

Introduction: Contemplation and Philosophy

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars.

—WISDOM OF SOLOMON 7:24–30

The passage above, from the apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon*, written in Greek by an Alexandrian Jew sometime in the first century BCE, bears witness to a conversation, even a contest, between philosophy and biblical faith. The text has its own polemics—the author, for example, regularly takes aim especially at the Epicureans for their ungodliness, lawlessness, and licentiousness—but while it seeks to provide a biblical corrective to philosophical error, at the same time it refuses to abandon philosophy as the love of wisdom. Instead, *The Wisdom of Solomon* bears witness to an author and a community of reflection able to imagine that the love of wisdom and intimacy with God are not in contest with each other, but are, rather, rightly construed, coordinate with one another. Wisdom is a breath of the power of

God and a mirror of God's good working. She makes *her* companions into *God's* companions: friends of God and prophets.

In the Christian tradition, from Augustine to Teresa of Avila to Thomas Merton, friendship with God has often been spoken about in terms of contemplation. In this book, I endeavor to see whether and how far we can retrieve the kind of constructive, integral meeting imagined by *The Wisdom of Solomon* in our own modern and postmodern age. This is, then, a book about contemplation (especially Christian contemplation) and philosophy—the ways in which they are related, how they might transform one another, and the ends to which they are ordered. And so it is a work not only of philosophy but also of theology: mystical and philosophical theology, in particular. The relationship between mystical theology and philosophical theology is a fascinating and complex one, but it is one that has too regularly gone unaddressed. Too often, the mystical is associated with the irrational and philosophy with the exclusively rational.

There are, however, encouraging signs that this oppositional way of construing things might be changing. In recent years, both analytic and continental philosophers of religion have turned their attention to texts drawn from contemplative traditions—it is no longer surprising to find writers such as Teresa of Avila, Dionysus the Areopagite, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, and many others referenced in the footnotes of philosophical argument—but this contemporary philosophical appeal to the contemplative tradition is only partial. Contemplatives are summoned into philosophy, whether analytic or continental, merely as examples and rarely as philosophers or even thinkers in their own right, the hackneyed charge of irrationalism still lurking somewhere nearby. Theologians, a few notable exceptions notwithstanding, often fare little better than the philosophers. It seems to be the case that in both philosophy and theology contemplation remains a topic of fascination but is, in itself, seen as something quite alien to the proper tasks of theologizing and philosophizing. In this book, by contrast, I argue that the meeting of contemplation and philosophy can go much deeper than this. I endeavor to ask the following question: Is it possible to have not just a philosophy (or even a theology) *about* contemplation but to have instead a genuinely *contemplative* philosophy?

WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?

A contemplative philosophy, if it is possible, will be something different from what we might call the philosophy of contemplation. The latter pursuit could be construed as a subdiscipline within philosophy of religion or philosophy of

mind and it would aim to make clear the nature and scope of contemplation, aspects of its historical development, and the issues contemplation raises for basic philosophical pursuits in epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and so forth. This would be a valuable project, but it is not mine, at least not here. My concern in these pages is, instead, to determine whether there isn't a prior relationship between contemplation and philosophy, a relationship out of which both philosophy and contemplation emerge and through which they continue to transform one another. Nevertheless, even if this book is not an exercise in the philosophy of contemplation as such, neither can it eschew all the questions proper to such an inquiry. After all, contemplation, the contemplative tradition, and other such terms are not words or phrases most ordinary people or even most philosophers and theologians regularly use, so it will be helpful to define certain terms before beginning.

GENERIC CONTEMPLATION

With roots in the old French *contemplatio* and the Latin *contemplatiōnem*, the lexical range of the English noun "contemplation" is wide, passing from "the action of beholding, or looking at with attention and thought," through to "religious musing" or "devout meditation" (these latter being the earliest English meanings of the word).¹ Ordinary usage makes it plain that contemplation comes in different forms: the sense of the word varies, for instance, according to whether we are speaking about a monk's daily contemplation and prayer, Socrates' contemplation of mortality, or the aesthetic contemplation one might pursue while standing before Chagall's *Les Maries de la Tour Eiffel* in Nice. For the purposes of this book, we need some philosophical clarifications to help us navigate this semantic diversity. Let us consider "Generic Contemplation" a form of human activity involving the exercise of sustained attention and the cultivation of awareness leading to states of subjective expansion, wonder, tranquility, illumination, or communion.²

1. "Contemplation, n." OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40094?redirectedFrom=contemplation>.

2. Cf. the definition of contemplation that Brown University's Harold Roth has provided as part of the efforts to establish the interdisciplinary field of contemplative studies. For Roth, contemplation is "[t]he focusing of the attention in a sustained fashion leading to deepened states of concentration, tranquility, and insight. It occurs on a spectrum ranging from the rather common, uncultivated, spontaneous experiences of absorption in an activity to the most profound, deliberately cultivated experiences of nonduality." See Harold Roth, "Developments in Contemplative Studies," Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, May 27, 2009, <http://vimeo.com/5076639>.

That Generic Contemplation is a matter of attention or awareness alerts us to its standing as a species of knowledge by acquaintance. The German Thomistic philosopher Josef Pieper defined contemplation as “the silent perception of reality.” He likens this silent perception to intuition, considering it an act of the scholastic *intellectus* rather than the *ratio*.³ One knows the object of contemplation directly, but, as B. Alan Wallace notes, unlike our usual experience of objective knowledge, “contemplation does not merely move towards its object; it already rests in it.”⁴ This resting in the object of one’s contemplation—whether that object be a thing, person, mood, act, being itself, or even the Good beyond being—begins to account for the second half of our definition. Generic Contemplation is a participatory event that involves the knower in the object of his or her knowledge and this participation, rather than ruining or merely undoing the subject, issues instead in certain salutary states. In other words, there is a kind of qualitative difference between Generic Contemplation and, for instance, a state of fixation, obsession, or any of the more invidious forms of absorption to which humans are susceptible. Perhaps subjective expansion, wonder, tranquility, illumination, and communion fail to exhaust these happy consequences of Generic Contemplation. No matter. My point here is only that the cultivation of awareness and attention in Generic Contemplation aims at and is taken to facilitate the occurrence of integrative states marked by these and similar qualities.

Why call Generic Contemplation a human activity? After all, doesn’t Aristotle argue that human happiness is to be found in contemplation precisely because contemplation is the activity of the gods, and of all beings the gods are most happy and blessed?⁵ Suppose we allow that gods and angels and other such beings do indeed spend their lives in contemplation; still, the contemplation of purely spiritual or supernatural beings would be something different than the act of embodied beings engaged in Generic Contemplation. We could, if pressed, designate their contemplation “Supernatural Contemplation,” or

3. On the distinction between the *intellectus* and the *ratio*, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.1 ad. 1. “Intellect and reason are different according to their different ways of knowing; because the intellect knows by simple intuition, while reason knows by a discursive process of moving from one thing to another. [*Intellectus et ratio differunt quantum ad modum cognoscendi, quia scilicet Intellectus cognoscit simpliciter intuitu, ratio vero discurrendo de uno in aliud.*]” Unless otherwise stated, all translation from the *Summa Theologiae* are taken from the English translation by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947).

4. B. Alan Wallace, *Contemplative Science Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge*, The Columbia Series in Science and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 1.

5. See Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

we could further specify Generic Contemplation as “Generic *Human* Contemplation” if such clarifications were felt necessary. At any rate, if we are talking about contemplation and philosophy, it behooves us to concentrate on human contemplative experience for philosophy is, of all things, something that humans seem to do. The gods, as Plato and Diotima remind us, do not philosophize, do not love wisdom, for they are already wise; humans alone are given the opportunity to become *philosophers* and so it is human contemplation that is of interest throughout this book.⁶

Still, it may be the case that humans are not the only animal or natural creatures capable of contemplation. Plotinus held that all things exist only insofar as they turn in contemplation back to the source from whence they first came. Thus, for Plotinus, contemplation and being seem to be coextensive. However, precisely because this contemplation precedes and is productive of the being of the creature, on Plotinus’s account, this contemplation would seem to be more an act of the divine Soul (effectively, the Nature-Principle within Plotinian henology) than the accomplishment of the creature itself.⁷ There may yet be a sense in which the heliotrope contemplates the sun, and even the source behind the sun, but let us bracket this possibility so as not to lose sight of the discrete acts of contemplation that rational creatures especially seem to undertake. If, as is almost certainly the case, human beings are not the only *zoon echon logon*, it may be that other animals do indeed have reason to such a degree that they also contemplate. Perhaps whales with their spindle neurons and complex neocortical organization are capable of Generic Contemplation. Nevertheless, the phenomenology and psychology of whatever contemplation other animals might be capable of is, at least for the moment, closed to us. I am, therefore, content in this context to stipulate Generic Contemplation as a human capacity. To call Generic Contemplation a human capacity, or to speak about human contemplative experience, indicates that Generic Contemplation may be something that one might justifiably expect to find across cultures, part of that common repository of moral and spiritual wisdom that C. S. Lewis, borrowing a term from the East, called “the Tao.”⁸ Indeed, part of the appeal of the emerging field of Contemplative Studies is that a concept like Generic Contemplation has proven useful in opening new paths for comparative and cross-cultural work.⁹ To say that

6. *Symposium* 204a.

7. Plotinus, *Enneads* III. 8.3.

8. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or, Reflections on Education: With Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*, Riddell Memorial Lectures/University of Durham 15th Ser. (London: Oxford University Press, 1944).

Generic Contemplation has cross-cultural scope, however, is not to say that it is universal. Even if a definition of Generic Contemplation could be found that would have transcultural and transhistorical applicability *tout court*, this scope and applicability would inevitably be purchased at the expense of the sort of first-person acquaintance that contemplative traditions themselves prize. For this reason, it is important to move beyond Generic Contemplation in order to speak about topical and tradition-specific aspects of contemplation. Accordingly, throughout this book, my attention will especially be directed either at the Western contemplative tradition or, more usually, at the Christian contemplative tradition. Let us consider the former first.

