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We are not the only ones to pray in a contemplative and welcoming manner; other cultures and religions also have a rich tradition of this type of prayer. Father Noël gives us a glimpse into the very rich and varied tradition of non-Christian religions, identifying aspects that invite reflection and lived experience.

Contemplation: Spiritual and Religious Issues

original in French

Introduction

It is not easy to discuss contemplation in its current forms, given that this reflection focuses on the concept in other cultures. Certainly, the term “contemplation” is an anthropological and divine reality. It can only be understood in the context of man's quest to reach the Spiritual and Supreme Being. The experience of cultures consists in identifying these forms of contemplation at the origins of man.

The aim is to show its profound value in itself and in relation to society, and what it can bring to the destiny of humankind.

Contemplation is indeed a universal cultural phenomenon, deeply rooted in the traditions (spiritual, philosophical, artistic) of various societies, which refers to a deep attention to an object, a work of art, nature or its inner world, for the purpose of knowledge, spiritual connection, wonder, or psychological well-being, manifested in practices such as meditation, yoga, artistic observation or even poetry reading. This cultural process involves introspection, subjective interpretation and a search for meaning that can lead to personal transformation.

For the ancient Greeks¹ (such as Aristotle with *theoria*), contemplation was the highest form of intellectual activity, seeking truth and elevation of the soul.

In certain spiritual and religious traditions, practices such as yoga, meditation (Buddhist, Hindu) or Christian prayer aim to achieve a contemplative state in order to draw closer to the divine or attain enlightenment. In the field of art and aesthetics: aesthetic contem-

¹ The Greeks did not distinguish between observation and contemplation. They refer to contemplation as the act of looking long and intently, but not the state of mind that can induce a slight trance-like fusion in the observer when reasoning fades away.

plation, in front of a work of art, music, or landscape, is a cultural act of interpretation and emotion that enriches the human experience, as in the poems of Victor Hugo's "Les Contemplations".²

There are several approaches we can take to this study: philosophical, theological, and historical. To these approaches, we can add another: the spiritual and religious approach, which we will adopt for this study. We will examine the experience of contemplation in the major religious traditions and in human experience. We will consider the writings of several biblical figures in order to compare them with the Christian faith.

The interest of this study lies in the fact that contemplation is a given for all human beings and all cultures.

After a brief introduction, the first section will deal with contemplation in the biblical tradition; the second section will analyse contemplation in other major religious traditions, and the last section will focus on the African approach, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This will be followed by a conclusion.

1. In the biblical tradition

It is true that the word contemplation, in the strict sense, is not found in the Scriptures. What comes closest to contemplative activity is the attitude of the Sages of the Old Testament. Through divine action in the history of salvation, the prophets came to possess a true knowledge of God and his providence³.

² A French artist of the nineteenth century, known mainly as a poet, playwright and novelist and a prolific draughtsman. He called himself Aristotle, and left a visionary graphic work, often inspired by fantastical and dark landscapes.

³ J.-M. TILLARD, *Conseils évangéliques*, in *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle* II,2.

1.1. In Jewish tradition: The patriarchs and prophets

The Bible is a mosaic of culture because the people of the Bible were influenced by several civilisations and cultures. Indeed, contemplation indicates a state of deep relationship with Yahweh, which involves both prayer and contemplation of his word and his creation. St. John of the Cross says: “Without neglecting to borrow the insights that science and experience can provide me, I will rely particularly on the divine scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the infallible teacher”⁴. It should be noted that in his book, Saint John often quotes many texts from the Old Testament, not for their doctrine but for the example they offer, the models of contemplatives found in the Pentateuch, the books of the prophets, the psalms⁵, etc.

The Letter to the Romans makes us venerate Abraham, the Father of all believers, Rom 4:16-22: I have made you the father of many nations; our Father before God in whom he believed, Gen 15:6. Faced with God's promise, he did not waver in unbelief, but was strengthened in his faith, giving glory to God and fully convinced that God was powerful enough to fulfil what he had promised.

In this sense, Abraham is a prophetic type who foreshadows the reality of Jesus Christ. He believed in the omnipotence of God, who miraculously promised him a son and, through that son, countless prosperity⁶. It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the divine call to leave and go to the place he was to receive as an inheritance; and he left without seeing where he was going, Gn 12:1-10.

Moses also became great through faith, refusing to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing to be mistreated with God's people rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin, because he considered the reproach of Christ to be greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he had his eyes fixed on the reward. It was by faith that he left Egypt without fearing the wrath of the king, because he saw, as

⁴ SAINT JEAN DE LA CROIX, *La montée du carmel*, ed. Silverio de Santa Teresa, Burgos, 1929, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ J. HUBY, *Épître aux Romains*, coll. *Verbum salutis*, Paris, 5eme éd., 1940, 177-178.

it were, the invisible, and remained steadfast (Hebrews 11:24-27).

The point of convergence of their experiences is faith in the one God. Then there is the contemplation of the invisible goods offered by divine promises. Indeed, after them, the prophets suffered all kinds of violence and torture in order to come into possession of God's promises and attain resurrection, Hebrews 11:32-40. Their faith in the one true God is the foundation of their love. In their eventful, turbulent and troubled history, the prophets proclaim that God is the master of history, whom he guides with love.

