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Meditation and Contemplation in High to Late Medieval Europe

In the Western European history of meditation and contemplation the period from the 12th to the 15th century differs significantly from the times both before and after. Earlier forms undergo important changes and the foundations are laid for spiritual practices of which several dominated until the 20th century. Four trends are of special importance:

- The development of elaborate philosophical and theological theories which treat meditation and contemplation systematically.
- The democratization of meditation and contemplation.
- The emergence of new methods, especially imaginative forms of meditation.
- The differentiation between meditation and contemplation and their establishment as methods in their own right accompanied by discussions about their relation and the transition from one to the other.

The following article will treat these trends and other related developments concentrating on Richard of St. Victor, the *Scala Claustralium* of Guigo II and the *Clowde of Unknowyng*.

A. RICHARD OF ST. VICTOR'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Regular Canons of St. Victor, an abbey outside the city walls of Paris, ran one of the most famous schools for higher education in the 12th century. They developed a new form of philosophy and theology, unifying the monastic mystical tradition and spiritual practice with a spirit of critical reflection and systematical thinking typical of the rising scholasticism. In a practical and theoretical sense the Victorines connected science with a specific form of life.¹

¹ Cf. S. Jaeger, Humanism and ethics at the School of St. Victor in the early twelfth Century, in: *Mediaeval Studies* 55 (1993) 51-79.

Richard of St. Victor (?-1173) “must be counted as the most significant of the Victorine mystics, both for the profundity of his thought and his subsequent influence on the later Western tradition.”² He affected Thomas Gallus and Bonaventura, the English mystics Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and the anonymous author of the *Cloud*-texts, as well as German and Flemish mysticism. It is probable that his influence extended (indirectly) as far as the Spanish Carmelites of the 15th century, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.³ Richard wrote two works concerning meditation and contemplation which are of special importance. *Benjamin minor*, also called *The twelve Patriarchs*, interprets Jacob, his wives, concubines and twelve sons as stages of preparation for the state of ecstasy which is symbolized in Benjamin, the last of the patriarchs. Emphasis is given to self-knowledge and the development of certain virtues.⁴ *Benjamin major* or *De gratia contemplationis*, also known as *The Mystical Ark*, is a comprehensive manual on contemplation.⁵

In *Benjamin major* I, 3-4 Richard develops a hierarchical system of different modes of cognition and correlates it to four basic cognitive faculties which he took from Boethius: *sensus*, *imaginatio*, *ratio* and

² McGinn 2004: 398.

³ See S. Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion. The Victorine Tradition*, Maryknoll 2003, 141.

⁴ The symbolical meaning of Benjamin is based on the latin version of Psalm 68:27: *Ibi Benjamin adulescentulus in mentis excessu* (“There is Benjamin the youngest, in ecstasy of mind.”) On Richard’s concept of self-knowledge see H. Nakamura, “Cognitio sui“ bei Richard von Sankt Viktor, in: R. Berndt and others (ed.), „Scientia“ et „Disciplina“. *Wissenstheorie und Wissenschaftspraxis im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2002, 127-156.

⁵ The latin texts of most of Richard’s works are found in: *Richardi a Sancto Victore Opera Omnia*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, Paris 1855 (*Patrologia Latina* 196). I quote the latin text of *Benjamin maior* from the edition by Aris. Translation of main works into English: Richard of St. Victor, *The twelve patriarchs. The mystical arc. Book three of the Trinity*. Transl. and introd. by G. A. Zinn, Mahwah 1979. For interpretations of his theory of meditation and contemplation see J. Ebner, *Die Erkenntnislehre Richards von St. Viktor, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters. Texte und Untersuchungen*. Bd. XIX, Heft 4, Münster i. W. 1919; Ruh 1990: 397-406; S. Chase, *Angelic Wisdom. The Cherubim and the Grace of Contemplation in Richard of St. Victor, Notre Dame*, London 1995; Aris 1996; Spijker 2004: 127-184; McGinn 2004: 395-418.

intelligentia (sense-perception, imagination, discriminative rationality, intuitive insight).⁶

The lowest mode of awareness is termed *cogitatio* which is dominated by the first two of the Boethian faculties of the mind. It is “the careless looking around of the mind tending to deviate.”⁷ This kind of thinking is essentially driven by curiosity and other passions. It is a restless movement, lost in the multiplicity of things and does not lead to any valid results. “The senses [with the help of imagination, KB] offer images to reason (*ratio*) where they become the objects of all kind of thoughts. These wander around purposelessly. When the mind comes upon one of these free-floating thoughts and wants to know more about it, it has to concentrate and cogitation turns into meditation.”⁸

Meditation is a much more focused way of thinking. It emerges when *cogitatio* starts to become seriously interested in something which it has uncovered. *Meditatio* and the following ways of cognition are subsequent steps on a progressive path towards truth.⁹ Richard defines it as “the eager exertion of the mind which affectionately tries to investigate something.”¹⁰ The dominant mental faculty is *ratio*, discursive thinking, which investigates the cause (*causa*), mode (*modus*), effect (*effectus*), purpose (*utilitas*) and inner structure (*ratio*) of its objects. Meditation finally merges into contemplation, the fulfilled act of insight that meditation is in search of:

“If the mind after a long time of searching finally finds the truth, then it usually happens that it receives the new insight with appetite, gazes at it

⁶ See Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolatio*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, Turnhout 1957 (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 94) V, 27-30.

⁷ Benjamin maior I, 4 (Aris, 9, 31-32): *Cogitatio autem est improvidus animi respectus ad evagationem pronus*. If not mentioned otherwise the translations of the latin texts are mine.

⁸ Spijker 2004: 145.

⁹ See Benjamin maior V, 12 (Aris, 137, 19-21): *Ecce quibus promotionum gradibus sublevatur animus humanus. Meditatione profecto assurgitur in contemplationem, contemplatione in admirationem, admiratione in mentis alienationem*. (“Look, through which stages of advancement the human mind is elevated. Through perfect meditation it is raised into contemplation, through contemplation into admiration/astonishment, through admiration/astonishment into the alienation of the mind.”)