THE WESTERN CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

Within popular culture and increasingly within the academy, those who speak about contemplation at all often have something vaguely Eastern in mind.¹⁰ Many assume that contemplation—today it often simply called mindfulness—is a peculiar feature of the socioreligious worlds of Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and other such “Oriental” traditions. As we have learned, however, most notably through the work of Pierre Hadot, a continuous tradition of contemplative practice has existed within Western culture at least since the time of the Pre-Socratics.¹¹ Brian Stock has noted that tracking this tradition—call

9. Harold Roth, “Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies,” *Religion East & West* 8 (2008): 1–26.

10. One can see a bit of this even in the emerging field of contemplative studies and coordinate efforts to introduce aspects of contemplative pedagogy into various aspects of the university curriculum. Quite contrary to its best intentions, much of the work in these emerging areas may be seen as courting a kind of Orientalism precisely insofar as these discourses largely concern themselves with Asian religious contemplative traditions and Western scientific ones. This plays all too easily into a story—familiar in the West both as a result of Orientalizing narratives and as a consequence of successful Buddhist missionary efforts that have been ongoing at least since the first World Parliament of Religion—of Eastern traditions as having preserved the nondogmatic inner half of the human being in a way that happily complements the extroverted human energies unleashed by the West. To be sure, there are good reasons for the amount of attention paid to Asian traditions, not least because of the sophistication with which particular Asian traditions have approached questions of contemplation. Still, the Eastern-spirit/Western-science model would appear not only to give Orientalizing hostages to fortune, but also contributes an unfortunate and historically false image of contemplation as something alien to the Western tradition.

11. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); idem, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); idem et al., *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 2d ed., Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Donald Phillip Verene develops a similar argument but pays more attention to Renaissance and early modern writers, especially Vico, than does Hadot. See

it the “Western contemplative tradition”—can be difficult, in part because it is distributed, both synchronically and diachronically, across what we now regard as different disciplines.¹² Thus it is that the ancient world largely located contemplation within the domains of philosophy and religion, domains that formed rather more of a continuum than a set of alternatives. In antiquity, the accent began to shift toward the religion side of the continuum until contemplation became, with a few notable exceptions, something taken to be more or less exclusively religious, even supernatural, in the late Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, the primary location of contemplative practices migrated again, back to philosophy in some degree, but especially into the humanistic pursuits of poetry, rhetoric, music, art, and so forth. Contemplative practices also went underground, finding a home in various esoteric and theosophical traditions, a process that contributed to their contemporary invisibility and accelerated both during the tumult of the Protestant and Catholic Counter-Reformations and, subsequently, in the midst of the burgeoning rationalism of the Enlightenment period.

The importance of the Western contemplative tradition to the practice of philosophy in the ancient and antique worlds, however, can hardly be overstated. Even those who have only a passing acquaintance with Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophy know how prevalent contemplative language was throughout the ancient world; whether it was Greeks drawing upon traditions of *theoria* or Latins referencing *contemplatio* (following Cicero and Seneca’s preferred translation of *theoria*), such language was philosophically, culturally, and spiritually ubiquitous.¹³ While the unadorned lexical meaning of both *contemplatio* and *theoria* could refer to a rather ordinary form of seeing—a kind of attentive viewing, surveying or beholding—there is, even in the bare form of the word itself, a kind of hidden religious valence.¹⁴ *Con-templatio*, for example,

Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). For an erudite but controversial account of contemplative and spiritual practice among the Pre-Socratics, see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Verene, *Philosophy and the Return*.

12. Brian Stock, “Western Contemplative Tradition in Higher Education,” paper presented at the first annual International Symposia for Contemplative Studies, Denver, April 27, 2012.

13. We will have more to say about the Greeks and contemplation throughout this book, especially when treating Plato in the following chapter, but a helpful introduction to the topic can be found in “The Greek Contemplative Ideal,” ch. 2 of Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 23–61.

14. For the lexical senses, see Charlton Thomas Lewis et al., *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955); and Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

almost certainly referred originally to “that which takes place in a temple,” that is, the beholding of divinities, statues, sacred objects, and so forth; and *theoria* was often used to speak of the pilgrimages that foreign Greeks took to diverse sanctuaries in order to participate in their rituals and to witness their spectacles.¹⁵ Whatever their original etymological and semantic inheritance, *contemplatio* and *theoria* quickly became philosophical and religious terms of art. For Plato, *theoria* denoted an exalted species of vision, both a vision of and a communion with (*koinonia*) the Forms that lie within and, at the same time, beyond the mutability of the material world. In this Platonic scheme, *theoria*, participation (*methexis*), and love (*eros*) are intimately linked;¹⁶ one sees the Forms, or even the Good that lies beyond both being and the Forms, only by integrally participating in the reality of that which one beholds.¹⁷ Interestingly, there is an almost proto-sacramental sense to this Platonic vision. Contemplation moves beyond but is always stimulated or mediated by a material encounter with that which provokes one’s contemplative vision, what Plato calls contemplative *anamnesis*.

This broadly Platonic sense of contemplation became a common inheritance throughout the schools of ancient philosophy, but there was controversy as well. Aristotle’s account of contemplation accentuated its intellectualist tendencies, even to the point of portraying the contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*) as something essentially opposed to the active life (*bios praktikos*). For Plato, *theoria* was something that contributed in crucial ways to the active life—this, for example, is why the philosopher who has seen the sun subsequently returns to cave, or why legislators aren’t to be untutored in contemplation. In contrast to this Platonic wedding of contemplation and action, however, Aristotle held that contemplation was essentially disinterested; like the self-thinking thought of God that was in fact the contemplative’s ideal model, Aristotelian contemplation was to serve no final practical end but itself.¹⁸ In our activist oriented culture of late Western modernity, this idea of disinterested contemplation is deeply unpopular, but we should note that it

15. See Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35. For more speculative accounts of the connection between temple and contemplation, see Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003); Henry Corbin, *Temple Et Contemplation, Idées Et Recherches* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980); and Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

16. *Symposium* 192c.

17. Cf. *Republic* 509b.

18. See Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

already had its share of critics even in the ancient world. Not only the Stoics but also the Epicureans, for example, with their shared emphasis on practical philosophy, both understandably resisted the Aristotelian denigration of action. The important point, however, is that although the Stoics and Epicureans thought Aristotle went too far in subordinating action to passive contemplation, nevertheless they did not let go of the ideal of contemplation or *theoria* as a crucial component of the philosophical life. For them, as for Plato, contemplation still mattered deeply precisely because contemplation changed how one lived, understood, and related to the real persons, beings, and events of the world.¹⁹

What we can see in the presence of these contemplative philosophical controversies, then, is the ubiquity of contemplation in ancient philosophy. With the possible exception of Aristotle and his Lyceum, we know that all of the significant ancient philosophical schools—Stoic, Platonist, Epicurean, and so forth—not only spoke about contemplation or *theoria*, but also engaged and trained their students in contemplative practices and spiritual exercises (most of which we could parse as operative cultural and historical specifications for Generic Contemplation).²⁰ Although we have received no systematic treatise on the mechanics of these exercises, Pierre Hadot spent much of his extraordinary historical talent on the project of carefully reconstructing these practices in order to make plain the important role they played within ancient philosophy. Combining two separate but related lists from the first-century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, Hadot points to the antique prevalence of contemplative exercises such as the following:

1. Research (*zetesis*)
2. Thorough investigation (*skepsis*)
3. Reading (*anagnosis*)
4. Listening (*akroasis*)
5. Attention (*prosoche*)
6. Self-mastery (*enkrateia*)
7. Meditation (*metletai*)
8. Practicing indifference to indifferent things

19. Thomas Bénarouil and Mauro Bonazzi, *Theoria, Praxis, and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle*, *Philosophia Antiqua* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

20. Arnold I. Davidson, “Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 3 (1990): 475–82; Wallace, *Contemplative Science*.

9. Therapies for the passions
10. Remembrance of good things
11. Accomplishment of duties.²¹

Certain of these activities may be done in a prosaic and careless manner, but even potentially prosaic activities such as reading or doing one's duty were taken to be transformed by the contemplative quality of attention and reflection with which they were deliberately performed. Moreover, within antique philosophy, these exercises were understood in more than just moral terms; they were, as Hadot insists, treated as spiritual practices. The aim of all of these various exercises, which seem to have been part of the common oral inheritance of the philosophical schools of antiquity, was self-realization through a process of transformation or even conversion, a kind of subjective formation and expansion that was held to liberate the self from its egoism and newly to conform the philosopher or student to some spiritual or superlative end (e.g., the cosmos, being itself, the Good, the One, God, etc.).²²

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND THE CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

In the wake of the kind of work that Hadot pioneered, it is easy enough—though, sadly, still too uncommon—to articulate, at least, the historical relationship obtaining between philosophy and the Western contemplative tradition. The Western contemplative tradition is itself already a historical and cultural specification of Generic Contemplation, but my aim is to consider an even more tradition-specific rendering of contemplation, namely, the *Christian contemplative tradition* and its relationship to philosophy.

Why this focus on the Christian contemplative tradition? To begin with, the Christian contemplative tradition has been the site of the most dynamic philosophical engagement between European philosophy and contemplative practices over the last millennium and a half. The legacy of this Christian engagement remains with us. If we are to court the possibility of a renewed contemplative philosophy in our own day, then, it seems likely that we shall have to come to terms with philosophy's relationship to the Christian contemplative tradition. On a more confessional level, I might add, this is also the tradition within which much of my own spiritual formation and

21. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84, Philo's lists may be found in Philo's *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things* and the *Allegorical Interpretations*.

