float into the "nothingness". When St. John of the Cross calls the state of being open to the flow of divine love into the inner center of the one who prays, quietism goes for the "nothingness" as a constant status. Every feeling or action is a sin, because the ultimate goal is to remain in nothingness and indifference. Thomas Merton<sup>194</sup> says: "Christian contemplation is the perfection of love, and quietism is the exclusion of all love."<sup>195</sup> By that he will say that "perfection of love" is the change of hearts, which has to prove its reality towards love of creation and all other human beings. This is what the desert Fathers and the Fathers of the Church also underline. This is the same definition John Wesley gives "christian perfection" as a "perfection of love": "Perfection is defined as "perfect love" and as something dynamic – not a state attained, nor something absolute, but something always improvable."<sup>196</sup> Quietism was quickly understood as heresy in the Catholic Church.<sup>197</sup>

Other critics will say that the contemplation in Centering Prayer has a resemblance to Pantheistic Brahmanism and Buddhism as a sort of self-annihilation, a state of indifference in which the soul enjoys an imperturbable tranquillity. And the means of bringing this about is the recognition of one's identity with Brahma, the all-god, or, for the Buddhist, the quenching of desire and the consequent attainment of Nirvana, incompletely

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<sup>191</sup> Merton, *Inner Awakening*, p. 101- 109

<sup>192</sup> Latin: *quies, quietus*, passivity

<sup>193</sup> <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Quietism>, 07.01.2007

<sup>194</sup> Thomas Merton, 1915-68, a Trappist monk, one of the most influential authors of the Catholic Church of the 20th century

<sup>195</sup> Merton, *The Inner Experience*

<sup>196</sup> Kimborough, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*

<sup>197</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia: Quietism, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12608c.htm>, 07.01.2007

in the present life, but completely after death.<sup>198</sup> Among the Greeks the Quietistic tendency is represented by the Stoics. Along with Pantheism, which characterizes their theory of the world, they present in their *apatheia* an ideal which recalls the indifference aimed at by the Oriental mystics. The wise man is he who has become independent and free from all desire. The supreme destiny of man and his highest happiness consists in rising to the contemplation of the One, not by thought but by ecstasy (*ekstasis*).<sup>199</sup>

Certainly, there can be many motives and dangers in going beyond our ordinary concepts. Keating is very clear in holding up that the intention of going beyond our thoughts in Centering Prayer, is to seek God's love, not for egoistic reasons, but for the love we are called to live out in our daily lives. The point is not at all to "disappear" in the "hidden, mystic" air as a human being, on the contrary it is to find our true self and develop to become who we really are from our inner center.

But it is important to point to the possibility that "centering" could become a temptation to only focus on one self, or to a kind of escape from the "real world". If a person wants to seek black magic, he will of course find it. This is why Centering Prayer is a calling to stay awake, to use the "sacred word", not as magic, but as an intention of staying in the abiding love of God. "Search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you," says Jesus in Matthew 7:7 NJB. As Keating also underlines, Centering Prayer is not a fast way to happiness, it is more a discipline and a willingness to let go of all our imaginative crutches.

If prayer is to communicate with God, and if it is possible for God to communicate with us on a deeper level than our brain capacity can receive, Centering Prayer is certainly prayer, as far as I can see. In CP God is speaking not to our ears, our emotions, or head, but to our spirit, our inmost being, according to Keating.

There is no human apparatus to understand that language or to hear it. A kind of anointing takes place. The fruits of that anointing will appear later in ways that are indirect: in your calmness, in your peace, in your willingness to surrender to God in everything that happens. That is why interior silence is greater than any insight.<sup>200</sup>

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, had this definition of prayer: "Prayer is the heart's communication with God". He preached more than anything else about "perfection

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<sup>198</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02730a.htm>, 2.04.2007

<sup>199</sup> *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/StoicEth.htm>, 22.04.2007

<sup>200</sup> Keating, *Open mind, open heart*, p.83

of love” as the intention and goal of a Christian life. He had given himself this rule: “When I am more than usually occupied with lots of work to be done, I pray one more hour.” He knew where he could find the Love he searched for both for himself but as much for others. He had learnt experientially that when he was with God longer than usual, the work was done in a better and far more effective way.