¹⁰ Benjamin maior I, 4 (Aris, 9, 28-30): *Meditatio vero est studiosa mentis intentio circa aliquid investigandum diligenter insistens* [...].

with wonder and jubilation and stays in this amazement for a longer time. This means to exceed meditation within meditation and to proceed from meditation to contemplation. Because the characteristic of contemplation is to dedicate itself to that which it sees full of joy and with astonishment/admiration.”¹¹

Contemplation is a free gaze of the mind into the visible manifestations of (divine) wisdom accompanied by astonishment/admiration, a gaze which – as already Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) said, whom Richard quotes in this respect – is poured out everywhere over the things to be known.¹² Whereas *cogitatio* is like crawling on the floor and *meditatio* like walking and sometimes running, *contemplatio* is comparable to a free flight (*liber volatus*) and a view from above, which sees the whole landscape at once whereas the meditating person has to wander on the surface of the earth from one point to the other discriminating and collecting the different parts and dimensions of the meditated object.

The disclosure of truth in contemplation is intrinsically connected with the mood of astonishment/admiration (the meaning of the Latin “*admiratio*“ as Richard uses it is somehow located between “astonishment“ and “admiration“). That is because what is revealed to the contemplative mind expands the established horizon of understanding (it is *supra aestimationem* as Richard says) and opens the human cognition in an unexpected way (*praeter spem*) towards an insight which exceeds its former capacity of understanding.¹³ We feel astonishment/admiration, whenever we realize a new perspective or discover something new (*novitas visionis et rei*), which changes our way of look-

¹¹ Benjamin maior I, 4 (Aris, 10,13-17): Nam veritatem quidem diu quaesitam tandemque inventam mens solet cum aviditate suscipere, mirari cum consultatione, eiusque admirationi diutius inhaerere. Et hoc est iam meditationem meditando excedere et meditationem in contemplationem transire. Proprium itaque est contemplationi iucunditatis suae spectaculo cum admiratione inhaerere.

¹² Benjamin maior I, 4 (Aris, 9,25-28): Contemplatio est libera mentis perspicacia in sapientiae spectacula cum admiratione suspensa vel certe sicut praecipuo illi nostri temporis theologo placuit, qui eam in haec verba definivit: Contemplatio est perspicax et liber animi contuitus in res perspicendas usquequaque diffusus.

¹³ Cf. Benjamin maior V, 9 (Aris, 133,15-134,18).

ing at things. In contemplation the leading faculty of the mind is *pura intelligentia*, pure intuitive insight into sublime and divine things.¹⁴

Contemplation is followed by the highest level of cognition, *excessus* or *alienatio mentis*, which is treated primarily in the fifth book of *Benjamin Major*.¹⁵ “The alienation of the mind happens when the mind loses the remembrance of things present and, transformed by divine action, acquires a state of the soul, that is alien and inaccessible to human effort.”¹⁶ The soul is then outside itself in that sense, that it is transcending its natural capabilities and for a while loses the perception of the world around it and even of itself. Richard uses a poetic metaphor for this process: As the light of dawn vanishes when the morning sun appears, so the light of human insight is flooded with divine light and sees things beyond the limits of mere human comprehension. This state of mind is mainly brought about by a deep love of the Divine. Richard distinguishes between different levels of ecstasy: a state in which only the activity of the corporeal senses is suspended, one in which imagination has come to a standstill and a final absorption in which even *intelligentia* is no longer active. All forms of ecstasy are accompanied by exaltation and intense joy. After the *excessus mentis* the mind returns once again to itself and can then recollect and meditate or contemplate the gifts which have been bestowed upon it.

Richard bases his theory of meditation and contemplation on general epistemological and ontological considerations, and thereby does not restrict it to certain Christian presuppositions and spiritual disciplines. But of course it is related to practices which formed a part of his daily life as a monk for whom the bible was the ultimate source of

¹⁴ Benjamin maior I, 3 (Aris, 9,19-20): Specialiter tamen et proprie contemplatio dicitur, quae de sublimibus habetur, ubi animus pura intelligentia utitur.

¹⁵ Evagrius Pontikos and Dionysios Areopagita discriminate in an analogous manner between *theoria* and *ékstasis*. See W. Völker, *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita*, Wiesbaden 1958; Ruh 1990: 57-63 and Aris 1996: 53-54. For an extensive treatment of ecstasy in medieval piety and theology see B. Weiß, *Ekstase und Liebe. Die Unio mystica bei den deutschen Mystikerinnen des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts*, Schöningh: Paderborn 2000; specifically for the 12th century see R. Javelet, *Extase chez les spirituels du XII^e siècle*, in: *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* 4, 2109-2120.

¹⁶ Benjamin maior V, 2 (Aris, 124, 324-27): *Mentis alienatio est quando praesentium memoria menti excidit et in peregrinum quendam et humanae industriae invium animi statum divinae operationis transfiguratione transit.*

wisdom and salvation. Albeit strong systematical intentions he articulates his thoughts on spirituality and contemplation often in the form of biblical exegesis. Moreover, his interpretation of the Holy Scriptures is in itself meant as a process which aims at spiritual transformation. Richard's exegetical works are a written articulation and model of this process and are intended to lead the reader towards contemplation.

"Richard presents the biblical text as a starting point from which the reader, participating in the reconstruction of the text, will compose his thinking (*cogitationes*) and his feeling (*affectiones*) by mimetically following the text. In this way, Richard describes and guides the inner process. Sometimes he will emphasize the way to contemplation; at other times, the subject of contemplation."¹⁷

This way of writing has its roots in the monastic practice of reading the Bible, *lectio divina*. Indeed, the trias of *lectio*, *meditatio* and *contemplatio* appears regularly in the writings of the Victorines.¹⁸ Perhaps more than anything else, meditation and contemplation were integral parts of their interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. It was the Carthusian Guigo II (?-1188 or 1192/93), who, influenced by the Victorines, elaborated what was probably the most influential medieval theory of *lectio divina* leading from simple reading to the ecstatic union with God.

B. GUIGO II: MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION AS PART OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Guigo's *Scala Claustralium* (ladder for monastics), also known as *Scala paradisi* (the ladder to paradise) and *Epistola de vita contemplativa* (letter on the contemplative life) contains one of the most concise analysis of *spirituale exercitium* (spiritual exercise) written in the High Medieval Ages.¹⁹ The abbot of La Chartreuse unfolds an elaborate understanding

¹⁷ Spijker 2004: 130.