22. *Ibid.*

early philosophical engagement took place. Much of my early interest in both philosophy and theology was brought about through the new sense of wonder provoked by my encounter with the Christian contemplative tradition in the form of its liturgies (largely Anglican), devotional practices, and spiritual directors, as well as through the relationship my family developed with a remarkable community of contemplative Trappist monks. These, and other such encounters, were deeply formative for me, not least because they introduced me to persons who provided living models for how contemplative worship and wonder might naturally give rise to contemplative wisdom. Plato put it this way: whoever said that Thaumás (or wonder) was the father of Iris (the rainbow messenger that, like philosophy, connects heaven and earth) did not genealogize badly.²³

So what is the Christian contemplative tradition? This is a difficult question. Traditions consist in certain shared practices, symbols, and languages—passed but also mutated from generation to generation—that do not easily submit to rigorous definition. Traditions have a properly tacit or vague sense, something that is, so to speak, caught more than taught.²⁴ The problem of definition is amplified when we consider traditions, such as the Christian contemplative tradition, that have persisted not over centuries alone, but over millennia.²⁵ In such circumstances, our best bet is to define matters ostensively, circling around examples and descriptions rather than risking *stipulative* or operational definitions. This ostensive approach is how, for example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* proceeds when it treats the subject of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer, it tells us, is like the eucharistic liturgy; it is the prayer of God's children; the welcoming response of love to love; the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer; a communion with the Triune God; a faithful gazing upon Jesus; a hearing and receiving of God's speech and will; a kind of silent love; and it is the Christian's participation in the high priestly prayer of Christ himself.²⁶ The *Catechism* quotes Teresa of

23. *Theaetetus* 155d.

24. For an extraordinary account of one aspect of the transmission of contemplative and philosophical traditions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, see C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

25. For a brief account of some of the diachronic transformations in the Christian contemplative tradition, see Frederic Nef, "Contemplation," in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), 353–61. For a popular account of the Christian contemplative tradition by one of its leading contemporary proponents, see Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 38–45.

Avila, “Contemplative prayer [*oracion mental*] in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”²⁷ For his part, John of the Cross, Teresa’s collaborator and fellow Doctor of the Church, defines contemplative prayer as “nothing else than the secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love.”²⁸

What the Christian contemplative tradition has referred to as contemplation, contemporary culture often refers to as “mysticism.” This is an unfortunate linguistic substitute, for mysticism is not only a relatively novel term—as a noun, it only enters western languages in the sixteenth century—but it is also a notoriously broad one, being deployed to denote nearly everything and almost nothing, often at one and the same time.²⁹ There is, however, a close connection between the Christian contemplative tradition, the adjectival modifier, *mystical*, and the frequent New Testament references to *mysteries*.³⁰ Within the Christian tradition, for example, contemplative prayer and mystical prayer are often equated, though the semantic range of contemplative prayer has historically been wider than the latter; thus it is that, traditionally, the infused contemplation associated with contemplative prayer admits of degrees, of which the highest degrees alone are referred to as mystical prayer.³¹

26. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* IV.1.3 art. 1.iii.

27. *Ibid.* Teresa’s definition is taken from *The Book of Her Life* 8.5, in Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez, 2d ed. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1987), I.67.

28. *Dark Night* 1.10.6, in John of the Cross, ed. *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, rev. ed. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1966).

29. For an account of the origins of “mysticism” (“mysticism,” the noun, as opposed to “mystical,” the adjective) in the sixteenth century, see especially Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

30. On the relationship between *mystical* and the *mysteries*, see Louis Bouyer, “Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word,” in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980); Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, trans. John Austin Baker (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973). New Testament references to the mysteries include Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7, 4:1, 15:51; Eph. 1:3–10, 3:1–10; Col. 1:26–27; 2 Thess. 2:7; 1 Titus 3:9; Rev. 10:5–7.

31. There has been much confusion around the proper use of these terms as evidenced by the early twentieth-century debate over the validity of “acquired contemplation” and its relation to “infused contemplation.” The debate can be simplified into a single question: Is contemplation a skill? This simple question becomes vexed as soon as one forgets to distinguish between Generic Contemplation and contemplative prayer. The evidence for calling Generic Contemplation a skill is overwhelming, but if contemplative prayer is possible—that is to say, if contemplation can not only be directed toward but also fulfilled by God—then this fulfillment will inevitably arrive as a gift of God who freely gives himself to the contemplative.

How do contemplative prayer and the Christian contemplative tradition differ from Generic Contemplation and the Western contemplative tradition? To be sure, there are elements of continuity. Richard of St. Victor, for example, whom Dante called “in contemplation, more than human,”³² provides a definition of contemplation that could easily serve as a description of Generic Contemplation: “Contemplation is a free and clear vision of the mind fixed upon the manifestation of wisdom in suspended wonder.”³³ Such an account, as one would expect from the broadly humanistic orientation of the Victorine school, highlights the lines of continuity between the medieval understanding of the Christian contemplative tradition, rooted especially in monastic and liturgical settings, and the classical characteristics of Western contemplative tradition, rooted in the philosophical schools of pagan antiquity.

However, even as the Western contemplative tradition renewed and perpetuated itself in the new Christian epoch, Christianity also significantly transformed and redirected elements of the Western contemplative tradition. Consider, for example, the Christian transformation of the common Western contemplative trope of divinization. As noted above, the Western contemplative tradition often regarded contemplation as the most god-like activity available to human beings. For most Greeks, contemplation was taken to be not only god-like but also god-conforming. For example, according to Aristotle, the highest, most divine life would be a life of unbroken contemplation:

But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but *in so far as something divine is present in him*; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence. *If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life.* But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but *must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us*; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.³⁴

32. Par. X.133.

33. Richard of St. Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs; The Mystical Ark; Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Grover A. Zinn, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

34. *Eth. nic.* 1177b18–1178a1, in Aristotle and Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols., Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1861.

Of course, everything turns not on the bare possibility of divinization or conformation to the divine, but on the type or character of the God *to whom* one is conformed and *by whom* one is divinized. For Aristotle, this God is utterly unrelated to the world, perfect in his own self-contemplation, and the divinization of the human accordingly involves the abandonment of the active life. This, in turn, involves the assimilation of one part of the human being only (the intellect) to the divine, and the consequent expurgation of all else. We might call this *contemplation as eliminative divinization*, an approach that legitimated much of the extreme asceticism found throughout the Hellenic and Hellenistic worlds. Such an approach, it would seem, sits uneasily beside core Christian doctrines about incarnation, the resurrection of the body, and so forth. How, then, did early Christian communities receive and transform this contemplation-divinization couplet?

A suggestive remark in 2 Peter 1:4 became the chief scriptural reference for early Christian reflection on the concept divinization, what Peter prefers to speak of as *participation in God*.³⁵ Peter writes: “Thus he has given us . . . his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and become participants of the divine nature [*theias koinonoi phuseos*].” Nearly as important for early Christian reflection on the theme of divinization was Psalm 82, a text that John remembers coming from the lips of Jesus: “I say, ‘You are gods, children of the Most High all of you.’”³⁶ Such texts provided Patristic theologians with a kind of scriptural warrant for baptizing Hellenic and Hellenistic speculation about divinization or assimilation to God.³⁷ Eventually this idea of participating in divinity would be subsumed under the words for “deification”: either the term *theopoiesis*, first used by Justin Martyr, or the term *theosis* that became the standard word for the concept after it was introduced by Gregory of Nazianzus. Just as the Greek philosophers had earlier done, emerging Christian theological authorities such as Clement and Origen strongly linked the concepts of deification and contemplation. For example, in his *Stromata*, Clement first

35. I am aware that many biblical scholars have serious doubts about the authorship of the Petrine epistles along with some of the Pauline pastorals, but since authorship issues make very little difference to my arguments in this book, I am content to abide by the traditional ascriptions. I will also refer to the author of such works as *The Divine Names* and *The Celestial Hierarchy* simply as Dionysius rather than saddling him with the prefix “Pseudo.”

36. Cf. Ps. 82:4 and John 10:34.

37. Cf. A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27.

quotes Psalm 82 and then compares contemplation to a man at sea pulling on an anchor:

As those who at sea are held by an anchor, pull at the anchor, but do not drag it to them, but drag themselves to the anchor; so those who . . . draw God towards them, imperceptibly bring themselves to God; for he who reverences God, reverences himself. In the contemplative life, then, one in worshipping God attends to himself, and through his own spotless purification beholds the holy God holily [and] is as far as possible assimilated to God.³⁸

The image of the man not just gripping but pulling at the anchor, for all of its potentially Pelagian pitfalls, communicates the dynamism that early Christians seemed to find in theosis. There is a vectoral quality to this Christian concept of contemplative deification; theosis is that toward which the worshipper is drawn, the telos not just of Christian life but of human life, a process of divinization that begins now by grace but is only completed eschatologically. As such, and this is perhaps the crucial point, theosis was not understood as a concept that simply stood alone. Regularly, as in Augustine, Hippolytus, and especially Cyril of Alexandria, theosis was linked to other Christian soteriological terms, such as the Pauline notion of our adoption as sons and daughters of God, or the conjoined themes of baptism and regeneration.³⁹ In this way, already, the antique vision of divinization was being transformed by the Jewish and Christian scriptural and historical imagination.

For the Patristic authors, the mystery of divinization, about which Plato or Plotinus also spoke, was most radically transformed by the greater mystery of the incarnation, about which the pagan world seemed to know nothing. The incarnation not only demonstrated the character of the God to whom one was

38. *Stromata* 4,23. Cf. Dionysius, *Divine Names* 3.1: "Picture ourselves aboard a boat. There are hawsers joining it to some rock. We take hold of them and pull on them, and it is as if we were dragging the rock to us when in fact we are hauling ourselves and our boat toward that rock. . . . That is why we must begin with a prayer before everything we do, but especially when we are about to talk of God. We will not pull down to ourselves that power which is both everywhere and yet nowhere, but by divine reminders and invocations we may commend ourselves to it and be joined to it." Cf. Colm Lubheid and Paul Roemer, eds., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 68–69.