#### **4.2.3. CP and the fear of occultism**

There are indeed many aspects that may look rather similar to Eastern mystics and CP. Thomas Keating himself has never denied that he has got much inspiration from Zen spirituality and other meditation techniques from the East. It is not difficult to see that the procedures for moving into silence in Centering Prayer are influenced by these sources. The basic objective with contemplation, whether it be Hindu-based Transcendental Meditation (TM), Buddhist, Islamic or Christian, is to acquire a situation of complete rest in the body, soul and spirit, thereby eliminating stress and facilitating contact with a deeper level of consciousness. Dr. Willem Nicol from South Africa, who promotes this kind of contemplation even in Protestant Churches,<sup>201</sup> underlines that this is a natural technique, that does not ask for any particular faith as a starting point. The point is to quieten the rational left brain and to awaken the perceptive faculties of the intuitive right brain.<sup>202</sup> Professor Johan Malan, at the university of Limpopo, South Africa, says,

Followers of the Eastern religions have, for many centuries, been dedicated to obtain mystical, right brain experiences, while those in the West mainly occupied themselves with rational thinking. Meditation is the most important technique to help a person transcend to the unknown, inner world.<sup>203</sup>

Prof. Malan warns against the possible consequences of such practice. By opening up to the unknown, he is convinced that we can get in touch as much with evil forces than with good, by demons as well as angels. He also says,

It is becoming increasingly obvious that mysticism is one of the most important areas in which different religions of the world are meeting one another to foster ties of greater unity (...) on this

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<sup>201</sup> The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa

<sup>202</sup> <http://www.bibleguidance.co.za/Engarticles/Contemplation.htm>, 19.02.2007

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

level the discovery is made that all faiths worship the same God, who is the Universal Source of Wisdom.<sup>204</sup>

His arguments are the same as many others, that a practice like this is not found in the Bible. He says that this eventually will develop into pantheism, and asks if this is the situation for the majority of the western world already.<sup>205</sup>

I fully recognise and understand the risk of playing with evil forces. I know they exist, and that they are very strong. I have had some encounters with them in my work through other people who have been suffering from occult activities in particular ways. I could agree that not all should enter contemplation, if they are seeking unknown forces through it. But to seek the Lord in contemplation cannot be called occultism. It is far from it. This shows why it is important to teach sound contemplation practice.

Professor Malan's arguments that this will unify the world religions are, on the other hand, arguments of hope for me. "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples from all nations," (Matthew 28:19 CCB), were the last words from Jesus before the Ascension. If the mystical way is one entrance of encountering one another, I would certainly go for it. The very fact that this is an encounter on a deeper level than our thoughts and presuppositions, gives me hope. As long as we only meet intellectually, defending our territories, the barriers will only be raised higher and the violence between us will increase. I will even strengthen it by saying: Maybe this is one of the very few ways to start a real religious dialogue, which may give hope for a "change" of the world, not by fighting with military weapons, but by getting into a more loving understanding spiritually.

#### **4.2.4. Thomas Merton and Gerard Hughes reflects on Contemplative Prayer according to Pantheism and New Age spirituality**

The key of Centering Prayer is not the method, it is where it takes us. The *use* of silence is different from Eastern meditation practices. The entrance door may seem much alike, and maybe that is the very clue of it? But what and whom we turn to inside the door, differs a lot. To seek the personal God who loves us, is quite different from just slipping into an impersonal energy, whether we think it is good or bad, or to just sink into our own being without seeking anything else.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

Thomas Merton more than many others knew the connections between the world religions when it came to mystical spirituality. In his book “Inner Experience – Notes on Contemplation”, he tells how he can see the differences between Zen and Christian mysticism.

In Zen there seems to be no effort to get *beyond* the inner self. In Christianity the inner self is simply a stepping stone to an awareness of God. Man is the image of God, and his inner self is a kind of mirror in which God not only sees Himself, but reveals Himself to the “mirror” in which He is reflected. Thus, through the dark, transparent mystery of our own inner being we can, as it were, see God “through a glass”. All this is of course pure metaphor. It is a way of saying that our being somehow communicates directly with the Being of God, Who is “in us”. If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass “beyond” the inner “I”, we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the “I AM” of the Almighty. <sup>206</sup>

Merton is referring to Augustine, who experienced the same in the 4<sup>th</sup> century:

Having therefore sought to find my God in visible and corporeal things, and found Him not; having sought to find His substance in myself and found Him not, I perceive my God to be something higher than my soul. Therefore that I might attain to Him I thought on these things and poured out my soul above myself. When would my soul attain to that object of its search, which is “above my soul”, if my soul were not to pour itself out above itself? <sup>207</sup>

When Augustine is using the term “above my soul” I correlate that with Keating’s term, “beyond my inner self”.