¹⁸ See e. g. Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* III, 10; V, 9.

¹⁹ For a critical edition of the text see Guigo II. Introductions and interpretations: The introduction to the above mentioned volume *Sources Chrétiennes* 163, 7-79; Tugwell 1984: 93-124; Ruh 1990: 220-225. McGinn 2004: 357-359; Dariuz Dolatowski, *Die Methode des inneren Gebetes im Werk "Scala Claustralium sive tractatus de modo orandi" des Guigo II. des Karthäusers*, in: J. Hogg (ed.), *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians*, vol. 2 (AC 55/2), Salzburg 1995, 144-167.

of meditation and contemplation which integrates the two as well as prayer into the reading and interpretation of the Bible. *Lectio divina* was the fundamental individual monastic practice of Benedictine monasticism which usually took two to three hours a day. In the course of the early medieval period it had become more or less identical with the memorizing of biblical texts for liturgical purposes. It was only in the 11th century that the tradition of the Desert Fathers was revived and the new order of the Carthusians who took part in this reform movement united the lifestyle of the hermit with monastic community life. This led to an interiorization of religious reading which is reflected in Guigo's text.²⁰ Influenced by the early scholastic culture he approaches his topic in a systematical way, trying to clearly define the various stages of the hermeneutical process which leads to a mystical understanding of the Holy Scriptures:

“Reading is a busy looking into the scriptures with an attentive mind. Meditation is a studious activity of the mind, which searches for some hidden truth under the guidance of one's own reason. Prayer is a devout turning of the heart to God to get evils removed or to obtain good things. Contemplation is a certain elevation of the mind above itself, being suspended in God, tasting the joy of eternal sweetness.”²¹

The whole exercise can be described in more detail as follows (I use the masculine form because the text was addressed primarily to monks):

²⁰ The shift towards personal experience is part of broader changes in spirituality, away from the liturgical, ritual devotions of the earlier Middle Ages. These changes continue during the 12th century. See G. Constable: *The Reformation of the 12th Century*, Cambridge 1996. C. W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1984, 16-17 sums up the developments which also affected the spirituality of the Victorines: “The fundamental religious drama is now located within the self, and it is less a battle than a journey – a journey towards God. Hagiography [...] focuses increasingly on inner virtues and experiences (often accompanied by external phenomena as trances, levitation, and stigmata) rather than grand actions on the stage of history.”

²¹ Guigo II, 84,32-38: *Est autem lectio sedula scripturarum cum animi intentione inspectio. Meditatio est studiosa mentis actio, occultae veritatis notitiam ductu propriae rationis investigans. Oratio est devota cordis in Deum intentio pro malis removendis vel bonis adipiscendis. Contemplatio est mentis in Deum suspensae quaedam supra se elevatio, aeternae dulcedinis gaudia degustans.*

- *lectio*: The monk reads the Bible in his cell – usually murmuring the texts with a low voice – and follows the literal sense of the text as attentively as possible.
- *meditatio*: If he comes across a passage or a single sentence which touches his heart and awakens his special interest, he starts to repeat it again and again (a practice which traditionally is called *ruminatio*, the rumination of the text). He illumines it with the help of rational thinking (*ratio*) by connecting the passage in a free, associative manner with other texts of the Bible which come into his mind, because they contain the same or similar keywords as the text which he is actually reading. The focus of *meditatio* is the moral sense (*sensus moralis*) of the Bible. It aims at insights as to what is of real importance in life according to the Word of God, how one should act in order to achieve this, what evils in one's own soul would be obstacles to attain it and how to overcome them. The example Guigo is giving for this process shows that he defines *meditatio* according to the somewhat rationalized Victorine understanding and like it at the same time still clings to the traditional monastic way of dealing with the Bible. This line of thought is not so much shaped according to Aristotelian syllogisms or philological accuracy as in later academic theology. Using the scripture in a very free way the meditating monk wove a web of allusions and quotations which were meant to create an emotional impact and deepen it. In this respect Guigo's art of meditation is very similar to the rhetoric of medieval monastic sermons and the style of exegetical works of his time. The basis for this kind of thinking was the mnemonic culture of the monasteries.²²
- *oratio*: The next step is to ask God for everything that is required for the necessary change of one's life and for opening the soul to His presence. The Christian tradition has always seen a close connection between meditation/contemplation and prayer. If we take the widest sense of the word and understand prayer like John of Damascus as every kind

²² M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought. Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, Cambridge 1998, 115: "Though the goal of spiritual life is the unmediated vision of God, divine theoria, one can only get there by travelling through one's memory. A person's entire memory is a composition among whose places, routes, and pathways one must move whenever one thinks about anything. This is why the most powerful, the most fruitful engine of the mind in meditation was considered to be that *pia memoria* of which Hugo of Rouen spoke."

of “elevation of the mind towards God” then of course meditation and contemplation are just different forms of prayer.²³ Guigo uses the term in the popular restricted sense of petitionary prayer and describes it as the spontaneous result of meditation on the moral sense of the Bible. The view that meditation leads to petitionary prayer was a common feature in High Medieval spirituality, founded on the belief that a substantial change of one’s way of life would only be possible with the help of the Divine. Hugh of St. Victor recognizes the same transition and St. Bernard explains it in a very similar way to Guigo: “Meditation teaches us what is lacking, prayer obtains it for us [...] By meditation we recognize the dangers which beset us and by prayer, at the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, we escape them.”²⁴

• *contemplatio*: God “does not wait until it [the soul, KB] has finished speaking, but interrupts the flow of its prayer in mid-course and hastens to present himself and come to meet the yearning soul, bathed with the dew of heavenly sweetness.”²⁵ The deepest level of understanding of biblical texts is gained when one experiences their mystical sense (*anagogia, sensus mysticus*). This can only be fully realized in contemplation as a direct encounter with God. Guigo does not discriminate between *contemplatio* and *excessus mentis* as Richard did. For him contemplation is the immediate ecstatic encounter with the Divine. He describes the experience of God’s loving presence as sweetness (*dulcedo*), a very popular expression in medieval monastic literature.²⁶ The most important biblical reference is psalm 33: 9: *Gustate et videte quam suavis est Dominus!*: “Taste and see how sweet the Lord is!” In our text *dulcedo* is an ecstatic bliss compared by Guigo with sexual ecstasy, a common thought, since medieval exegesis interpreted the erotic poetry

²³ John of Damascus: *De fide orthodoxa* III 24 [PG 94,1089]: *elevatio mentis ad Deum*.

²⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on the Feast of St. Andrew* 10 cited according to Tugwell 1984, 115.

²⁵ Guigo II, 96,159-164: *Dominus autem [...] non expectat donec sermonem finierit, sed medium orationis cursum interrumpens, festinus se ingerit et animae desideranti festinus occurrit coelestis rore dulcedinis perfusus [...]*. I quote the English translation of Tugwell 1984, 96.

²⁶ See F. Ohly, *Geistige Süße bei Otfried*, in: Friedrich Ohly, *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt 1977, 93-127; R. Fulton: „Taste and see that the Lord is sweet“ (Ps. 33: 9): *The Flavour of God in the Monastic West*, in: *The Journal of Religion* 86 (2006) 169-204.

of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the mystical union between God and the soul.²⁷

According to our abbot and many other medieval authors the encounter with God takes place in the *acies mentis*, the peak of the mind. This word and its many synonyms like *apex mentis*, *synderesis*, *radix animae* and *abditum mentis* signify the very core of the human person which was considered to be the 'place' of the mystic union with God. The unity of the human soul, its undivided, centered being, was thought of as transcending the manifold cognitive, emotional and volitive faculties and their respective activities. One of the basic differences between meditation and contemplation is that in meditation the different faculties of the soul are working, whilst in contemplation their activities are calmed down and the ineffable center of the soul awakens.²⁸ In the eyes of Guigo, whose Chartusian way of life was directed towards silence, solitude and prayer, the experience of tasting the sweetness of the Lord is not something very extraordinary. God answers to the longing of the soul with His self-communication even before its petition has come to an end. Contemplation thus appears to be a not unusual culmination of the *lectio divina*.

After distinguishing between the four stages of spiritual exercise Guigo shows how they depend on each other. Reading without meditation remains without fruit, while meditation without the guidance of reading can lead to errors. Prayer without meditation is lukewarm. Meditation not followed by prayer has no effect, while prayer leads to contemplation. The attainment of contemplation without prayer happens only rarely.²⁹

This very coherent system of spiritual exercise remains influential until the present day where the protagonists of a revival of *lectio divina* relate to it.³⁰ But through developments that began in the time

²⁷ See D. Turner, *Eros and Allegory. Medieval Exegesis and the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo 1995.

²⁸ For the history of the concept which can be traced back to stoic and neoplatonic philosophy see E. von Ivánka, *Plato christianus. Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter, Einsiedeln* 1990, 315-351.

²⁹ See Guigo II, 112, 349-354.

³⁰ See e.g. M. Casey, *Sacred Reading. The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, Ligouri 1995, 58-63; E. Friedmann: *Die Bibel beten*, Münsterschwarzach 1995, 18-23; J. Johnston: *Savoring God's Word. Cultivating the Soul-Transforming Practice of Scripture Meditation*, Colorado Springs 2004, 87-91.

when the *Scala Claustralium* was written, the different steps that Guigo had unified into a single practice either lost their importance, changed or differentiated themselves into separate disciplines.

C. SURVEY OF THE NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL AGES

1. *The decline of lectio as spiritual practice*

Which changes with respect to meditation and contemplation did Christian Spirituality undergo in the two centuries after Guigo? Firstly, the link between the reading of the Bible and meditation lost its importance. "One of the reasons for the relative downfall of the old tradition of reading as the essential discipline of the spiritual life was the combination of more rigorous canons of exegesis with a more frankly speculative notion of *meditatio*."³¹ Also the rise of imaginative techniques (which will be treated below) had the effect that the Bible was often replaced by manuals for meditation like the *Vita Christi* which transformed the biblical narratives into a sequence of scenes more suitable for visualization and surrounded by commentaries which were easier to digest than the original text. Whereas the quantity of devotional literature was exploding, only few Christians had access to the Bible, at least to the whole text. As many heretical sects based their criticism of the Church on a careful study of the Holy Scripture, the Church officials were not very enthusiastic about translations and the spreading of too much Bible-knowledge.

2. *Democratization of Monastic Practices*

It is characteristic of the Late Medieval Ages, that meditation and contemplation ceased to be a monastic privilege and became more and more popular. This development is linked to social changes which did not happen in the solitude of La Chartreuse but in the flourishing towns of that time. Increasing participation and creativity of lay people were important factors in almost every dimension of the late medieval urban culture. One side of this development was the growing wish to play an active part in religious life. We also find a steady expansion of lay liter-

³¹ Tugwell 1984: 107.

acy in urban society especially among the mercantile and artisan classes. The techniques of bookmaking had been developed enough to let a market of religious books emerge. Spiritual Handbooks (called *speculum* or *rosetum*) became widespread. They usually contained compilations of monastic mystical theology, simplified schemes of the ascent to God, prayers, descriptions of visions and edifying stories about saints and miracles.³² These books were not written in the language of the Latinate elite but in the vernaculars and contributed to the transfer of Latin theology and monastic spiritual literature into the common language of the people.

The rising religious interest of the lay people was moreover strengthened by the resolutions of the 4th Lateran-Council (1215) which prescribed annual confessions as a duty and formulated the program of religious education for everybody. Within this context the scheme of penance-meditation was of increasing importance and became probably the most influential and popular form of meditation. It usually starts with a reflection on the calamity and corruption of man and the confession of one's own sins (*miseria nostra*), while the second part deals with the compassion of God especially as revealed in the life of Christ (*miser cordia Dei*). The meditation ends in praise of God.³³ This way of meditating was a kind of internalization of popular methods of catechesis, preaching and education. It helped to stabilize the reign of the religious system and therefore it is not astonishing that its practice received official encouragement.

An extra-liturgical, individualized piety flourished "which, though often originating in religious communities, quickly found favour with the laity."³⁴ The patterns of the new spirituality were often related to more or less traditional monastic forms, which have been adopted for the needs of the urban citizens. Typical for the dispersion of monastic spirituality in the world outside the monasteries is the title given to the

³² See Steinmetz 2005: 82 and M. G. Sargent, *Minor Devotional Writing*, in: A. S. G. Edwards: *Middle English Prose. A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, New Jersey 1984, 147-175.