39. Cf. Hippolytus, *Discourse on Holy Theophany* 10; Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* 49, 2; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John's Gospel* 1.14. On Augustine and Hippolytus, cf. Cf. Williams, *Ground of Union*, 28–29. On Cyril, cf. Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts and Commentary*, trans. Theodore Berkeley (London: New City Press, 1995), 263–64.

conformed (thus addressing the crucial question broached above), but was also taken to be, in some extraordinary sense, the very means of that conforming. Already in the second century, Irenaeus wrote programmatically that, through his love, the Word of God “became what we are in order to make us what He is Himself.”⁴⁰ Following Irenaeus, Athanasius adopted the formula and employed it in his fourth-century contest with the Arians. “The Son of God became human,” he stated succinctly, “in order that we might become God.”⁴¹ In the same century, Gregory Nazianzen (whom the Orthodox affectionately call Gregory the Theologian in recognition of his contemplative virtue) formulated the maxim, “What has not been assumed has not been healed.”⁴² Since theology and dogma were not separate for the early church from contemplation and what we today call spirituality, it is not only in theological tracts that we find doctrinal intricacies linking contemplative divinization and incarnation, but also in sermons and devotional writings intended for general consumption. Thus, for example, we find Augustine preaching to his church, “In order to make gods of those who were merely human . . . one who was God made himself human.”⁴³

This incarnational rendering of the conjoined themes of divinization and contemplation continued after the fall of Rome and remains to this day a kind of common inheritance of the Christian contemplative tradition. In the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor writes, “We lay hold of the divine to the same degree as the Logos of God . . . became truly human.”⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas inherits the same tradition and writes in the thirteenth century, “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.”⁴⁵ Thomas goes further saying in his commentary on John’s Gospel, “We are gods by participation under the effect of grace.”⁴⁶ Teresa of Avila links contemplative union to the concept of divinization when she tells how “the soul, or rather, the spirit of the soul, is made one with God.”⁴⁷ And Teresa’s “little Seneca,” John of the Cross, rounds out our chrestomathy when he declares, “Everything can be expressed in this statement: the soul becomes God from God through participation in him

40. *Against Heresies* 3, 191; 4, 33, 4.

41. *On the Incarnation* 54.

42. *Letter* 101, to Cledonius.

43. *Sermon* 192.

44. *On the Lord’s Prayer*, 90:877a.

45. *Opsuculum* 57.1–4.

46. *In Joannem* 15.2.1.

47. *Interior Castle*, 7.2.

and in his attributes.”⁴⁸ For John of the Cross, this contemplative divinization is linked to what he refers to as *spiration*, breathing the very breath or Spirit of God, even as the Spirit eternally proceeds breath-like from the Father and the Son.

One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God through participation as God breathes in her. For, granted that God favors her by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know, and love—or better that this be done in her—in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! . . . [T]hus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created her in his image and likeness that she might attain such resemblance. No knowledge or power can describe how this happens, unless by explaining how the Son of God attained and merited such a high state for us, the power to be children of God, as St. John says [Jn. 1:12]. Thus the Son asked of the Father in St. John’s Gospel: ‘Father, I desire that where I am those you have given me may also be with me, that they may see the glory you have given me [Jn. 17:24], that is, that they may perform in us by participation the same work that I do by nature; that is, breathe the Holy Spirit.’⁴⁹

What I want to draw attention to in this summary is the way that, in all of these cases, while contemplation is still linked to divinization, the Christian narrative has introduced new emphases upon grace, relationality, the body, and the prior action and character of God in the incarnation as the necessary prerequisite for contemplative divinization.

This points, moreover, to a second, important way in which the Christian contemplative tradition might be seen to differ from and transform the Western contemplative tradition, namely, in the resolute personalism that the Christian approach brought to the question of contemplation. For the Christian, contemplation is not just an intellectual movement as, for example, it was for Aristotle. Contemplation is instead taken to be chiefly of interest as a kind of prayer, a *koinonia* or communion not with the Forms but with the Triune God, just as we find in John of the Cross’s description above. The object of contemplative prayer is, for the Christian, a peculiar non-object, contemplation being paradigmatically directed at the God who alone gives objects and contemplative-subjects alike to be, the God who is not part of the objective furniture of the universe but is, rather, its author and more than its

48. *Living Flame of Love* 3.5–8.

49. *Spiritual Canticle* 39.4,5.

author. Indeed, the God addressed in contemplative prayer is the relational and covenanting God of Jewish and Christian tradition, the God whom Christians are taught to call “our Father.”⁵⁰

Contemplation thus becomes not an exercise in abstraction but a practice of personal communion. Here, for the Christian contemplative tradition, the influences are of course largely scriptural and Semitic rather than philosophical and Hellenic, which could be seen to present a problem, for it might thus appear that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures have little to say about contemplation. In the New Testament, for example, word *theoria* itself only occurs once—when, in Luke 23:48, the evangelist describes the spectacle (*theoria*) of the crucifixion—and although cognates of the related verb *theoreo* occur repeatedly, these occurrences describe vision in the ordinary sense and lack the technical significance that *contemplation* was subsequently to acquire even within the Christian world. Nevertheless, any use of even an ordinary word within extraordinary texts such as the Gospels tends to move the word beyond banal meanings and towards some sort of linguistic splendor. That *theoreo* was used to describe ordinary vision perceiving (albeit under a veil) the extraordinary event of divine incarnation no doubt warmed the Christian imagination to the prevalent Greek use of *theoria* to describe an overtly spiritual kind of vision (a meaning found not only in Platonism and Aristotelianism as discussed above, but also in Stoicism, Hermetism, and the various mystery religions that made regular use of the term).

As I have been insisting, however, the Greek context did not determine the meaning of contemplation for early Christian communities. Indeed, the early Christian use of *theoria* owes as much to the visionary, esoteric, and apocalyptic Judaisms that were widespread in the first century, and to the *merkavah* mysticism that is discernible at least in the writings of St. Paul and John of Patmos, as it does to the Western contemplative tradition articulated before Christianity.⁵¹ Already in Alexandria, where so much of the Christian

50. Important here is not only the Lord's Prayer (cf. Matt. 6:9-13) but also the extraordinary description of Christian prayer provided by Paul in Rom. 8:14-17a, 26-27. This text, which Sarah Coakley considers to be foundational for the Christian practice of silent contemplative prayer, links contemplative silence or attention to key themes about prayer as a gift, participation in Christ, relationship to God, and the transformation of identity necessary if we are to relate to God personally but without idolatrously imagining ourselves and God to be two objects squared off in opposition. Cf. Sarah Coakley, “Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 2 (1998): 223-33.

51. Along these lines, G. G. Stroumsa notes that early architects of the contemplative tradition, such as Clement and Origen, were not only proficient in Greek thought but also claimed to have learned from

spiritual tradition would later emerge, Philo linked middle-Platonic speculations about philosophical *theoria* to the biblical concepts of person, covenant, and relationality. These Jewish traditions located the center of the human being in the heart instead of the mind, and held to a personalist anthropology that integrated body, soul, and spirit, rather than relegating the essence of the human being only to an intellectualized version of the latter term. The diversity of the Western contemplative tradition notwithstanding, Hellenic and Hellenistic accounts of contemplation largely concerned the intellectual vision of *abstracta* such as the Forms or divine ideas, and though this contemplative beholding was often tied to a kind of *eros*, even this was rarely understood in personal terms (certain writings of Plato, not least the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, notwithstanding). Early Christians, however, following Philo, adopted the term *theoria* but now applied it to the God who called all of creation both to be and to be in relation to Godself. For early Christian contemplative writers such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, contemplation became not simply the beholding of immutables but, rather, a supremely personal *theoria theou*: a loving vision of the God who created all things and who became incarnate out of love for a wayward creation.⁵² This understanding is reflected in the technically false but substantively revealing Byzantine etymology that derived *theoria* from *theon horan*: to see God in all things.⁵³

Just as the Christian reception of the term brought contemplation into a more thoroughly personalist religious vision, so, too, did Christianity mitigate the Greek tendency to a spiritualized or intellectualist anthropology. To be sure, the visionary tropes that everywhere attach themselves to the language of contemplation may suggest something akin to the latter.⁵⁴ Vision is nowadays

Jewish masters, and Jerome reports that Eusebius was likewise apprenticed to a Jewish master. See Jerome, *Contra Rufinum*, I.13, and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2d rev. and enl. ed. (Boston: Brill, 2005), 110. For more on the second-temple roots of Christian contemplation, see Alexander Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mysticism?," *Pro Ecclesia* 12, no. 2 (2003): 161–212; Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and the Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 34–71; Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Barker, *Great High Priest*; Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagita." On the Jewish merkabah traditions, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 40–79; Rachel Elior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*, trans. David Louvish (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).

52. McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 104.

53. Tomás Spidlík, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel, Cistercian Studies Series no. 206 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 158.

often understood to imply the kind of distance or detachment that previous eras associated with a cool intellectualism—sight, it is said, is that sensory faculty least affected by the heat of our blood and the passions of our heart—but we should beware of reading this kind of vision into the Christian contemplative tradition, which enacts its operative visual tropes quite differently.⁵⁵ In a powerful example of the synesthesia that recurs throughout contemplative and mystical writings in many traditions, spiritual seeing within the Christian contemplative tradition is regularly understood at the same time as a kind of intimacy or a touching.⁵⁶ Such contemplative knowledge is different than the calculative knowledge associated with discursive thought; it does not reason by deduction but, rather, knows intuitively through a sort of spiritual touching. It is thus that Aquinas defines contemplation as “a simple intuition of the divine truth.”⁵⁷ Note the mixing here of tangibility and cognition; what is touched is truth (which may indeed suggest the Johannine juxtaposition of truth, tactility, and personhood such as we find in John 14:6; 18:38; 20:25). The movement beyond ratiocination does not render the contemplative event noncognitive but opens contemplation to a different sort of cognition. For the scholastics, as we noted at the outset of this introductory chapter, contemplation was an operation of the *intellectus*, rather than the *ratio*.⁵⁸ The scholastic *intellectus* is not reducible to our contemporary understanding of the intellect. It is not an operation of the head alone, but of the whole person, an understanding not unrelated to the insistence by later Greek Christians—most notably, the *Hesychasts*—that contemplation is

54. Contemplative language, however, is not only visual. For a meditation on contemplation as paradigmatically aural, that is, a listening to the word and will of God, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986).

55. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

56. Margaret Miles’s important article on vision in Augustine is relevant to our understanding of contemplation. Miles argues that we tend to misread Augustine’s meditations on sight and illumination because we inherit a long historical development that emphasizes the distance involved in any act of seeing. Augustine, however, inheriting a Platonic phenomenology of sight, understood vision to be a much more intimate process. Sight was not understood as a passive process but a relational exchange in which the soul was conceived as sending forth a beam of light in order to make corporeal objects intelligible. The emphasis was on the activity of the soul that, through the projected beam of the eyes, met and mingled with the light emanating from objects. This mingling produced vision. As Miles states, “The ray theory of vision specifically insisted on the connection and essential continuity of viewer and object in the act of vision.” Margaret Miles, “Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and *Confessions*,” *Journal of Religion* 63, no. 2 (1983): 124–42.

57. *ST II-II* q.180 a.3

58. See n. 3 above on Aquinas’s distinction between intellect and reason, in *ST I*, 1 ad. 1.

an operation of the heart, the seat of human personhood, rather than of the head alone.

Many of these currents, both East and West, found their way into the writings of Thomas Merton in the twentieth century, who reiterates this traditional conviction: “We meditate with our mind, which is ‘part of’ our being. But we contemplate with our whole being and not just with one of its parts.”⁵⁹ So it is that, within the Christian contemplative tradition, contemplation names an event whereby the entirety of one’s person enters into and is transformed by the Mysteries that lie at the heart of Christian faith. In this sense, contemplation might be understood as the integral intensity of Christian life. Elsewhere, Merton provides a rhapsodic definition:

[Contemplation is] an awakening to the Real within all that is real. . . . [The response to] a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being. . . . It is a deep resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One.⁶⁰

It is important to keep this integral and broadly catholic sense of contemplation in mind. Throughout this introduction, I have been referring to the Christian contemplative tradition, something that in later chapters I will oftentimes simply refer to as “the contemplative tradition.” It should be said that, until the high Middle Ages, it would have been as absurd to speak of a discrete contemplative tradition within Christianity, as it would have been to speak of a eucharistic tradition, or of a charitable tradition, for that matter. When I speak of the Christian contemplative tradition, therefore, I do not intend to identify a discrete tradition within the broader church but, rather, to refer to those aspects of the broadly catholic Christian inheritance that have to do especially with the preparation for, enjoyment of, and reflection upon the event of contemplation. I will be speaking of contemplation *dispositively*, as Aquinas might say, referring not only to a particular kind of prayer, state of life, or

59. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 59. Merton understands contemplation as the flowering of active participation in the liturgy, the celebration of which involves sights and sounds, movements and bodies, singing, remembering, speaking, all while necessarily immersed in the community of other bodies and souls. “Here, least of all, is contemplation something merely mental and discursive. It involves man’s whole being, body and soul, mind, will, imagination, emotion and spirit.” *Ibid.*, 63.

60. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), 3.

spiritual event but to the entire body of doctrine and practice—of charity, study, ascesis, and devotion—that disposes personal and communal life to the contemplative vision of God, even while recognizing that this vision itself is held to arrive only ever as gift.

PHILOSOPHY, CHRISTIANITY, AND CONTEMPLATION

This introductory chapter has, thus far, attempted to provide a generic definition of contemplation (Generic Contemplation), a general account of the Western contemplative tradition, as well as some sense of what may be meant by the Christian contemplative tradition and contemplative prayer. By now, the relationship between the Western contemplative tradition and philosophy should be apparent, but what is the relationship between the Christian contemplative tradition and philosophy? This question will occupy us, in one way or another, throughout subsequent chapters, but it is worth briefly addressing before drawing this introduction to a close. The matter is controversial. Hadot, for example, largely blames the Christian epoch for bringing to an end the integration of contemplative spiritual exercises and philosophical inquiry shared by the major philosophical schools of antiquity. He allows that such spiritual exercises reproduced themselves in Christianity, but sees this reproduction as something suspect, even illicit. Reversing, in a way, the Hellenization thesis of so much German theological scholarship of the last two centuries, Hadot sees Christianity as a kind of intellectual aggressor, absorbing much of the language and practice of ancient philosophy, while at the same time shutting the door on the intellectual freedom and rational self-determination that Hadot admires so much in the Stoics and other classical philosophical schools (one might be forgiven for suspecting that Hadot's affections here owe as much to Immanuel Kant or even to the post-*Kehre* Martin Heidegger as to Aurelius). The transformative modes of open inquiry that characterized ancient philosophy were thus, on Hadot's account, subordinated to the putative irrationalism and heteronomy of Christian theology and sacramental practice. Having assimilated the spiritual exercises of the ancient schools, Christianity came to regard philosophy as simply a conceptual matter and so philosophy found itself uncoupled from the spiritual practices to which it was latterly yoked. The wholly conceptual shape of our contemporary philosophy departments, Hadot suggests, unconsciously but slavishly perpetuates the legacy of Christianity's routing of the pagans.⁶¹

61. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 237–70.

There is no question that aspects of irrationalism, dogmatism, and even superstition have sometimes plagued Christian engagements with questions of learning, but there is something specious, not to say tendentious, in Hadot's insistence that such unfortunate episodes be treated as normative for the Christian tradition. Hadot, for example, heaps much blame upon scholasticism, but it is far from apparent that any of these shots could land upon an Anselm or an Aquinas, a Bonaventure or a Nicholas of Cusa.⁶² Let us set aside the old Enlightenment stories that cast Christianity *tout court* as the corruptor and oppressor of open human inquiry and liberal flourishing. To be sure, these are neither wholly trivial charges nor unimportant questions and we will return to some of them later in chapter 3, but let us first endeavor to get some sense of how Christianity, and especially the Christian contemplative tradition, felt itself to be related or not to the philosophical traditions that both preceded and later grew within it. How has Christianity thought about the relation of contemplation and philosophy? What sense does it make to speak about the possibility of a Christian contemplative philosophy?

More sense than we might have expected. During earlier periods of Christian history, contemplative philosophy was not only a possibility, but an actuality. Already, in the late antique period, *philosophia* was often used as a technical term to refer to the contemplative and monastic life. Later still, in the monastic Middle Ages, the cenobitic (community centered) and the eremitic or anchoritic (solitary) religious lives were often designated "philosophy according to Christ," philosophy being understood not only *conceptually* as theory but also *sapientially* as lived wisdom and *contemplatively* as a way of life that culminates in *theoria*. As Jean Leclercq writes:

[For the monastic tradition,] there are, in effect, two ways of living according to reason. Either one lives according to worldly wisdom, as taught by the pagan philosophers, and that is the *philosophia saecularis* or *mundialis*, or one lives according to Christian wisdom

62. For an erudite defense of Christianity as making room for both theological and philosophical spiritual exercises, see Wayne J. Hankey, "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59, no. 2 (2003): 193–224. For more on the way Aquinas and his contemporaries continue rather than contest the classical approach to philosophy that Hadot celebrates, see Fergus Kerr, "Tradition and Reason: Two Uses of Reason, Critical and Contemplative," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 1 (2004): 37–49; A. N. Williams, "Mystical Theology Redux: The Pattern of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 1 (1997): 53–74; Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

which is not of this world but already of the world to come, and this is the *philosophia caelestis* or *spiritualis* or *divina*. The philosopher *par excellence*, and philosophy itself, is Christ.⁶³

In speaking this way, the monastic tradition was only carrying forward a way of thinking in tandem about philosophy and contemplation that was already deeply rooted in Christian tradition. As we have noted, the pagan world knew about this as well, treating philosophy as a way of life and suffusing it with spiritual exercises.⁶⁴ The presence of the Western contemplative tradition demonstrates that there is an early and intimate relationship between the philosopher's love of wisdom and an essentially contemplative desire to behold the divine. One might even argue that all philosophy originally emerged and today continues to be sustained only by first planting reason deep in the soil of such an infinite desire—Thaumas as the father of Iris—but, in any case, it is incontestable that the Christian philosophical vocation began precisely in this contemplative longing to see God. The first Christian philosopher, the eminent second-century teacher Justin Martyr, says as much in his *Dialogues with Trypho*. Justin opens the text on an autobiographical note, recounting his successive philosophical apprenticeships first to the Stoics, and then to the Aristotelians, the Pythagoreans, and finally the Platonists. His Platonist teacher taught him that the end of philosophy was “to gaze upon God” and that this contemplative consummation was available to those who practiced and studied with diligence. Justin tells us how he often sought this vision by retiring to a lonely field beside the Aegean Sea, there to set his sights upon immaterial things, hoping in this way to add “wings” to his mind.⁶⁵

While once thus disposed, Justin found his solitude disturbed by the approach of an anonymous old man.⁶⁶ The whole setting of this encounter is part of the art of Justin's dialogue. Where his previous philosophical training had encouraged him to find a place of solitude for the sake of pursuing an inner

63. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3d ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 101.

64. See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; idem, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*

65. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), §2.6.

66. Justin seems to present the old man as a kind of Christophany. The old man explains his sudden appearance with the words, “I am concerned about some of my household. These are gone away from me; and therefore have I come to make personal search for them, if, perhaps, they shall make their appearance somewhere” (*Trypho* ch. 3). This is, of course, an echo of John 10:16, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

journey alone, Justin's new interlocutor continually presses him to see that the self by itself—and thus also the philosophy of the autonomous self—is impotent. Immortality, the vision of God, and all of the affiliated desiderata of ancient philosophy are not found in the soul's own divinity but only in the soul's graced receiving of a share of divinity. The hinge of the old man's argument, at this point, is the concept of participation, a concept that, in Justin as in so much later Christian philosophy, seems to reach for a theological canopy far beyond its Platonic roots. In the *Dialogues with Trypho*, the old stranger argues that although the soul both sees and lives, it neither sees nor lives by its own power, but must in fact receive its being, its life, and its vision from the Source of being, life, and vision. As the stranger explains, "Now, no one would deny that the soul lives and if it lives, it does not live as life itself, but as a partaker of life . . ."67 If, however, the soul is not autonomous but a creature itself, if indeed the soul *receives* its life, then no amount of soul-searching alone, no carefully prepared solitary Platonic ascent, will deliver to Justin the vision and the salvation (there is really no other word for it) that Justin precisely as a philosopher desires.