Is God, the true self in me, Pantheism? Many critics question that. Ignatian spirituality underpins the perspective: “Finding God in all things”. Some critics will say that even this expression is Pantheistic. They say this is to say that all Creation *is* God. Gerard W. Hughes, <sup>208</sup> an author of several books of Ignatian spirituality, says in the book of the same title, <sup>209</sup> (God in all things), that New Age spirituality has something important to teach the Christians: that the search for spirituality includes both the body, the mind and all creation. Too long has there been a division between spirituality and the ordinary

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<sup>206</sup> Merton, *The Inner Experience*, p. 11

<sup>207</sup> Merton, *The Inner Experience*, p.12, quoting Augustin, from Enerratio in Psalm 41

<sup>208</sup> [http://www.gerardwhughes.com/god\\_in\\_all\\_things\\_chapter1.htm](http://www.gerardwhughes.com/god_in_all_things_chapter1.htm), 05.05.2007.

<sup>209</sup> [http://www.gerardwhughes.com/god\\_in\\_all\\_things\\_chapter1.htm](http://www.gerardwhughes.com/god_in_all_things_chapter1.htm), 05.05.2007.

everyday life. God is present in all things. Saying that our spirituality must be holistic, he does not say that it will automatically become holy.<sup>210</sup>

Gerard Hughes is pointing at something very important. He is talking in our time, where people are searching for a holistic spirituality more than any time before. To say that God is in all things, does that mean that everything is God? That a stone is God, or a tree is God, or that our heart is God? Not to Hughes<sup>211</sup>, not to Merton, and not to Keating. God, who is the Creator of everything, shows his love and providence through it all. That is very different to Pantheism.

Thomas Merton is very clear that in the Christian contemplative tradition there has never been an intention to suggest that God and our inmost self become one and the same, as in the Buddhist tradition. There is a distinctive metaphysical difference between the being of God and the being of our inner "I". This is why it would be very wrong to call contemplative prayer, or Centering Prayer, pantheism.<sup>212</sup> Even though God is dwelling in our hearts, and He says that "we are one in Him", this does not mean that God is us, or we are God. The Christian tradition has always encouraged seeking people to "let Jesus come into their hearts". That never meant that they should take out their own hearts, and transplant Jesus in. To consent to God's presence in our lives is to become aware that our spirit and the Holy Spirit are united in love.<sup>213</sup> This is what Centering Prayer encourages. "Be still, and know that I am God," Ps.46.10 (CCB) says. "The New Jerusalem Bible" phrases it like this: "Be still and acknowledge that I am God." (Ps.46.10 NJB) To wait in silence opens up a different attention towards God. In silence it is not very easy to hide. It is much easier to hide in our talking and thinking. Today, people usually hide themselves in noise and busyness. The silence through CP is not a key to open up God, it is a key to open ourselves to God.

#### **4.2.5. Inter-religious implications**

Why is Keating so relaxed to inter-religious inspiration? I think we find the answer in his theology. He believes in the Triune God, who always is giving to the other, "listening" to the other, love must always love. He cannot close his eyes and avoid seeing that God is being searched for in all religions. Observing the humble searching, the effects of others

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Pantheism= the belief that God and the material world are one and the same, and that God is present in everything.

<sup>213</sup> Romans 8:16 CCB

meditation in silence, he knows he has something to learn. But nothing like just copying it altogether. Keating and his fellow monks were a long time searching where to find a foundation for this in a Christian way. They had all practiced contemplative prayer for a lifetime, and they recognized some of the same practice in Eastern meditation. With his respect for the evolution of mankind, he could not possibly deny that God is teaching man everywhere under the sun. He understood that what he saw was a universal seeking from man's side to God. He found a useful door, that could be used by everyone. But it was to seek the loving God, not a door for "vanishing" into some impersonal energy. Was he naïve in doing that? Or did he find the very key to open a door into God's love, that also those who thought they were outside of that possibility, could enter? Those who enter for a serious purpose will find that it is not fake. They will meet God and his love. This can change people's lives forever. I do not at all say that this is the only way people can seek God in the postmodern time. Far from it. Not everybody will benefit from it either. Some have a temperament that would bring great difficulty into seeking silence as in CP.

There is a deep misunderstanding, though, that we as human beings *are* our thoughts or *are* our emotions, so that if we go beyond them it must be occult, dangerous or sick. When practitioners of Centering Prayer begin to discover that it is possible to drop the thoughts for some moments, they find that they are *not* their thoughts or emotions. This is a powerful discovery.

If one can drop a negative thought during the inner laboratory of prayer, is it not possible to do the same in daily life? With repeated practice, one can learn to identify and let go of one's "emotional programs for happiness" when they arise.<sup>214</sup>

If it is true that we *are* not our thoughts, it is even more important to discover that throughout the world. If we can acknowledge other peoples' ways to silence, there might be a greater chance to come into a dialogue to seek the Love of the true God beyond. And the result may be along the road: We *are* not our ancestors thoughts, or our cultures, we are ourselves encountering God! That could bring dramatic consequences in the world.