Contemplation for this people consisted in seeking to draw closer to God, to be transformed and to align themselves with his will through their daily lives. Thus, all these patriarchs and prophets are models of faith: intelligence, love, and the whole being are what respond to God in faith⁷.

1.2. In the Christian tradition

The perfect revelation of God was revealed to us by the Son of God: no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known to us (Jn 1:18). Jesus appears as the ideal model of the contemplative life. The holy humanity of Jesus, united to the Word of God in the unity of the person, intuitively contemplates the heavenly Father; this is an event that transforms all humanity. Thus, the beatific vision is promised to us as our ultimate end; our whole life tends towards it, without ever reaching it here below. Only the Son possessed it on this earth, for he is the firstborn, the first of the living, the first of the risen.

1.2.1. Contemplation in the life of Jesus

We see moments of intense contemplation in his life. These moments were characterised by prayer and withdrawal. We see him in places such as the Mount of Olives praying and spending time alone

⁷ J. MOUROUX, Remarque sur la foi dans Saint Paul, *R.A.*, vol. 65, 1937, 141-143

with his Father (John 18:1). Contemplation was also an expression of his faith, reflecting his personal relationship with God his Father. Jesus lived a life in harmony with God's will, and contemplation helped him to live his relationship in an integral way. This attitude illustrates well how contemplation was a pillar of his life. Certain features of his life lead us to this revelation, first and foremost prayer. Before every decisive act in his life, we see him withdrawing to pray. immediately after the theophany of his baptism, the descent of the dove, and the heavenly voice, Jesus withdrew to the desert (Lk 4:1; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 11:1; 23:34, 36; Mk 1:12, 13, 35; Jn 17).

These few examples, however, give us a glimpse of this life of prayer; mutual knowledge is incommunicable, so the Father and his Son are of the same nature, Jn 10:30. As Jean Romain said: Jesus is a person who, despite his obvious humanity, impresses us as being at home in both worlds from beginning to end⁸. Indeed, in Christianity, contemplation, like prayer and meditation, is a means of accessing the divine. Its purpose is everything that can excite divine love in the soul and increase the desire for holiness within it. Christianity has always believed that contemplation is a path of love, trust and surrender to God. However, progress on the path of contemplative life also requires effort, sacrifice and trials, which will be purifying for the sanctification of the soul.

For the Fathers of the Church, in this case Saint Thomas, the contemplation of truth was also practised in the activity we call scientific; its object was constituted by all kinds of knowledge⁹. Thus, the contemplative life was opposed to practical activity, such as manual labour, but also to the efforts of moral life. Today, the term contemplation refers exclusively to the religious, spiritual and aesthetic domains, because the importance of the contemplative life for the spiritual life is enormous.

The Christian tradition, particularly that of the Greek Fathers¹⁰, assigns contemplation a place of paramount importance. The Fathers

⁸ J.-R. ILLINGWORTH, *Divine Immanence*, London, 1904, 50.

⁹ Cf. Saint Thomas quoted by A. BERNARD, *Projet spirituel*, Rome 1970, 12.

¹⁰ The cases of Clément d'Alexandrie, Origène and Grégoire de Nysse.

extol the value of contemplative activity, which they consider to be the anticipation of vision and which they regard as having, in a sense, an absolute character¹¹. The question we may ask ourselves is this: is contemplative activity legitimate in Christian life? From a Christian point of view, it must be said that contemplation is not an end in itself; it is a means of achieving union with God¹². Indeed, what matters unconditionally in this logic is charity. This charity can be experienced in the form of union with God through love, but it can never conflict with the duty of charity towards one's neighbour. Saint John says: Whoever loves God and hates his brother is a liar (1 Jn 4:20).

1.2.2. Contemplation: a mystery to be lived

How can contemplation transform the lives of believers? First, it is an invitation to enter into an intimate relationship with God, a silent communication of love where we allow ourselves to be loved by him. Second, it is the discovery of God's presence, perceiving God in everyday life so that we can marvel at his beauty and greatness, hence the attitude of adoration. Contemplation invites us to re-examine our lives in order to act more in accordance with the image of Christ. It restores our inner being. And for Christians, it is also a call to action. It guides Christian action in the world, so that actions are inspired and guided by faith and love¹³.

Contemplation is therefore a silent prayer, in which we listen to God and humbly surrender ourselves to his love. To this end, Christians are invited to see the world with fresh eyes and full of hope, even in difficult times. Silence is a fundamental element of contemplation. Whether external or internal, it is essential for allowing the word of God to descend into the heart and for receiving divine guidance.

¹¹ A. BERNARD, *Contemplation*, in Dictionnaire de vie spirituelle, Cerf 1983, 178.

¹² Cf. A. BERNARD, *Contemplation*, 179.

¹³ A. BERNARD, *Le projet spirituel*, Rome 1970, 14.

In short, in Christianity, contemplation as prayer and meditation is a means of accessing the divine. To this end, its purpose is to draw the soul towards divine love for holiness¹⁴; moreover, contemplation requires human participation.