Initially, the effect of these arguments was to bring Justin close to despair for, he wonders, if even Plato's philosophy fails to deliver the vision of God, then what hope remains? Why bother with philosophical learning and spiritual practice at all? Rejecting this despair, Justin's elderly interlocutor commends instead a study of the Hebrew prophets—those "blessed men," just and loved by God, whose age was "long before the time of the so-called philosophers" and who spoke "through the inspiration of the Spirit . . ." These prophets, in turn, all point to the person of Christ as the consummation of wisdom itself.⁶⁸ The old man thus enjoins Justin to practice a different sort of philosophy, a love of wisdom whose first injunction was not dialectic but prayer. "Above all," he instructed the young philosopher, "beseech God to open to you the gates of light, for no one can perceive or understand these truths unless he has been enlightened by God and his Christ."⁶⁹

Justin tells his readers that after the old man left he did not see him again, but Justin's "spirit was immediately set on fire" and he found himself possessed by "an affection for the prophets, and those friends of Christ."⁷⁰ And so Justin became a Christian, but what is important to note is that Justin did not see his conversion as the abandonment or subordination of philosophy but, rather, as its consummation. The one fire kindled in Justin's soul had two pyres: it

67. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* §6.1.

68. *Ibid.*, §7.1.

69. *Ibid.*, §7.3.

70. *Ibid.*, §8.1.

brought together the philosophical flames described in Plato's *Seventh Epistle*, kindled among a community of practice and learning, passed from soul to soul like a salutary contagion, and the Pentecostal tongues of fire, transforming Justin by grace and initiating him into the new community in Christ.⁷¹ Justin became a teacher, first in Ephesus and then in Rome, wearing the *pallium* (the philosopher's cloak) while teaching a cosmopolitan array of inquirers at his school above the baths of Mamertinus in the southeastern portion of the city, near the very center of the empire.⁷² In short, at least according to Justin's own testimony, he became in every way the philosopher he had always intended to be, but he did so only by becoming a Christian. For Justin, Christianity delivered the contemplative goods that Plato could only promise: the vision of God as the end of all desire. Thus, in Justin's thought, Christ fulfills and exceeds Greek philosophy, in what A. N. Williams has felicitously called "philosophical supercessionism."⁷³ In Justin's own words, "I discovered that [Christianity] was the only sure and useful philosophy. Thus it is that I am now a philosopher."⁷⁴

Christian philosophy, then, in the most literal sense, began in contemplative desire, the desire to *see* God. Nor did it abandon this contemplative vocation as the centuries passed. In Justin's wake, Clement of Alexandria saw the church itself as a kind of wisdom tradition, Christ being both the teacher and the path to wisdom, and Christianity the true philosophy. Developing the Logos theme in John, Clement's works present an account of Christ as the Universal Intellect, the ordering principle of the cosmos who also dwells in the center of the human heart.⁷⁵ The key word here is *gnosis*, a crucial term of art in the early church.⁷⁶ The idea of *gnosis* was so important

71. The authenticity of Plato's *Seventh Epistle* has often been called into question, though contemporary scholarship as exemplified especially by the Tübingen school of Plato studies tends to regard the letter as genuine. Regardless, the letter accurately portrays a vision of Platonism that Justin himself accepted. For an introduction to the Tübingen school and their arguments for the authenticity of the letter, see Thomas A. Szlezák, *Reading Plato*, trans. Graham Zanker (London: Routledge, 1999); Hans Joachim Kramer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics: A Work on the Theory of the Principles and Unwritten Doctrines of Plato with a Collection of the Fundamental Documents*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

72. Harlow Gregory Snyder, "Above the Bath of Myrtilus: Justin Martyr's School in the City of Rome," *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no. 3 (2007): 335–62.

73. A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

74. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* §8.1.

75. On Clement, see especially Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, 445–64. Cf. also Salvatore C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

to Clement that Jean Daniélou calls it the centerpiece of his entire thought.⁷⁷ For Clement, the summit of Christian perfection is the possession of this gnosis, a possession that is marked by the intuitive knowledge of certain sacred truths (importantly, Clement also refers to this intuitive knowledge as *theoria* or contemplation). Furthermore, in order to be accounted true, this gnosis must be marked by spiritual and moral perfection as well as the ability to communicate this encompassing or integral contemplative gnosis to others (i.e., true gnosis is not only intellectual but is also transformative and communal). Clement thus defines gnosis, at one point, as “the contemplation by direct apprehension of those who are ‘pure in heart’.”⁷⁸ For Clement, as for Justin,

76. Because it came to name one of the first and most notorious Christian heresies, the term *gnosis* regularly conjures either orthodox apprehension or romantic adulation. This is unfortunate and obscures the centrality of gnosis within the New Testament texts, the Church Fathers, and the later contemplative tradition. The term occurs regularly in a technical sense within the Pauline and Johannine writings. For John, gnosis is often linked in a contemplative manner with vision: “If you *know* me, you will *know* my Father also. From now on you do *know* him and have seen him” (John 14:7). Such knowledge is not awareness of brute facts about God and Christ (John 6:42; 7:28), but a recognition of Christ’s union with the Father, a recognition that one can make only through the empowering initiation of the Spirit, who leads the Christian into truth (John 10:38; 14:26; 15:26; cf. also Matt. 16:11–12). In continuity with the Hebrew concept of *yadah*, gnosis is a relational term for the Johannine community. True gnosis only emerges in the context of proper relationship; it is impossible without love for both God and the community. “Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:7–8) In an evangelical saying that the great contemplative St. Bernard of ClairivauX will later make much of (see Bernard’s *On Loving God*), gnosis is the knowledge of being loved that energizes our own responses of love and adoration (John 13:34; 15:9). Similar themes are found in the Pauline writings. For Paul, too, gnosis is not an individual’s mystical knowledge of God alone, but a sacred kind of knowing that issues in love for both God and the community (1 Cor. 8:1). Paul points out further that our own knowledge of God is less important than God’s gnosis of us (1 Cor. 8:3) and warns Timothy to beware of those who claim to have “knowledge falsely so called” (the *pseudonumou gnoseos* of 1 Tim. 6:19). Despite these demurrals, for Paul, gnosis remains important and a gift from God to the community of faith. Gathered in worship, the community charismatically receives bestowals of wisdom (*sophia*) and words of knowledge (*logos gnoseos*) (1 Cor. 12:8). The church is initiated into this knowledge that is like a sacred perfume to both the Christian community and to the world (2 Cor. 2:14). After speaking about the way we are transformed from glory to glory through beholding with unveiled faces the vision of Christ, Paul recounts: “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge [*photismos tes gnoseos*] of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). This knowledge has, for Paul, the highest value. Its ultimacy qualifies all other measures of value. Paul declares every privilege of treasure and status to be loss compared with the excellencies of knowing (*gnoseos*) Christ (Phil. 3:8).

77. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, 447.

78. *Strom.* VII.3.13.1; quoted in *ibid.*, 448.

this contemplative gnosis is the motor of true philosophy and also signals how the Christian philosophy of these early apologists differs from its pagan predecessors. According to Clement, “the whole choir of philosophers” was content merely to contemplate the heavens, but the Christian philosopher moves even beyond the heavens to the contemplation of God himself.⁷⁹

Later, the first truly great theologian of antiquity, Origen of Alexandria, also gives this contemplative gnosis pride of place, just as he also follows Clement and Justin in identifying Christianity with true philosophy.⁸⁰ For Origen, Christ is the whole of wisdom and the philosopher is only a philosopher to the extent that he participates in Christ.⁸¹ There is some debate about whether indeed Origen of Alexandria studied under Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, but, regardless, the philosophical credentials and power of the Christian Origen of Alexandria are impeccable, as even Porphyry was forced to concede.⁸² Where Plotinus’s and Porphyry’s genius was speculative philosophy, however, Origen’s passion was philosophically informed exegesis; he sought to uncover and make plain the rich layers of truth he saw adumbrated in the Scriptures. This led him to a kind of hermeneutical gnosis, a theological type of what later Christian contemplatives would call *lectio divina*, in which the prayerful exegete is led through ever deepening layers of reflection upon and interaction with the biblical texts. True knowledge, for Origen, is insight into the hidden meaning of Scripture, insight that brings the exegete into a deeper relational communion with the Father through the Son. For Origen, as for Clement, this gnosis has an anthropological component—its condition of possibility is the ecstasy of the human intellect that is elevated and made one with God’s own light. The human mind receives the entirety of its virtue from participation in God’s intellectual light, but this virtue admits of degrees. The

79. Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* 4.55, quoted in Williams, *Divine Sense*, 69.

80. This equation recurs throughout the contemplative tradition as, for example, later in John Scotus Eriugena and Meister Eckhart.

81. As Origen writes, “But each of the sages, in proportion as he embraces wisdom, partakes to that extent of Christ, in that He is wisdom; just as every one who is greatly gifted with power, in proportion as he has power, in that proportion also has a share in Christ, inasmuch as He is power.” Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1.39.

82. It is now accepted that Ammonius Saccas certainly taught another Origen, known as Origen the Pagan, but many have argued that this same Ammonius (rather than a different Christian Ammonius with whom Eusebius occasionally confounds Saccas) taught both the pagan and the Christian Origen. This surprises us largely because we find Origen to be such a peculiar name but, as John Dillon has argued, if one were to open an Alexandrian phonebook from the first few decades of the third century, one would have found at least a column and a half of “Origenes”! John M. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

clarity of one's contemplation is a corollary of one's purity of heart and these two determine the extent of one's participation in God's trinitarian life.⁸³ All intelligences, Origen writes, have their being only through this participatory *taxis* according to which the very being and knowledge of spirits is found in their ecstatic dependence upon and turning toward God (indeed, for Origen, this universal vertical participation—the essence of spiritual being—is the source of our horizontal communion as well, inasmuch as it establishes the connaturality and potential sympathy of all sentient beings).