#### **4.2.6. From a Wesleyan view**

For me as a Methodist, it is interesting to take a look at Wesley's theology in relation to what Keating teaches about CP. John Wesley did not practice prayer the way CP describes.

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<sup>214</sup> Bourgeault in Reininger, *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*, p. 48

I am sure of that. When he is asked about prayer beyond “reason”, just to be illuminated by God, he refuses it consequently.<sup>215</sup> He lived in a time of history, when this practice was hidden in the monasteries, and when “reason” was very important to uphold. In spite of this, his theology is very strong about the inner witness of love in a Christian human being. Randy Maddox,<sup>216</sup> produced a huge study on the practical theology of John Wesley in 1994. He draws the connection between Wesleyan theology, and Eastern and Western theology. He says that the heart of Wesley’s theology is “the initial dimension of the Spirit’s deeper presence.”<sup>217</sup> For him, “faith is not the epitome of Christian religion, as many Protestants are inclined to claim. For Wesley faith is the handmaid of love.”<sup>218</sup> For Wesley, the work of the Spirit was dynamic and therapeutic. His language is also often therapeutic, he says: “The Holy Spirit is the Divine Physician whose Presence effects the healing of our sin-diseased nature.” This happens by “the inspiration or influence of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>219</sup> Here Wesley is using the term “inspiration” not as a cognitive influence of the Holy Spirit, but more like the basic meaning of the Latin original, *inspirare*, says Maddox, which means “to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame.”<sup>220</sup> It is this inspiration from God that enables a person to love and serve God. It is not far from the inner listening to God, when Wesley says in a letter to a Mrs. Woodhouse in 1766:

The spark of faith which you have received is of more value than all the world. O cherish it with all your might! Continually stir up the gift that is in you, not only by continuing to hear God’s word at all opportunities, but by reading, by meditation, and above all by private prayer. Though sometimes it should be a grievous cross, yet bear your cross and it will bear you. <sup>221</sup>

It is the mature Wesley, who says this. Easily we see that he is referring to *Lectio Divina*, how it was practiced after the 16<sup>th</sup> century: The *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation) and *oratio* (private prayer), while the *contemplatio* was left out. Maddox maintains that the genius of Methodist spirituality is the balance Wesley establishes between the insistence that empowerment for holiness is an undeserved gift of God’s grace by various means, and the recommendation of these same means as exercises for nurturing that

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<sup>215</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 9, Third Edition, p502-503

<sup>216</sup> Randy Maddox, ass. Professor of Philosophy and religion at Sioux falls College, South Dakota, and adjunct professor of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies, past president of the Wesleyan Theological Society

<sup>217</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p. 124

<sup>218</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p 174

<sup>219</sup> Maddox has quoted Wesley’s “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion”, Sermon 57. *Responsible grace*, p. 121

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p. 201 quoting John Wesley

holiness. Wesley has a holistic psychology and theology, which is very interesting for today. Methodists have not after him always continued this line. Maybe the time is now. For Wesley “Christian holiness was fundamentally a matter of purified and strengthened tempers.”<sup>222</sup> This is very interesting in the view of Keating’s emotional programs needing to be healed. Wesley knew exactly what the “original sin” brought into mankind, (the holy tempers and the perfection in man were destroyed), but he still taught that the grace, given through the death and resurrection of Christ, was stronger than the “destruction” of man. Preventive and restoring grace were keys in his theology, “God’s grace always pre-vents (comes before) and makes possible human response.”<sup>223</sup> He says that the human is always in the position that he is created from the hands of God, into God’s image. Our first parents, as an archetypal pair, the root of mankind, was made “upright” before they sinned,<sup>224</sup> that is why God can cleanse the human being from his sins, when he asks for mercy through Christ. Wesley is clear that this grace has to be received and responded to from the human being himself, to let it work holiness through his life.

Wesley never established a fixed number of means of grace. Viewing his heart theology and his stress on Preventive grace, there should be good reasons to be positive to Centering Prayer among Methodists today. After having been a member of the “General Board of Discipleship” (GBOD) in the worldwide United Methodist Church the last couple of years, I have found that Centering Prayer is very well known among Methodists in the United States. The last time I was there (March 2007), the Board closed its Conference by a Holy Communion service. To prepare ourselves for receiving the Communion, we were told to use one or all of four “stations” during a fixed amount of time. These stations were one place of saying the “Creed”, another of Confession, one of Anointing and the last was: Centering Prayer! This was a beautiful natural way of taking it into the church, where people in silence were centering in their prayers together. Obviously most of them knew this practice from before.