³³ Penance-meditation was originally a monastic practice. The most influential literary paradigms for its secularized use are John of Fécamp, *Meditationes sancti Augustini* and Anselm of Canterbury, *Meditationes et Orationes*, both 11th. century.

³⁴ Duffy 2005: 233.

Middle English version of Guigos *Scala Claustralium*: “Ladder of cloysters and of othere Goddis lovers“.³⁵

The secularized forms found their way back into the monasteries and hermitages and influenced the practice of monks and nuns. The new mendicant orders which consciously chose the urban societies as their field of activity led a much more ‘worldly’ life than the traditional communities which lived in the countryside and followed the Benedictine rules. Therefore they also had to face the need to develop new ways of religious practice. Of course the clergy was also affected by the spread of monastic forms of spirituality in the Christian cities. So, from Late Medieval Times onwards meditative and contemplative practices became increasingly popular among all strata of the literate European Christian society.

3. *The New Mysticism*

One side of this popularization was the emergence of what Bernard McGinn has called “New Mysticism.” He characterizes this movement as follows: “In Western Christianity, mysticism remained closely bound to monasticism until the thirteenth century, when reforms in religious life, especially the Beguines and the Mendicants, marked an important change. Older forms of mysticism, based on the withdrawal from the world and programs of moral discipline and contemplative prayer, did not die out, but they were challenged by new lifestyles encouraging types of mysticism that were more democratic, in the sense of being open to all (and therefore also communicated in the vernacular), as well as ‘secular’ in not demanding flight from the world.”³⁶

Part of the New Mysticism was a revival of Denys the Areopagite. Thomas Gallus (the last important theologian from the school of St. Victor) and others reinterpreted his apophatic theology in the light

³⁵ Guigo II, A ladder of foure Ronges by which man mowe wele clyme to heven: Deonise Hid Divinite, ed. P. Hodgson, London 1955 (Early English Text Society 231), 100/6-7. See Steinmetz 2005: 139.

³⁶ B. McGinn, Mysticism, in: Hans J. Hillebrand (ed.): The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation, Vol 3, New York/Oxford 1996, 119-124: 119.

of a dichotomy between *intellectus* and *affectus*, intellect and love.³⁷ God is incomprehensible through the intellect, they said, but love transcends rational thinking. It alone is able to touch the divine mystery and to unite with it. The *apex* or *acies mentis* is now qualified as *apex affectionis*, the centre of a pure selfless love of God (*amor castus*) which does not want anything from Him, transcends all bounds of knowledge and meets God in mystical darkness. In order to cultivate this approach to the Divine New Mysticism emphasized special forms of practice, which supported imageless devotion and the calming of thought-activities. The term “contemplation” was increasingly used not only to describe a state of mind but also to denote these methods. Meditation and Contemplation which used to be different stages of one continuous process now became autonomous spiritual practices.³⁸ Whereas meditation, as shown above, found its place within the framework of the official religious system, the popularization of techniques of contemplation regularly caused tensions with the authorities of the Church, which finally led to the marginalization and even condemnation of this form of religious life.

4. *The Rise of Imaginative Techniques*

In the Late Medieval Ages meditation is understood as a practice not so much based on associative and argumentative thinking like in the 12th century but on imagination. It no longer starts from reading the Bible but rather from the imagination of biblical scenes which have been removed from their original context and retold in special manuals for their usage within imaginative meditation techniques. Anselm of Canterbury's *Meditationes*, Bernhard of Clairvaux and especially Aelred of Rievaulx's method of meditation (which was originally meant as a part

³⁷ For the differences between this view and Denys' mystical theology see D. Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge 1995, 186-194.

³⁸ It is oversimplified to think that an exaggeration of analytical thinking was responsible for the destruction of what is idealized as the innocent unity of medieval prayer. For this view see T. Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life*, New York 2004, 21: “Unfortunately this passion for analysis in theology was later to be transferred to the practice of prayer and bring to an end the simple, spontaneous prayer of the Middle Ages based on *lectio divina* with its opening to contemplation.”

of eremitical piety) had created the basis for this form of meditation. Now the imagination of the Life of Christ and especially the passion became the central devotional activity.

One should imagine oneself directly taking part in the mysteries of the life of the saviour. As Aelred of Rievaulx says: “*Sta nunc quasi in medio*“, “Place yourself quasi in the middle [of the imagined situation].“³⁹ The imaginations were not limited to visual phantasies, therefore I hesitate to call them visualizations. The meditator did not look at inner images but participated in a dramatic event in which all senses were involved. This included the performance of certain postures and movements, talking with the imagined persons, touching them, smelling the odors of heaven and hell and sometimes even swallowing drops of Jesus’ sweat and blood.

The paradigms for the most popular forms of imaginative meditation are to be found in the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (≈ 1300, wrongly attributed to Bonaventura) and in Ludolf of Saxony’s *Vita Christi* (after 1348) one of the most widespread spiritual books of the Late Medieval Age. A passage from Ludolf’s book shows that the follower of imaginative meditation considered this approach as superior compared to the hearing and reading of the Bible and imageless devotion:

“Oh good Jesus, how sweet you are in the heart of one who thinks upon you and loves you [...] I know not for sure, I am not able fully to understand, how it is that you are sweeter in the heart of one who loves you in the form of flesh than as the word, sweeter in that which is humble than in that which is exalted [...] It is sweeter to view you as dying before the Jews on the tree, than as holding sway over the angels in Heaven; to see you as a man bearing every aspect of human nature to the end, than as God manifesting divine nature, to see you as the dying Redeemer than as the invisible Creator.”⁴⁰

Famon Duffy comments on this: “The enormous imaginative power of this form of meditation, and its spread into the world of the

³⁹ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum* in: C. H. Talbot (ed.): *Aelredi Rievallensis Opera Omnia* (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 1), Brepols 1971: 639-682: 679 (§ 33).

⁴⁰ Quoted according C. A. Conway, *The Vita Christi of Ludolph of Saxony and late medieval devotion centred on the incarnation. A descriptive analysis* (*Analecta Cartusiana* 34) Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur: Salzburg 1976, 56.