The porous boundaries between philosophy and contemplation, between philosophical theory and mystical *theoria*, are not only found in the Alexandrian East but in Latin Christendom as well. Although Augustine is certainly more circumspect in his commendation of philosophy than either Justin or Clement, nevertheless there is no question that for him contemplation and philosophy permeate one another, and that philosophy achieves its ends only as it is suffused in a contemplative milieu. Augustine's dual accent upon divine transcendence and the necessity of grace may at first glance seem to leave little room for the intellectual confidence without which philosophy can only despair. As Etienne Gilson writes, "To the extent that philosophy is defined as a purely rational and theoretical attempt to solve the most general questions raised by man and the universe, Augustine's doctrine proclaims the insufficiency of philosophy on every page."⁸⁴ But, arguably, Augustine's robust doctrine of the intellect in fact rehabilitates ancient philosophy precisely by transforming it and setting it in a Christian and contemplative key.⁸⁵ For Augustine, autonomous philosophy can only lead to skepticism insofar as the intellect itself is not autonomous but only properly functions through divine illumination.⁸⁶ While Augustine certainly distinguishes *scientia* (calculative knowledge) from *sapientia* (contemplative wisdom), this distinction is one of degrees and use rather than a real distinction between differing faculties.⁸⁷ The grandeur of what philosophy

83. *Peri Physeon* IV.9 in Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 326.

84. Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), 235.

85. Williams, *Divine Sense*, 144. Thus, in the *De Ordine* Augustine is able to equate "true philosophy" with "true religion," both of which are suffused in prayer.

86. On divine illumination, see especially Lydia Schumacher, "Knowledge by Illumination: The Grandeur of Reason According to Augustine," in *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism*, ed. Peter M. Candler and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM Press, 2010), 417–31. Cf. also Gilson, *Saint Augustine*, 66–96.

87. Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. 5 (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 12.22.

at its best can be is tied, for Augustine, to the grandeur of the intellect that is capable of receiving illumination.⁸⁸ One might say that, for Augustine, the intellect is essentially pontifical in its essence; it is the bridge (*pontifex*) between divine and creaturely realms. We human beings are only able to receive illumination because we are *capax dei* on account of our being rational creatures—that is, spirits made in the image of God whose proper end is the contemplation of God.⁸⁹ Our intellectual activity is therefore always already on the way to prayer, though this capacity is only consummated by grace and transformation. In this way, Augustine solves the skeptical problem by radicalizing the dynamic dependence of the intellect upon a divine source: all knowledge, even quotidian knowledge, is bound up to some extent with the intellect's openness to God, in whose light, Augustine holds, we see light.⁹⁰

It would be easy to multiply these examples many times over. Thus, as his pseudonym would lead one to expect, in his small body of works, Dionysius the Areopagite repeatedly refers to philosophy (“my philosophy,” “divine philosophy,” “celestial philosophy,” “true philosophy,” and the like).⁹¹ He derides Apollphanes for making unholy use of godly things because Apollphanes uses philosophy to attack God when, in fact, philosophy properly pursued should have led him to the mystical contemplation and participatory divinization that is always Dionysius's overwhelming concern.⁹² Later authors in the Dionysian tradition such as Maximus the Confessor and John Scotus Eriugena intensified this intimate connection between philosophy and contemplation.⁹³ Eriugena's equation of philosophy and spirituality is so strong

88. Schumacher, “Knowledge by Illumination.”

89. On the intellect as “pontifical,” see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, The Gifford Lectures. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

90. Thus Augustine's frequent references to Ps. 36:9, “In your light we see light [*In luce tua videmus lucem*].”

91. *Divine Names* II.2; III.3; *Epistle* VII.2.

92. *Epistle* VII.2. In *Epistle* IX.1, Dionysius contrasts two styles of Christian teaching, one mystical and initiatory, the other philosophical and demonstrative. While Dionysius certainly differentiates these modes, and even sees the mystical as more noble, he in no way divides them. For him, the philosophical path is only fulfilled in mystical contemplative consummation, and he never suggests that a naked contemplative way is possible without being planted in the necessary symbolic, philosophical, and demonstrative soil.

93. Hans Urs von Balthasar writes of how Maximus rearticulates the Dionysian project in “a sharper, more philosophical way.” Indeed, Maximus brought his immense philosophical erudition as a way of powerfully contending for the importance of contemplation. As von Balthasar writes, Maximus sought “to strike mystical and spiritual sparks out of the rough scholastic flint.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 86, 51.

that it is often startling. Not only does he say, quoting Augustine's *De vera religione*, "that true philosophy is true religion and conversely that true religion is true philosophy,"⁹⁴ but Eriugena goes even farther, making the astounding claim that "no one enters heaven except through philosophy [*nemo intrat in celum nisi per philosophiam*]."⁹⁵

The point of this miscellany of Christian contemplative philosophy is not to be exhaustive but merely to establish the intimate and early connection between philosophy and contemplation within the Christian tradition. To be sure, the estimation of philosophy's worth varied considerably amongst early Christian writers and there were some for whom the term *philosophy* was nothing but a term of opprobrium. My case, however, is not that everyone throughout the first Christian millennium agreed wholeheartedly in embracing philosophy—they did not—but, rather, that when Christian writers did explicitly esteem philosophy, their acceptance of it coincided with an accent upon contemplation. In the first Christian millennium, the fortunes of philosophy were wed to those of contemplation; philosophical theory and contemplative *theoria* went hand in hand.

The constitutive reciprocity between philosophy and contemplation, between dialectics and what we today know only in a diminished form as spirituality, endured at least until the high Middle Ages. Indeed, although the idea of such a contemplative and sapiential philosophy may seem alien to those of us who know philosophy only as an academic specialty, to the typological imagination of the medieval mind, the connection had something obvious about it. The mutually beneficial relationship of philosophy and contemplation was apparent to medievals who understood both philosophy and contemplation to be Marian disciplines. From the earliest Christian centuries, Mary, the Mother of our Lord, even more than Mary of Bethany so beloved of later Christian mystics, served as the model for the contemplative life. The Virgin's receiving of the Word of God in the annunciation, her presence to her Son

94. John Scotus Eriugena, *De predestinatione*, I, 1. On Eriugena, see esp. Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Deirdre Carabine, *John Scotus Eriugena*, ed. Brian Davies, *Great Medieval Thinkers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a reading of Eriugena's mystical anthropology that is sensitive to the concerns of contemporary continental philosophy of religion, see Thomas A. Carlson, "Locating the Mystical Subject," in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

95. John Scotus Eriugena, *Annotationes* 57.15. Quoted in Dermot Moran, "John Scotus Eriugena," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2004 ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2004/entries/scottus-eriuena/>.

at the wedding in Cana, her vigil before the cross—all of these vignettes and more served as imagistic models for the contemplative calling to receive and give birth to the presence of the divine life in the midst of oneself and the world. As Hans Urs von Balthasar, inheriting this tradition of reflection, says: “[Mary’s] consent became the source of the Incarnation of the Word. In the Spirit she utters that Yes of hers which is the origin of all Christian contemplation . . .”⁹⁶

Less familiar today, though it was a recurring trope throughout the Middle Ages, is the image of Mary as the model of genuine philosophy. Monastic exegetes understood Christ not only in terms of the *Logos* but also as the divine *Sophia*, the incarnation of Holy Wisdom. The Virgin herself, who sheltered this Wisdom in her womb, thus became true philosophy and was called by the title “the philosophy of the Christians.” For the monks of the Middle Ages, learning was an activity that took place in Mary’s presence and under her direction; it was guided by the imperative: *philosophari in Maria*.⁹⁷ The memory of this tradition gave John Paul II the words with which to close his encyclical on faith and reason. The “holy monks of antiquity,” he reminds his readers, called Mary “the table of intellectual faith.” “In her they saw a suitable image of true philosophy and realized that they must [in their intellectual pursuits] *be philosophizing with Mary [se debere cum Maria philosophari]*.”⁹⁸

PROSPECTUS

Is this union of philosophy and contemplation still viable today? Might theologians and philosophers of religion still pursue a contemplative philosophy? Can we make such a contemplative philosophy intelligible in light of our present concerns and the proliferation of our sciences? I believe we can answer all of these questions with at least a qualified affirmative, and thus, in this book, I seek to uncover some of the ways we might make this affirmative answer persuasive. As we have already seen, throughout its history, the Christian contemplative tradition has been deeply intertwined with a variety of philosophical theories and practices and it has even recently become the object of renewed philosophical attention on the part of both analytic and continental philosophers. As I show in chapter 1, however, most of these contemporary philosophical studies fail to treat the practices of the

96. von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 71.

97. Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 101.

98. John Paul II, “Fides Et Ratio,” in *Restoring Faith in Reason: With a New Translation of the Encyclical Letter, Faith and Reason: Together with a Commentary and Discussion*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 171, ¶08.

contemplative tradition as integral to its philosophical deliverances—contemplation and philosophy remain extraneous to one another rather than integral. Throughout this book, I will argue, by contrast, that the philosophical theories advanced within the contemplative tradition only find their intelligibility within the practices of contemplative *theoria*. In this way, the contemplative theologians may be seen to inherit the classical understanding of philosophy as a way of life. Like the philosophical traditions of antiquity, the ones that attracted Justin even before his conversion, the Christian contemplative tradition fundamentally involves not just theory, but an integrally mystical and conceptual path, a complex of conceptual, somatic, psychosemantic, and spiritual traditions, practices of transformation, and theories that seek to open new emotional, volitional, social, and cognitive capacities. These newly cultivated capacities both transform and reorient the kinds of philosophy and theology contemplatives produce, issuing ultimately in a transfigured philosophy whose end may be, by grace, the vision of God or even the divinization of the contemplative-philosopher.