#### **4.2.7. A Resource for Ecumenical work?**

Joseph G. Sandman, vice president for Advancement at Loyola University Chicago, teaching on Centering Prayer in the Institute for Pastoral Studies, says to the America Magazine in 2000,

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<sup>222</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p. 201

<sup>223</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p. 83

<sup>224</sup> *The works of John Wesley*, volume 9, p. 434-436

Who could have predicted 25 years ago, when three Trappist monks from a monastery in Massachusetts introduced contemplative prayer to a group of “non-contemplatives,” that its popularity would grow so dramatically? Today, thousands of believers from a variety of Christian denominations in every state and in dozens of countries practice contemplative prayer daily. In addition, an international network of dedicated volunteers teaches it around the world.<sup>225</sup>

The ecumenical implications in CP are huge. To enter into this prayer does not claim for any specific creed of faith. It is only an invitation to come to God directly. This is a possible gift for all denominations to use. To be with God in silence, what will that lead to in our fellowship along the way? To share what is given in the long run, will widen all involved. This is the prayer of Paul to the Ephesians:

May he strengthen in you the inner self through his Spirit, according to the riches of his glory: may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith: may you be rooted and founded in love. All of this so that you may understand with all the holy ones the width, the length, the height and the depth – in a word, that you may know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled and reach the fullness of God. (Epf.3:17-19,NJB).

It sounds to me like a good program for strengthening the practice of CP across the churches all over the world.

In spite of the fact that it is already spread in many countries and is practiced by thousands of people, it seems to be almost totally unknown in Norway. In a time when Ignatian retreats seem to be the only type of “new” silent retreats , received from other countries, I feel it is time to widen the spectrum of retreats that offer good fruits.

For so long, most of the Christian tradition in our country appears to have been sceptical about Mystic Theology. It was considered to be dangerous and possible representing occult phenomenons. I have tried to figure out if a contemplative tradition was known in the Pre-Reformation era in Scandinavia, but I have not succeeded in finding many writings on this. D. Lindholm and D. Nicolle have done a study on Medieval Scandinavia, where they find that from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century “Sweden, Norway and Denmark departed from the rest of western Europe,(...) by the fact that traditions were maintained while the rest of Europe progressed.”<sup>226</sup> I understand this to include the

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<sup>225</sup> [http://www.cuc.claremont.edu/interfth/Centering%5Centering\\_prayer.htm](http://www.cuc.claremont.edu/interfth/Centering%5Centering_prayer.htm) 20.04.2007

<sup>226</sup> Lindholm & Nicolle: *Medieval Scandinavian Armies*  
<http://www.oxbowbooks.com/bookinfo.cfm/ID/37696?Location/Oxbow> 02.05.2007.

spiritual traditions. What was growing elsewhere in Europe, never rooted in Scandinavia. Some monasteries were of course practicing contemplation in their communities, but not to the extent of influencing people outside. It is rather strange that even in our time, the Apophatic theology and spirituality is still almost unknown. The fact that the Retreat-movement in Norway celebrated its 50 years of anniversary last year, almost all retreats are organized around Kataphatic theology, included Ignation retreats.

Across many denominations in Norway there has been a long established position whereby ordinary Church life has been the more or less only Christian spiritual alternative to offer. We are now living in a time of history where alternative ways to seek spirituality, health, and wisdom, are flourishing. The Church is only one alternative among others. No matter how much we believe that our God is the only One, - those who do not believe that, are of the opinion that they can choose from a wide variety of alternatives. This is the reality the ecumenical church is facing in this Postmodern era.

The challenge is to understand there is a spiritual search among more and more people. The Church Council (Kirkerådet) in the Norwegian Lutheran Church (Den Norske Kirke) published a booklet to their Annual National Gathering (Kirkemøtet) in 1999, because of a challenge they were given from the same gathering the year before. They called the pamphlet: "The Church facing spiritual yearning of today."<sup>227</sup> In this booklet it is stated :

In silence we find what modern man is looking for. Relaxation, rest, peace. We get to know our own body, our emotions, our consciousness and subconsciousness. Being in silence together leads to an experience of fellowship. But the strongest driving force in silence is the awakening of the longing for identity and belonging, and the yearning for God.<sup>228</sup>

This booklet encourages further ecumenical dialogue, by affirming other churches' traditions, such as meditation, retreats and contemplation, even mystical theological aspects. It challenges the need to integrate spiritual experience into schools of theology, by quoting Kenneth Leech (1994): "The essence of a theologian is his prayerlife."<sup>229</sup>

This gives hope for a more authentic spiritual life in our churches. The challenge is to let the words of this booklet come alive. Too many are searching for an authentic inner life and do not find it in the churches. This can be seen as an invitation to Christians to find

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<sup>227</sup> Egedeinstuttet and Tore Laugerud , *Kirken i møte med den åndelige lengsel i vår tid*. Kirkerådet 1999.