[...] laity, is evident from the accounts Margery Kempe has left of her visionary experiences, which seem in places to be little more than literal-minded paraphrases of the relevant sections of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* or of Richard Rolle's almost equally influential *Meditations on the Passion*, works read to her by the spiritual directors she found in such abundance in fifteenth century East Anglia."⁴¹

Visual media were used to support and sometimes also to replace the imaginative methods of meditation. In the daily life practice of lay people as well as in the monasteries, visualization was often replaced by contemplating pious paintings, drawings and woodcuts, which were created especially for this purpose. Images should serve as simulacra of visionary experience.⁴²

The Books of Hours (*Horae*) which were from the 14th century onwards among the first mass produced books are good examples for this. They not only contain psalms and other prayers which should be performed at certain times of the day, but also illustrations as visual material for meditation and prayer. Paintings or woodcuts of the Trinity, of the life of the Virgin, of the saints with their emblems, above all scenes depicting the suffering and death of Christ, served in themselves as focuses of the sacred, designed to evoke worship and reverence. They were often conceived as channels of sacred power independent of the texts they accompanied. The fifteenth century had seen the circulation of devotional woodcuts which the faithful were encouraged to meditate on, to kneel before, to kiss.⁴³

The arguments of the theoreticians who tried to substantiate the practice of imaginative meditation are very similar to the arguments rhetoricians traditionally used to underline the importance of imagination for the art of creating impressive speech. It could well be, that generally the late medieval introduction of imagination into meditation is

⁴¹ Duffy 2005: 237.

⁴² See J. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions*, *VIATOR (Medieval and Renaissance Studies)* 20 (1989) 161-182; K. Krüger, *Bildandacht und Bergeinsamkeit. Der Eremit als Rollenspiel in der städtischen Gesellschaft*, in: H. Belting, D. Blume (ed.), *Malerei und Stadtkultur in der Dantezeit: die Argumentation der Bilder*, Hirner: München 1989, 187-200 and K. Kameron, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages. Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500*, New York 2002.

⁴³ Duffy 2005: 214.

only an extension of the rhetorical structure which is so typical for the Western European style of meditation from the Hellenistic schools of philosophy until Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).⁴⁴ It is, for example, obvious from the style of Aelred of Rievaulx's writings that he was very well educated in rhetorics and purposely uses colourful images to create emotional responses within the reader's mind. From here it is only a short step to the new forms of meditation, as in meditation imagination is also used "*ad maiorem impressionem*", to create a greater impression as Ludolf says.⁴⁵ It thus functions as a link between the cognitive and the emotional faculties of the human being. The meditative imagination of biblical scenes (Is this different from "visualization"?) aimed at the emotional involvement in the life of Jesus and Mary.⁴⁶ It should finally lead to *conformatio*, a deep emotional mimesis with the protagonists (not only Jesus and Mary but also the shepherds who adore the new borne Jesus or Simone of Cyrene who helped Jesus to carry the cross etc.) of the holy drama – further supported by practices like real or imagined self-flagellation or standing with widespread arms to imitate the crucifixion etc.⁴⁷

This identification should not only intensify the experience of God's redeeming love as present in the life and death of Jesus Christ. According to rhetoric and the late medieval theory of Christian meditation *affectus mentis* and *effectus operis* correspond with each other: only the arousal of proper emotions is able to affect a certain behavior. In the long run the emotional *conformatio* with the biblical moral examples should build up good habits, cultivate virtues like compassion, humility, obedience etc. This intention of the imaginative techniques is quite close to Guigo's understanding of *meditatio*, but the means to attain it have changed significantly.

As already mentioned, the tie between meditation and contemplation was loosened. The new meditation techniques tended to become

⁴⁴ See P. Rabbow, *Seelenführung. Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike*, München 1954.

⁴⁵ *Vita Christi* 4b, cited according Baier 1977: 484.

⁴⁶ See F. O. Schuppisser, *Schauen mit den Augen des Herzens. Zur Methodik der spätmittelalterlichen Passionsmeditation, besonders in der Devotio Moderna und bei den Augustinern*, in: Walter Haug, Burghart Wachinger, Tübingen 1993, 169-210.

⁴⁷ See P. Dinzelsbacher, *Christliche Mystik im Abendland. Ihre Geschichte von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des Mittelalters*, Paderborn 1994, 333-334.

self-sufficient rituals without any space for contemplative prayer. In Ludolf's *Vita Christi* the basic unit of practice consists of three parts: *lectio*, *meditatio* (sometimes completed by *conformatio*) and *oratio* in the form of a concluding prayer.⁴⁸ He has no distinct concept of contemplation and uses *considerare*, *contemplari*, *meditari* and *attendere* as equivalent expressions.⁴⁹ At the end of some chapters or certain passages Ludolf summarizes the content of the previous meditation and invites the practitioner to become absorbed with it. But even this more contemplative mental process is connected with thoughts, intense emotional movements, exclamations of pain, questions etc.⁵⁰

D. THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPLATION AS AN INDEPENDENT EXERCISE IN THE CLOWDE OF UNKNOWYNG

The *Clowde of Unknowyng*, written between 1375 and 1400, and nowadays one of the most famous of all late medieval mystical texts, is suitable to exemplify the outlined developments.⁵¹ The anonymous author was probably a Carthusian. He addresses his text to a disciple, a young man, who was about to start an eremitical life. The text is an introduction to contemplative prayer which the author conceives as the highest form of Christian spirituality. "His prime motive is to teach a 'special prayer' over and above the 'preiers that ben ordeynid of Holy Chirche'."⁵² The author is very conscious about the fact that his manual, written in Middle English, will not only circulate among Latinized circles of religious specialists but is bound to reach a broader audience. Therefore he in-

⁴⁸ See Baier 1977: 488-489.

⁴⁹ See Baier 1977: 489.

⁵⁰ See Baier 1977: 497-498.

