

NOT CONFIDENTIAL

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Contemplative Christianity

by Dr Alan Branford (© 20 June 2018)

I describe myself as a Contemplative Christian.

I really should write “contemplative Christian”, using a lower case “c” for the word “contemplative”. For I am choosing to use the word “contemplative” simply as an adjective to describe *my* spirituality.

I am not claiming to be an adherent of a new movement within Christian worship, the “Contemplative Christians”: upper case “C” for “Contemplative”. I have no doubt that there is such a movement, or perhaps I should say movements, plural, and no doubt I shall have much in common with these. That is simply to be expected. But there is no organized movement or school of thought to which I adhere.

The title of my talk, “Contemplative Christianity”, may have evoked in your mind a medieval, ascetic monk dressed in a hair shirt and self-flagellating as he studies the Scriptures. Am I claiming to have a lineage of thought and practice from this holy hermit to me in the present day? Again, no doubt I shall have ideas in common. But as for hair shirts and self-flagellating, I gave up going to those sort of parties years ago.

No, I see spirituality as a deeply *personal* experience. I take credit or blame, as you see fit to call it, for my ideas. I describe these ideas as “contemplative”, and I have been asked to talk about what my ideas are and why I feel the word “contemplative” is appropriate.

As I talk about my own spirituality, inevitably I shall, either explicitly or by omission, call attention to practices that are *not* part of my spiritual experience. I wish to emphasise that I am not dismissing, let alone condemning, those other practices. If they are important to you, then, by all means, embrace them; I shall simply choose not to join you.

Let us look at the word “contemplative”. To be contemplative is to be in a state of contemplation, which may be defined as ...

- deep reflective thought;
- thoughtful observation;
- full or deep consideration and reflection;
- serious and quiet thought for a period of time.

In Latin, the verb “contemplare” is a first-conjugation verb with the same meaning as the English “to contemplate”. Its deeper origins are to be found in the word “templum”, meaning a “place for auguries”. The prefix “con-”, originally “com-”, here takes its intensive meaning: “completely”,

“with great attention”, etc. So, the Latin verb “contemplare” and our verb “to contemplate” are derived from the action “to mark out carefully a place for auguries”.

Symbols and allegories are a powerful means of teaching, learning and reflection. They are fundamental to contemplation.

To me, one of the most important symbols of spiritual contemplation is the lit candle. Indeed, we have this evening lit a candle and it remains in prominent view throughout our service for us to reflect upon.

Genesis 1:3

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

(Genesis 1:3, New International Version)



The lit candle represents to me “God the Father”, God as the basis of our being.

1 John 1:5

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

(1 John 1:5, New International Version)

⁵ Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία.

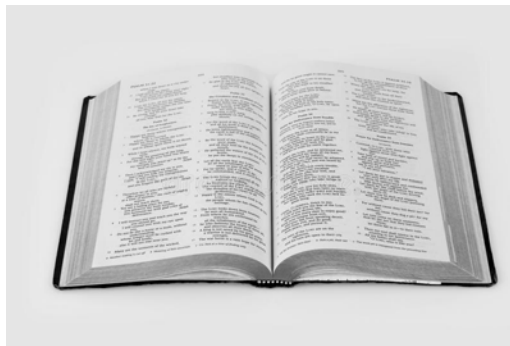
There is a second meaning to the symbolism of the lit candle: it is a focus of safety and of belonging, around which we may gather and share our thoughts, like a campfire in the dark woods.

This interpretation reveals an aspect of the practice of what I call Contemplative Christianity: it occurs either in pensive, meditative isolation, or within a small group, say at most thirty to forty people. Individuals in the group may choose to enter into dialogue within the group, or may just

sit and, well, contemplate what is being said, without any feeling that they are obliged to enter the dialogue themselves.