<sup>228</sup> Egedeinstuttet, *Kirken i møte med den åndelige lengsel*, (transl. by H. Sanden) p. 21.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. p. 25, "Teologen er essensielt en bønnens person" (transl. H. Sanden).

a true self in God, so that the Church, whatever denomination, again may attract hungry people of all ages and help them to more fully realise their true self centered in God..

Retreats are organized ecumenically in many places in Scandinavia. Centering Prayer is one more way among others to help Christians to find their true self in the love of God. This will hopefully lead to open faces towards the world, and it will help the church to a truer authenticity.

#### **4.3. A way to a truer self?**

This thesis has been stressing Centering Prayer as a way to find a truer self. Gustave Reininger put a remark in the chapter on "Divine Therapy" that one of the most provocative concepts in Christian tradition, is the fundamental word "Divine Indwelling".<sup>230</sup> This concept, as far as I understand, touches the issues: How can there be a good and holy true self hidden inside a human being, when there is a doctrine of original sin who points to the fact of total "destruction" of *imago dei* in us? How can a human being meet God in his inner being without a previous conversion to Christ? How is it possible to find a true self before we die? Is it realistic that God's love in a man or woman can transform their lives and give rays of authentic divine love to others?

I have referred to John Wesley who had a conviction of the total destruction of man's spiritual and ethical life because of the Original Fall. But simultaneously he teaches that Grace, because of Christ's Atonement and Resurrection, is even stronger than the destruction of sin. This makes it possible to believe that God can heal what sin destroyed.

The anonymous author has written not only "The Cloud of Unknowing", but also a "Book of Privy Counseling". Here he is answering questions and critiques about the same issues. Some cannot understand how a "human being by nature and a pitiful, fallen wretch through sin"<sup>231</sup> can find a way to real union with God in the sweet simplicity of perfect love. The Author says:

Forget your misery and sinfulness and, on that simple elemental level, think only that you are as you are ,(...). Take the good gracious God just as he is, as plain as a common poultice, and lay him to your sick self, just as you are. Or, if I may put it another way, lift up your sick self, just as you are, and let your desire reach out to touch the good, gracious God, just as he is, for to touch him is eternal health.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Reininger, *Centering Prayer in daily Life and Ministry*, p. 29.

<sup>231</sup> Johnston: *The Book of Privy Counseling*, p. 141.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

He refers to the Scriptures, where the woman in the Gospel of Luke testifies when she says: “If I but touch the hem of his garment I shall be healed.”<sup>233</sup> In the New Jerusalem Bible this stanza is translated like this: “If I can just touch his clothes, I shall be saved.”(Mark 5:28 NJB). The Author clearly underpins what a true self is and where to find it:

Go down to the deepest point of your mind and think of yourself in this simple, elemental way,(...), Do not think *what you are* but *that you are*.<sup>234</sup>,(...), Leave behind all inquiry and profound speculation into your being or his. Forget all these qualities and everything about them, whether they be pure or defiled, natural or grace-given, divine or human. Nothing matters now except that you willingly offer to God that blind awareness of your naked being in joyful love, so that grace can bind you and make you spiritually one with the precious being of God, simply as he is in himself.”<sup>235</sup>

To become one with God, is to be united in the Trinity. Christ is part of the Trinity. What the Author of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Keating open up, is that we do not have to sort out a specific sequence in how to meet God. To surrender in the ineffable God, is not only to become one with the Father, but also the Son and the Holy Spirit. At the same time it opens the possibility to be integrated in our self, our true self. God’s love leads us to repent to change the direction of our lives.

By this I have come to an understanding that it is possible, through the way of Centering Prayer, to find our true self. The searching for spiritual guidance and authenticity among people gives hope for giving this a new chance. “It is not hard to master this way of thinking”, says the Author of the Cloud and Privy Counseling. “I am certain that even the most uneducated man or woman, accustomed to a very primitive type of life, can easily learn it.”<sup>236</sup> He finds that it is the scholars and learned theologians that oppose and say this is too complicated. Speaking out of a 14<sup>th</sup> century European culture, it is interesting to see that he describes the latest theology and discoveries in the natural sciences as factors that are complicating what was the true nature of a simple practice. Now, in the Postmodern history of time, we might perhaps be helped to go further.

There is a hiding true self in our inmost being, that was laid there by the Creator, before we were born.

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<sup>233</sup> Mark 5.28 – quoted by the Author in “The Book of Privy...” p. 141.