⁵¹ The full title of the text is *A Book of Contemplacyon, the whiche is clepyd the Clowde of Unknowyng, in the whiche a Soule is onyd with God*. I use the critical edition by P. Hodgson. *Introductions and interpretations: W. Johnston, The Mysticism of 'The Cloud of Unknowing'. A Modern Interpretation (Religious Experience 8) St. Meinrad 1975; P. Hodgson, Introduction, in: P. Hodgson (ed.), The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises, ix-lxii; R. W. Englert, Scattering and Oneing. A Study of Conflict of the 'Cloud of Unknowing' (Analecta Cartusiana 105), Salzburg 1983; J. P. H. Clark: The Cloud of Unknowing. An Introduction. Vol. 1: An Introduction (Analecta Cartusiana 119/4), Salzburg 1995, Vol. 2: Notes on 'The Cloud of Unknowing', (Analecta Cartusiana 119/5), Salzburg 1996; Steinmetz 2005.*

⁵² P. Hodgson, Introduction, xxi with reference to Cloud 41, 1-2.

cludes instructions concerning the distribution of the book. It should not be given to those who are merely curious about its content, but rather to people who fulfill the criteria of being ready for contemplation. Those to whom the book is passed on should be advised to take the time to read the whole book, not only parts of it.⁵³ Obviously he wants to propagate the practice of contemplation, but on the other hand he emphasizes that he does not simply call upon everybody to just try it. Instead those who feel motivated to try his method should first thoroughly test themselves.⁵⁴

The text follows the traditional discrimination between *vita activa* (*actyve liif*) and *vita contemplativa* (*contemplatyve liif*). It also alludes to a stage in-between which is at the same time the second degree of active life and the first degree of contemplative life.⁵⁵ So altogether we have three stages. The first stage of *vita activa* consists of works of mercy and charity. The second stage of *vita activa* which is at the same time the first stage of *vita contemplativa* is *goostly meditacion*. The second stage of *vita contemplativa* attends to the *specyall preier*. These different ways of religious exercise are related to the active life in the world and to monastical or eremitical life respectively. The author is in favor of the second, which he thinks is the perfection of Christian life and the best condition for contemplative prayer. But, as already said, the *Cloud* was not written for monastics and hermits only. The prologue explicitly says, that the following explanation of contemplative prayer is also meant to help people who are living an active life but are motivated by the Holy Spirit to participate at least from time to time in the *specyall preier* as highest practice of contemplative life.⁵⁶ Moreover, because it is written in Middle English one could say that the *Cloud* answers to the growing interest of the laity in the *vita contemplativa* and participates in the democratization of contemplation. The author attempts to maintain a standard of quality, to avoid the vulgarization of contemplative practice.

⁵³ See *Cloud* 74, 72-73.

⁵⁴ See *Cloud* 75, 74-75.

⁵⁵ Out of reasons which cannot be discussed here, the author of the *Cloud* avoids speaking about a *vita mixta* which since Augustine and Gregory the Great was the usual expression for a form of life participating in both, *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*.

⁵⁶ *Cloud* 2, 7-13.

1. *The Concept of Meditation*

Meditation is thought of as a practice for beginners, a preparation for the achievement of contemplation. The author knows Guigos' scheme and mentions the first three parts of it as three "menes [...] in the whiche a contemplatiif prentys schuld be occupyed, the whiche ben theese: Lesson, Meditacion, & Oryson."⁵⁷ These three are now taken together as one exercise called *goostly meditacion*. Its main topics should be *mans owne wrechidnes* connected with sorrow and contrition, the *Passion of Christe* with the awakening of pity and compassion and the *joyes of heven* resp. the *chiftes* (of God) which should evoke thanks and praises.⁵⁸ The *Cloud* here obviously refers to the main points of repentance-meditation. Not only *reson* and *affeccioun* but also *ymaginacioun* is needed for this exercise. Of course the author was familiar with the imaginative methods of meditation which were flourishing in his religious surroundings.

Within the context of the *Cloud* meditation fulfills a positive function as a kind of necessary domestication of the powers of imagination.⁵⁹ Because of their corroboration with sin the inner images and with them the emotional part of the human soul have to be trained and reshaped. Through correct meditation one can overcome the manifold distracting thoughts and empty fantasies which usually preoccupy the mind of the practitioner. But the author makes clear, that the techniques of imagination and meditative reflection are nothing more than a beginning, and that he is obviously not interested in detailed analysis and explanations. Instead much space is given to the treatment of dangers which arise from imaginative techniques. He criticizes the literal understanding of images and metaphors. He makes jokes about different kinds of hysterical behavior caused by a wrong practice of affective and imaginative meditation and warns of deceptive visions.⁶⁰ The activity of imagination in meditation is repeatedly connected with a harmful *coriouste* which only scatters the attention of the practitioner.⁶¹ The very

⁵⁷ Cloud 39, 23-25.

⁵⁸ Cloud 29, 35-47.

⁵⁹ See Cloud 65, 65-66.

⁶⁰ See Cloud 52,28-59,18.

⁶¹ For the role of coriouste in the Cloud-texts see Steinmetz 2005: 63-87.

heart of spiritual life is only reachable through a radical abandoning of the imaginative interior space.

2. *Entering the Cloud. The Practice of Contemplation*

The Middle English term *contemplacyon* or *contemplaccion* is only rarely used by the author of the *Cloud*.⁶² Instead he prefers to describe it with terms like *blynde thoucht* or *nakyd feeling* or calls it *specyal preier*. The latter is not conceived as the last phase or perfection of meditation. Although it culminates in an ecstasy (*excesse of the mynde, overpassyng of thiself*) of the kind which Guigo describes as contemplation, it is not identical with it. Contemplation in the *Cloud of Unknowing* is not only a state of mind or a certain experience of union with God. It has become an exercise in its own right, which is caused by a call from above that changes the whole spiritual life significantly, leading to a new form of practice. The author mentions different signs which show that the time for starting contemplative prayer has come: a spontaneous and long-lasting joy when one hears or reads about the possibility of contemplation and a decrease of inspiration in usual meditation.⁶³

The step from meditation to contemplation means starting to practice a form of prayer which aims at a wordless silence filled with the love of God. Inner silence is produced and supported through undivided attention on the meaning of single monosyllabic words, especially *Sin* and *God*, without any discursive mental acts.⁶⁴ The method of reducing prayer and meditation to a very short formula or as in our case to one word (very often the name of Jesus) has a tradition which goes back to the Desert Fathers. It was, and in the *Cloud* still is, meant as a support of the so-called continual prayer which should accompany the activities of daily life and act as a means to gain mystical union with God.⁶⁵ In the late Medieval period it was a well known monastic practice, as one can see for example from nuns' vitae like the Dominican *Tößer Schwestern-*

⁶² See Steinmetz 2005: 171-176.