Clearly, then, I am not a Pentecostal. My experiences with Pentecostals and Pentecostal worship is that there is a disproportionate emphasis put on God the Holy Spirit to the point that I find there is more theatre than salvation. This view reflects my personal preference for private personal contemplation, and consequent interaction with God in any of his tripartite forms as a private and personal experience. I repeat that I am not denigrating the Pentecostal form of spiritual experience; it is simply not for me.

In many places of worship, there will be an open Bible. The Bible, open in full view, symbolizes that the Word of God is there for *anyone* to access.



Faith, Hope and Charity are called the Three Beatific Virtues, as they are considered blessings bestowed by God. Faith, Hope and Charity, since the early Christian era, have been symbolically represented by a cross, an anchor and a heart, respectively. Also, the three symbols are often combined into one composite symbol.



Many of you will be familiar with the ΙΧΘΥΣ symbol. The word “ ΙΧΘΥΣ ”, iota – chi – theta – upsilon – sigma, is a Greek word meaning “a fish”. The English transliteration is “ichthys”, i – c – h – t – h – y – s.



The symbol is very simple: two arcs, one convex and the other concave, sharing the same starting point on the left and crossing each other at the right, to produce a stylized form of a fish.

This symbol predates Christianity, but was adopted by early Christians as a simple means of identifying themselves to each other, particularly in situations in which Christianity was still treated with general hostility. The Greek word “ἰχθύς” is an acrostic for the Greek phrase which translates as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour”. This is its symbolic interpretation in Christian spiritual life.

Symbolical rituals are also important in a contemplative spirituality. These might be conducted privately or in commune with others; they may be established rituals in the broader Christian Church, or they may be specifically designed to suit the participant(s).

The Eucharist (Holy Communion) is an obvious example of an established ritual, in this case symbolical of the Last Supper of Jesus and his Disciples. The Contemplative Christian purposefully reflects on the symbolism when they take part in this symbolical ritual. Many congregants participate in the ceremony simply because it is what one does as part of going to Church, without any thought as to why they are doing it. For a Contemplative Christian, the reflection on the symbolism is essential.

Allegories are symbolical narratives in which a story is used to convey a lesson, to make a point, to explain a concept. Another word for “allegory” is “parable”, and Jesus – God the Son – famously used parables as the primary medium for his teaching.

Allegories can be very powerful. Take, for example, the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). The word “talent” meant a form of monetary currency at the time of the Parable’s telling, but this word now is our word “talent” meaning a special, natural ability or aptitude. The modern meaning is drawn directly from the lesson of the Parable!

Another important component of my spiritual life, and of what I term Contemplative Christianity, is the scholarly investigation and debate of scripture, followed by personal reflection, and ultimately synthesis into my outlook and actions.

I am not a Bible literalist. Rather, I argue that the Bible was written by people in languages which changed over time, and was then translated into other languages which have changed over time. Even the books that comprise the canonical Bible were selected by people and differ even today between different branches of Christianity. Thus, the Scriptures, and allied writings, must be studied. This study cannot simply be a literal study of the words written, but inevitably must include the historical and cultural context in which the words were written.

A method that I often use to help me to tease out the meaning intended by the author is to look at many translations of the Bible side-by-side.

As an example, consider one of the best-known verses in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:13.

¹³ νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα: μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.

(Latin alphabet transliteration:

¹³ nynì dè ménei pístis, elpís, agápē, tà tría taũta: meízōn dè toútōn hē agápē.)

New International Version

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition

¹³ And now there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity.

Revised Standard Version

¹³ So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

King James Version

¹³ And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Good News Translation

¹³ Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.

Wycliffe Bible

¹³ And now dwelleth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the most of these is charity.

It is the *greatest* of these three beatific virtues, ἀγάπη (agápē), that is causing us problems here! Oh dear!

In pre-Christian times, ἀγάπη (agápē) was principally used for the unconditional love of a parent for a child and the unconditional love between spouses. This form of love had no sexual component, which is considered separately by the concept of ἔρως (érōs). Thus, ἀγάπη (agápē) could be considered the highest or purest form of love.