<sup>234</sup> Johnston, *The Book of Privy Counseling*, p 140.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid. p. 139.

God said, “Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, (...), God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. (Gen.1:26,27, NJB)

Seeking God in silence is to become aware both of Him and of ourselves in that hidden place, even without knowing yet who that is. As a result of the deep rest and silence that come through a regular practice of Centering Prayer, our emotional programs begin to lose their importance. They were designed at a time when we were not aware of the goodness in God’s presence. In the presence of God we find true security. We understand that there is no other real security. Divine Love is the full affirmation of who we are.

This sort of spiritual discipline is a therapy for the tyranny of the false self. When all our selfish and defensive thoughts are quietened, it is much easier to see what emotional energies we are driven by.

Are there not psychological traumas that are too severe to be healed from in CP? What about sexual abuse and incest? Keating answers:

One of the most devastating emotional traumas of early childhood is physical or sexual abuse. The damage done to these children is so painful that it is repressed into the unconscious, where it may remain unknown by the victim unless deep psychotherapy or contemplative prayer loosens it up.<sup>237</sup>

Keating is convinced that being embraced by God’s love it is possible to let go of the captivating false self, and open for the freedom of a true self. CP is not an end in itself, but it is a means to an end. It provides profound healing.

To be really healed requires that we allow our dark side to come to full consciousness and then to let it go and give it to God. The divine therapy is an agreement that we make with God. We recognize that our own ideas of happiness are not going to work, and we turn our lives completely to God.<sup>238</sup>

By this we understand that surrendering to God is a kind of “death”. To let go of all we are used to cling to, whether it is traumatic or blessing, may be felt as horrifying. To leave what we used to think was our very being, is a kind of “dying”. This is all we know. To leave it is to enter the unknowing. Instead of “felt” consolation, the inner maturing grows into pure faith. Pure faith is to let go of all support. This is a challenge for all. Christians

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<sup>237</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 34.

<sup>238</sup> Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 35.

used to a Charismatic tradition might find it especially frustrating. When affective prayer is usually practiced, and blessing from God is anticipated to be felt by emotions and signs, it is a great surrender to be willing to go beyond all these manifestations. Pure faith does not seek any rewards of any kind, which might be called “spiritual junk food”,<sup>239</sup> by Keating. Rather than showing his disrespect to those who are practicing affective prayer, this tells how much more profound contemplative prayer is. The final cleansing of spiritual pride is traditionally known as the dark night of the spirit. “Surrender to the unknown marks the great transitions of the spiritual journey”, he says. “On the brink of each new breakthrough there is a crisis of trust and love.”<sup>240</sup> We might ask ourselves: Do I really trust God? Do I trust He is Love? Do I love Him that much as to trust Him? This process is designed to free us from the residue of the false self in the unconscious and thus prepare us for the transforming union. Why is this so important? Teresa of Avila said that one of our greatest problems is that we “pray as if God is absent”,<sup>241</sup> which leads to a belief that we must be in charge of our own lives either practically or spiritually, that we even must take the responsibility to tell God what He has to do when we pray. To rest in God is totally different. By that he can evacuate the immature inner emotions of ours, so that we don’t have to react in the old ways any longer, when others are hurting us. Paul says to the Corinthians:

You are the letter. This letter is written in your inner self,  
yet all can read and understand it...  
A letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God,  
carved not in slabs of stones, but in hearts of flesh. (2.Cor. 3:3 NJB)

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<sup>239</sup> Keating, *Intimacy of God*, p 97

<sup>240</sup> Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 21

<sup>241</sup> Keating, *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*, p. 1

## **5.0 Conclusions and summary**

I started this thesis by asking: How can we become more aware of the true self in this postmodern era? And the research question was: How can Centering Prayer according to Thomas Keating be a way for the human being to find an identity of a true self, and how can this concept be evaluated in our time?

Why do I ask these questions? I do, because I think there is a need to find the true self among people today. Something changed in our culture over the last decades. Through the long period of Modernism there was an optimistic view among people. They were aiming at a better future. Science helped man to understand the world. Poverty helped people to stand together to build a new society, we were dependant on each other to succeed. But when the affluent society could do no more than offer prosperity to people, individualism grew stronger. Traditions lost their grip, Christianity with the big narratives lost interest. The time for each individual to find his own belief, narrative and personality became natural and a human right. Today we live in the midst of all kinds of alternative ways when it comes to lifestyles and beliefs. But the optimism is not as strong as it used to be. There is not as much to struggle for individually any longer, we have seen that materialism did not make us happy after all. The climate disturbances on earth are telling us that we still need to cooperate with each other, terrorism has revealed that no safety can be guaranteed. More than ever people are searching for alternative ways to fill their inner needs and yearnings. The individualism is not only a freedom, it also leaves behind a feeling of abandonment and vulnerability.