⁶³ See Steinmetz 2005: 133-137.

⁶⁴ See *Cloud*, 40,15-44,14.

⁶⁵ For the historical roots see I. Hausherr, *The Name of Jesus*, Kalamazoo 1978.

buch (14th century).⁶⁶ The *Cloud* adds something new to these informal, individual practices. It contrasts the already well established system of meditation with a systematized form of contemplation. By recommending *Sin* and *God* as mantras the two most important topics of repentance-meditation are connected with contemplative prayer and elevated to a higher level of understanding. The transition from meditation to contemplation in his time started to become a much discussed question and the author of the *Cloud* tries to develop criteria which are able to evaluate when one is ready to begin with contemplation.

Through the proposed way of contemplation one should leave behind distinct considerations of the self, sins, creation and God under a “*cloude of forgetyng*.” What should remain in the end is an empty mind surrendered to “*nakyd*” i.e. self-forgetful love, which aims at God himself and not at one of his divine goods which the practitioner may desire to possess. In order to reach out towards union with God, one must beat upon the cloud of unknowing which lies between ourselves and God, with the ‘sharp darte of longing love’. This has to become a settled habit.⁶⁷

As in the theology of Thomas Gallus with its priority of love, for the author of the *Cloud* the *pointe of spirit* (*apex mentis*) is an *apex affectionis*, *syngulertee of affeccioun*, which transcends cognition and therefore resides in a *cloude of unknowyng*. If the practitioner reaches this point he enters a nothing (*noucht*) which is everything (*Al*) because in it one learns to comprehend all things at once without discriminative knowledge.⁶⁸ In this nothingness God and the soul are revealed in their oneness. It may seem difficult to reach this point, but like many contemplatives after him, the author of the *Cloud* assures us that contemplation is a very easy and fast way to God, presupposed that through divine grace the flame of love has been ignited.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ E. Stigel, *Deutsches Nonnenleben. Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töb und der Nonne zu Engelthal*. Eingel. und übertr. von M. Weinhandl. Vorw. von A. Haas, Stein am Rhein 2004.

⁶⁷ J. P. H. Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, Vol. I: Introduction, Salzburg 1995, 32.

⁶⁸ See *Cloud*, 67,37-68,21.

⁶⁹ See *Cloud*, 9, 25-26.

E. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

In the 15th century not only the meditation of the Life of Christ flourished but also the methodical structuring of thought within meditation became extremely elaborated. The representatives of the *Devotio moderna* wanted to establish a most effective program of spiritual training which should guarantee the spiritual success of each of the devotees by a systematical cultivation of the inner man. Wessel Gansfort (1419-1489) went beyond all previous efforts in systematizing meditation. He constructed an *ordo scalaris rationalis*, a rational system of meditation, whose twenty-four steps are based on the structure of the human mind, which Gansfort in Augustinian manner divided into *memoria* (memory), *intelligentia* (intellect) and *voluntas* (will and emotion).⁷⁰ Extensively using concepts of humanistic rhetoric he constructed a method capable of developing any topic for any length of time by systematically arousing the three faculties. The *Devotio moderna* influenced Ignatius of Loyola whose *ejercicios espirituales* and especially his – compared to Gansfort – simplified method of meditation with the three powers of the soul became the most powerful paradigm of Christian meditation until the 20th century.

The more meditation became formalized the more its limitations and dangers became obvious. “The ignorant find it too great a tax on their energies; the imaginative cannot pursue it without encountering endless distractions; the simple-minded ask if no more direct approach can be found for them to the sanctities of prayer.”⁷¹ There was the tendency of too much self-reflection, a scrupulous observation of one's own mental processes which never reaches the point of a simple opening towards the divine mystery. Fear of hell was often more cultivated than the pure love of God.

Protagonists of contemplative prayer continued to spread their forms of practice in reform (lay) circles, religious orders and a large number of spiritual books. The limitations of meditation, the misuse of it, the transition from meditation to contemplation and the cultivation of inner silence remained a topic of discussion among the Spanish Mystics

⁷⁰ See D. Snyder: Wessel Gansfort and the Art of Meditation, Diss. Cambridge/Mass. 1966.

⁷¹ R. A. Knox: Enthusiasm. A Chapter in the History of Religion, Notre Dame 1994, 245-246.

of the 16th century, Madame Guyon and her companions and also in pietism. Although nobody went so far as to abandon contemplation *in toto* practitioners of contemplation had to face serious repressions. The points of criticism remained the same through the ages: neglect of the cultivation of Christian virtues, antinomianism, denial of salvation through the mediation of the Church and its sacraments. The inquisition persecuted several groups which were connected with the practice of contemplation. It started with the heresy of the „Free Spirit“ (condemned in 1311), followed by the Alumbrados (condemned in 1525). The last strike hit Quietism. With the condemnation and imprisonment of leading Quietists at the end of the 17th century, the contemplation movement which had started in late Medieval Europe came to its end.

Only with the growing influence of Eastern religions and the revival of Western mysticism from the end of the 19th century onwards did the popularization of contemplative practices start all over again. The 20th century became the Age of the decline of the Baroque form of European meditation and gave birth to a second contemplation movement within Western Christianity. Shortly after the end of World War II Giacomo Cardinal Lercaro – an expert in Christian meditation and contemplation who later became one of the important reformers of the Second Vatican Council – asked: “Why did the rich blossom of prayer methods which characterized the 17th and 18th century expire completely today? Why do they hardly survive – with the exception of the Ignatian which is too often explained and taught in a miserable way [...]? Why was discursive prayer declared to be the ultimate stage attainable without the help of extraordinary Grace?”⁷²

People did not wait until clerics and theologians had found proper answers to these questions (in fact hardly anybody went further into them), but instead started to practice Yoga, New Age- and Buddhist meditation or attended courses in which old forms of contemplative Christian prayer were taught in a modern way. But this is another chapter altogether.

⁷² G. Kardinal Lercaro, *Wege zum betrachtenden Gebet*, Basel/Freiburg/Wien 1959 [1947], 357.

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