Although we might find evidence of this model in any number of contemplative authors throughout Christian history (from Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria to John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, from Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor to Evelyn Underhill and Thomas Merton, etc.), this book concentrates on its exemplification in the works of Anselm of Canterbury and Nicholas of Cusa. The choice to focus on Anselm and Nicholas is not at all arbitrary. Not only are they both heirs to an Augustinian tradition that refused to separate philosophy and theology in any disjunctive manner, but they are both equally remembered for their extraordinary philosophical work and their superlative contributions to mystical theology and the Christian contemplative tradition. What is most remarkable, however, is that both Anselm and Nicholas exemplify these two arenas (philosophy and contemplation, theory and *theoria*) at one and the same time: their greatest philosophical achievements are already spiritual and contemplative, their efforts at rational argument and intellectual understanding coincide with (and are in no way opposed to) events of contemplative illumination. Accordingly, for both Anselm and Nicholas, philosophical argument is necessarily deployed within a carefully constructed literary context of liturgical ascent, the cultivation of attention, practices of sacred reading, prayer, the ordering of desire, and so forth, and all of these aspects are displayed on their very pages.

Nevertheless, there are differences enough between the two authors to merit the consideration of each. Anselm writes before the rediscovery of the

Dionysian corpus in the West and, thus, contemplation for him has a rather more kataphatic flavor. For Nicholas, the Dionysian influence is everywhere apparent and the strategies of negative theology accordingly play a much larger role. Still, despite differing emphases, the contemplative life seems to require both positive and negative theological approaches, and one can discern kataphatic and apophatic approaches in both the former archbishop and the one time cardinal. Philosophy, too, has a different sense for Anselm, who stands at the precipice of the age of the schoolmen, and for Nicholas, who lived through the last days of the scholastic tradition. It seems, then, a matter of great interest that both of these philosopher-theologians, separated by nearly five hundred years, find in contemplation the resources for transforming, engaging, and creatively renewing the philosophical questions of their own day. In chapters 2 and 4, I seek both to show and to commend this respectively Anselmian and Cusan approach to the practice of contemplative philosophy.

One might wonder, at this point, to whom I intend to show this. Who do I imagine my readers to be? There is no easy reply to this question, for I suppose that every book needs as much to create its audience as to find it, a point that is not incidental to my account of Anselm and Nicholas in later chapters. Nevertheless, I can offer at least a preliminary answer. Throughout this book, I address students, inquirers, and professionals within theology, philosophy of religion, religious studies, spirituality, and the emerging field of contemplative studies, and I address especially those who find that their thinking is still marked by the inheritance of Christian traditions of reflection. Scholars today are regularly encouraged—even within, if not *especially* within, theology, philosophy, and religious studies—to adopt so-called etic standpoints of putative neutrality vis-à-vis their subject matters. There are times when such a disengaged approach to one's inquiry may be especially important, but in practice it has too often become a demand that one structure all inquiry according to the peculiar epistemic and metaphysical patterns of modern, Western thinking.⁹⁹

By contrast, this book is written in a pilgrim voice, which is to say, in the voice of a scholar-practitioner, and it therefore aims to think both from within and about “indigenous (or naturalized) Christian” patterns of speech and existence.¹⁰⁰ In short, I forego all the theological hand-wringing and assume that I can, however inadequately, nevertheless talk about God—even the God

99. For more on such matters, see Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, “The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies,” in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies*, ed. Jacob H. Sherman and Jorge N. Ferrer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

Christians know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—while also trying to talk about other issues of critical importance. Some theologians (not all, by any means) may be more comfortable than some philosophers with this way of speaking, but the questions I address are as philosophical as they are theological. Issues of revelation, ecclesiology, Christology, and so forth arise in the following chapters, but they do so occasionally and only ever as steps within more sustained arguments about metaphysics, epistemology, the nature of reason, and other philosophical and metaphysical matters.

Even though I speak this way throughout the book, one need not be a Christian theologian or a Christian philosopher to engage my argument. Understanding across cultural, religious, linguistic, and other similar barriers is always an achievement, and should never be made a prerequisite for conversation. Moreover, much of what is said here will have relevance for thinking through the cognitive import of contemplation within other traditions, especially Jewish and Islamic contemplative traditions, and for efforts to think even more broadly about the cognitive role of piety, spirituality, and devotion within various religious communities. Still, I would not have written this book if I didn't believe there was something good, true, and beautiful about the particular tradition that I am seeking to recover, reinterpret, and creatively re-perform, and so I do at least implicitly invite my readers to imagine becoming scholar-practitioner *viatores* alongside me. Accordingly, I will often use the first-person plural as a way of imagining the community I would like to see obtain between myself and my readers, a community that would justify *my* referring to *us* by virtue of a common scholar-practitioner *we*.

Far from disqualifying one's contribution to philosophy, theology, and religious studies, as some within the academy would claim, I insist that to come at certain matters as scholar-practitioners may afford a critical advantage, especially when dealing with philosophical and theological topics that are necessarily self-implicating. So many disputes in philosophy end, after the rigorous clarification of terms and argument, with opponents locked in apparently intractable oppositions rooted in competing basic intuitions. Might it not be that such intuitions only appear basic because scholars have not paid attention to the processes of formation through which they came to have such intuitions in the first place? When we insist that scholarship proceed only in the voice of an outsider, we elide the complex inheritance of traditions and processes of formation that first made us capable of taking an outsider's point

100. Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West*, Radical Traditions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3.

of view at all, which is bad enough, but we also elide our access to anything we are not yet capable of seeing. Could we see things differently if we allowed ourselves to be transformed? This is at the heart of what I have been calling the question of contemplative philosophy.

Therefore, throughout this book, I implicitly invite my readers to wrestle not only with the distinction between philosophy and theology—arguably a contingent and malleable distinction anyway, rather than a universal and essential one—but also with the deeper distinction between philosophico-theological practices that treat their subjects extrinsically and those that risk an adventure of transformation as a correlate of inquiry. To invite readers into such transformation is not a fideistic or fundamentalistic insistence that one can understand if and only if one enters the magic circle of privileged identity. Identity is not the issue—in fact, identity is what such an approach calls into question, for it renders identity plastic. I am inviting my readers to entertain the notion that there are some truths that can only be seen insofar as they also transform the one who sees.¹⁰¹ I believe this is what Michel Foucault was getting at when he tried to theorize the distinction between philosophy and spirituality as correlative to the distinction between the epistemic injunction to “know thyself [*gnothi seauton*]” and the transformative injunction to “care for one’s self [*epimeleia heautou*].” On Foucault’s account, philosophy concerns itself with the conditions that govern access to truth and falsehood, but spirituality goes a step farther. Foucault writes:

Spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right. Spirituality postulates that the subject as such does not have right of access to the truth and is not capable of having access to the truth. It postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge (*connaissance*), which would be founded and justified simply by the fact that he is the subject and because he possesses this or that structure of subjectivity. It postulates that for

101. Although I do not directly address the point in this book, I assume that these subject-transforming truths are not confined to the discipline of theology, or to the church for that matter. However quaint it may now seem, the old notion that the proper study of the sciences and the humanities ought to be ennobling may be given an ontological and not merely a sentimental justification, and this means that theologians as much as philosophers must be open to the surprise, challenge, and transformation of the good whenever and wherever it appears. More sinisterly, and even more unfashionably, one must also entertain the thought that certain disciplinary practices achieve their particular forms of insight only at great cost to the person, even perhaps risking moral disfigurement—and this, too, may apply to certain theological approaches just as it does to certain forms of philosophy, the liberal arts, or the sciences as well.

the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth.¹⁰²

Although Foucault distinguishes spirituality from philosophy, in this way he does not divide them, for he recognizes that throughout most of our history, spirituality and philosophy were integral to one another. It is only in modernity that their separation becomes absolute, for in modernity we proceed as if the untransformed subject were already capable of truth and as if the truth were incapable of transforming (Foucault even says *saving*) the subject.¹⁰³ Perhaps what I ask most of my readers is that they entertain the possibility that, in this matter, at least, modernity may have erred.

Let me conclude this introductory chapter with a very brief précis of what is to follow. In order to emphasize the way that the book's interests are philosophical and theological rather than merely historical, its chapters are organized around a very basic chiasm. After opening with a chapter on contemporary approaches to contemplation in philosophy of religion and the failure of such approaches to integrate theory and *theoria* (chapter 1), we turn to consider the way that Anselm's *Proslogion* achieves precisely such an integration via what I call the adorative intellect (chapter 2). But can modern men and women any longer think this integration of contemplation and philosophy? Might the sundering of theory from *theoria* be part of what it means to be modern? In chapter 3, the hinge of the chiasm, I consider Hans Blumenberg's influential argument that modernity is precisely constituted by the differentiation of theory from any trace of *theoria*, the severing of curiosity from any moral or spiritual elevation. I show, however, that, Blumenberg's account turns on a peculiar misreading of Nicholas of Cusa, one that casts him as the last great failure of the medieval mind. But Nicholas might very well be read, instead, as the first iteration of a kind of modernity, one constituted more by the discovery of human and worldly creativity than by the sundering

102. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981–82*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15.

103. "If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begin when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject." *Ibid.*, 19.

of reason from contemplative elevation, and, if this is the case, then philosophy need hardly reject its contemplative traditions in order to avoid anachronism. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that philosophy's renewal may lie in a retrieval of the integration of theory and *theoria* that was only contingently lost rather than progressively outgrown through the Enlightenment's awakening sense of autonomy.

Chapter 4, then, turns to Nicholas explicitly in order to show how his text, *De Visione Dei*, explicitly unites philosophical theory and contemplative *theoria* through an iconic and participatory ontology. Finally, in chapter 5, I turn the book's attention back to the state of philosophy of religion today. I argue that the model for contemplative philosophical practice uncovered in the preceding chapters retains a number of lessons for the practice of philosophy of religion within the contemporary academy. By turning attention to the role of self-implicating practice and transformation within argument, contemplative philosophy suggests a way around either the rationalism of our Enlightenment forebears or the fideism of mere religious and philosophical assertion, and might in this way offer a surprising way around the analytic and continental divide that largely rent twentieth-century philosophy into two relatively isolated camps. The model of contemplative philosophy also suggests that when the intellect acts in concert with volition—that is, when the mind acts with the heart, or when theory and *theoria* coincide—it is capable of far more than we philosophers have yet understood. The contemplative challenges the philosopher to admit that we do not yet know what a mind is capable of, and in this admission may lie not the fashionable end of philosophy but, rather, its most profound renewal.