The early Christian Church extended the principle of ἀγάπη (agápē) by defining it to mean the unconditional love of God (the parent) for mankind (the children), and therefore the unconditional love that mankind should have for God and for his fellow man. In this form, it is often referred to as “Christian love”.

The original meaning of the English word “charity” was precisely this concept of ἀγάπη (agápē). Thus, the earlier versions of the Bible that I quoted above used the word “charity” for that third beatific virtue. However, these days the word “charity” is used in a much narrower sense.

“Agape” itself in fact has been absorbed as an English word, having precisely the same meaning. However, no-one but bookish nerds are aware of this word.

The word “love” is the best fit these days, hence its use in the more modern translations, but even that is unsatisfactory. The word “love” is used far too loosely in popular language to really do the job. “I love ice-cream.”; “I love my cat.”; “I love going to the movies”; “I love Aunt Betty”; “I love my parents”; “I love my husband”; “I love God.”

We are left with the dilemma that the only way of discerning what Paul really meant in 1 Corinthians 13:13 is to *study* the origins of the text. A passive congregant on a Sunday morning may hear the NIV rendering of 1 Corinthians 13:13 given as a New Testament reading, but what of its true import would they learn?

I conduct my study and contemplation of the Scriptures and other works through the prism of what I regard as the touchstone of my faith,

John 13:34

³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ ...” (*John 13:34, New International Version*)

³⁴ ἐντολὴν καινὴν δίδωμι ὑμῖν, ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους; καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους.

(I note in passing that the original text of this passage uses the word ἀγάπη (agápē) for “love”.)

There are instances where I believe that I fully discern what is being said, but I simply disagree with the author, even in cases of the Scriptures themselves. A Contemplative Christian should not be afraid to disagree with what is said in the Bible, but be prepared to debate their position

and possibly be convinced to change their mind. 1 Corinthians 6:9 springs to mind as an example!

I make the following observations that are a corollary of my form of Contemplative Christianity.

I do not participate in or support active proselytization. I believe that one's actions will be observed by those one encounters, and that this is the only honest manifestation of one's beliefs. I am always happy to discuss and to debate my principles with anyone who wishes.

I am not an Evangelical. Although labels such as "Evangelical" need themselves to be treated with care, as they can mean different things to different people, the facts that I am not a Bible literalist and that I do not believe in active proselytization would in most Evangelical's view rule me out.

I am not a Millennialist. Although I place a high regard on the writings of John the Apostle (and I subscribe to the view that all the New Testament Johannine books may be attributed to John the Apostle), I do not place much importance on The Book of Revelation. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that I would not have included this book in the canon. In my view, some churches and individuals are so obsessed with the "end times" as to forget to live in the present according to God's precepts. At best, I regard the Book of Revelation as an allegory of the battle between good and evil.

I dispute the Vengeful God of the Old Testament. I regard almost all of the Old Testament as merely a contextual back-story to the times in which Jesus lived and preached. The Old Testament is littered with stories of genocides that met with God's approval. Such a God is completely inconsistent with the Christian message. While knowledge of the Old Testament is important contextually in the academic study of the New Testament, I would have excluded nearly all of the Old Testament from the Christian canon, just as the books of the Apocrypha "never quite made the cut". Even the Synoptic Gospels I see as being as much propaganda for a purely First Century Romano-Jewish world as for the Good News of Jesus. The Gospel of John the Apostle, being written much later than the Synoptic Gospels but by an eye-witness of the ministry of Jesus, is able to be a Gospel purely for the new Christian religion.

As I said earlier, a Contemplative Christian should not be afraid to disagree with what is said in the Bible, but be prepared to debate their position and possibly be convinced to change their mind.

I may be a quiet contemplative in respect of my spirituality, but that does not stop this Contemplative Christian from being a controversial iconoclast!