I gave a further background for why I wanted to do this study in the Introduction chapter to the thesis. The need to be loved is universal and actual at all times. When this need is not met, our emotions, actions, and thinking, will be influenced by it. The consequences of the deprivation of love is not only seen in conflicts, wars, and violence, but also in “successful” people, who start to wonder why they *are*. In this thesis I have tried to deal with the roots of this universal pain. I find that this time of Postmodernism is bringing the pain more to the surface than ever. Thomas Keating is one of those who has experienced how a contemplative life is able to dismantle the harmful driving forces in the

emotional life and help us understand that the deep need of love can only be met by God in our own inner beings. The wisdom of this approach is revealed through the practice of Centering Prayer. Thomas Keating, over nearly a full lifetime, has been working with establishing this project worldwide. He has written many books and articles about the topic. That is why I wanted to carry out a study of his literature trying to analyse his teachings and estimate if Centering Prayer is a way to the search of finding a true self.

Into the multitude of spiritual alternatives of today, Thomas Keating is giving a Christian Prayer. In chapter 2, I have given a background for the spirituality Centering Prayer comes from, the Contemplative Spirituality. Even though it is a new kind of prayer practice for many today, it is deeply founded in a very old tradition. I go back to the tradition of Mystical Theology, where I describe what is the essence of it.

In chapter 3, I explore how Keating gives an answer to the question of finding our true self through his teachings on Centering Prayer. He has dealt with both psychological and theological issues, and I have tried to take a closer look at it in order to see if it can be upheld and validated. Keating has been open to learn from Eastern meditation techniques in order to help people into silence as a stepping stone into the embrace of God's love.

In chapter 4, I start a discussion on his teachings. There are critical views in existence opposing this practice. Therefore I have carefully selected to show some of these criticisms levelled against Thomas Keating's work. The critique deals with serious matters, I have tried to explore how theological authorities, who are familiar with these questions, such as Thomas Merton and Gerard Hughes, discuss the dangers and construction of it.

I am aware that I could have discussed some of the problematic issues even more than I have done. Thomas Merton, especially, convincingly discerned and dealt with the differences, and the Scriptural arguments are met easily with opposite arguments from the same Bible. Therefore, I found that since my research question was about how Centering Prayer can be a way for the human being to find an identity of a true self in our time, the most important task for me was to show if and how this can happen. I had objections myself to some of the same issues that the critics held up when I started this work. Without knowing the background and the whole content of Centering Prayer one can easily think that this is more or less the same as any meditation technique whatsoever, not giving what it really promises.

Certainly, I may have interpreted both the critics and the spokesmen according to what I wanted to find. This may have given me some blind spots in the research. Still, I must conclude, that the theology that showed the validity of contemplative prayer, was to

my knowledge more weighty than the opposing. Centering Prayer has a long tradition from the very first centuries of Christianity, and I know that the distilled wisdom which brought the true essence of the Gospel into our time, was given to us from those who searched for God in silence in the desert and monasteries.

Common sense tells us that there are many levels in our consciousness. By now our culture is overloaded with information, we communicate through innumerable channels, everywhere we are surrounded by sounds and impressions. Obviously, a human being of today is fully engaged in receiving these impressions at a superficial level of awareness. But our souls are longing for more. Listening to all kinds of voices reinforces and strengthens our false self. We do not know who we are or where we belong, if we do not sometimes withdraw from the stream of impressions, opinions and noise.

I have tried to show through this thesis how Centering Prayer is offering a chance to enter a “place” where our soul and spirit can find rest. I have found that Keating is underpinning the fact that God is Love, and to seek Him in silence is to find this Love. Love is our true self, says Keating. If he is correct, the only way to find our true self is to find the source of Love. God is Love, says the Bible. Augustine says in his Confessions 1:1: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests with you.”

I think that Centering Prayer is a gift to people of this Postmodern world. My hope is that Christians in the Nordic countries will discover this precious gift. I find no objections that are serious enough to warn against it. After writing this thesis I find myself even more secure that this kind of prayer is leading deeper than many other ways. It is fully accountable to the saying of Paul in Eph. 3.16-19:

In the abundance of his glory may he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love,(...),so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. (Eph.:16-19 NJB).

The utter fullness of God is to be become fully alive, whole and undivided. From this point of our true self we will be set free to love the suffering world, God and even ourselves. One of the ways to utter fullness in God, according to what Paul says in Eph. 3, seems definitely to be along the way of Centering Prayer.

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