2. Contemplation in other major religious traditions

Contemplation is a practice found in all religions. We have discussed Christianity and Judaism above, and now, by way of illustration, we will touch on this practice in Islam and Buddhism. However, this is not a study of these religions, but rather a look at contemplation: its meaning and daily practice.

2.1. Islam

By definition, Islam is a monotheistic religion¹⁵, which means submission to God, Allah. Founded in the 7th century by the prophet Muhammad, who revealed the Koran as the word of God. In everyday life, prayer is one of the pillars of Islam.

Contemplation in Islam¹⁶ is a spiritual practice that invites believers to reflect deeply on divine creation and the verses of the Quran. It aims to strengthen faith and the relationship with God by meditating on His signs and names. This practice goes beyond simple thought, involving introspection to better understand oneself and the divine. The object of this contemplation is meditation on creation. Believers are encouraged to observe the universe, nature, and the alternation of day and night, considering all of this as signs of God's power and wisdom. They are also encouraged to reflect on the Quran,

¹⁴ Cf. Saint Bonaventure, quoted by A. RAVIER, *La mystique et les mystiques*, Paris 1964, 9.

¹⁵ H. ZIRKER, *Islam, Christianisme*, in *Nouveau dictionnaire de Théologie*, 436–442.

¹⁶ M. ANAWATI, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane, essai de théologie comparée*, Vrin³ 1981, 17.

which contains numerous calls to contemplation, meditating on its verses and learning lessons from them.

In short, contemplation in Islam includes self-reflection¹⁷, a form of regular soul-searching to better understand one's actions and relationship with Allah¹⁸. It helps to better know Allah by reflecting on His names and attributes, such as mercy, peace, and guidance, and how they manifest themselves in daily life.

As such, it is a means of attaining a deeper understanding of God, accessing a unitive vision of the divine, and strengthening one's faith, humility and desire for improvement.

2.2. In Buddhism

Buddhism founded by Siddhartha Gautama¹⁹. For Buddhists, contemplation is a deep meditation practice that involves carefully observing an object (such as the body, breathing or the Dharma)²⁰ to develop awareness, understanding and wisdom. It is a way of training the mind, helping to calm the mind, detach from excessive thoughts and obtain direct, experiential knowledge of reality. Contemplation can also take the form of visualisations, for example that of a Buddha to develop faith.

Contemplation plays a very important role in the spiritual life of the believer. It is a training of the mind that helps to develop qualities such as attention, mental stability, presence and the ability to discriminate.

It then allows one to reflect on the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings) in order to understand the causes of suffering and the paths to happiness, and to gain direct, experiential knowledge rather than

¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ H. WALDENFELS, translated by A. Van HOA, *Bouddhisme/ christianisme*, in *Dictionnaire de théologie*, Cerf, Paris 1996, 77-83; *Le petit Robert, Dictionnaire des noms propres*, 258.

²⁰ H. WALDENFELS, *op. cit.* 439.

intellectual understanding²¹. This practice leads to the development of wisdom, compassion and spiritual awakening. In fact, for Dharma, contemplation means reflecting on teachings such as: Truths, the concepts of impermanence, suffering and impersonality²².

2.3. African approach

Contemplation in African culture is not an isolated practice but is intrinsically linked to spirituality, communion with ancestors and nature, and manifests itself in daily life through rituals, respect for traditions and an animistic worldview. It is also expressed in the maintenance of identity in the face of external influences, seeking to integrate new realities while preserving deep roots, as illustrated by the Pan-Africanism movement²³. Contemplation is often linked to the idea of gods and ancestors acting in the world, prompting reflection on the meaning of existence and the place of the individual in the universe. Some traditions include a supreme being who is sometimes seen as the Father of all, explaining life and human existence.

*2.3.1. Communion with ancestors*²⁴

Ancestors are revered spiritual figures, a bridge between the living and the divine, guardians of tradition and social cohesion, honoured by cults, and essential for cosmic harmony. Their importance lies in their role as protectors and intercessors, influencing the present and the future.

²¹ Ibid., 440.

²² Ibid., 441.

²³ The Pan-Africanist movement, which advocates African unity, is a form of collective contemplation aimed at developing a common consciousness and building a future based on solidarity and a shared African identity. See also Cahiers des Religions Africaines, V1, no. 1 (April 2020).

²⁴ See B. AKOTIA, La gestion des conflits chez les Akebu du Togo, Lille, ANRT, 2007, pp. 261-273.

Ancestors who have acquired divine status are a source of inspiration and guidance for the living. Contemplation can take place by addressing them for advice or to understand their will, as the main cult is addressed to the ancestors²⁵. Their cult is fundamental and involves respect for rituals to maintain the balance between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Contemplation is expressed through certain required attitudes: deep communion, respect, gratitude, and intercessory prayers. For Africans, ancestors occupy a special place insofar as they are present in the lives of living people on earth and are therefore associated with all the important events of their pilgrimage here below. In this perspective, the Second Vatican Council considered the mediation of ancestors as participation in the unique universal mediation of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium* nos: 8 and 49-51).

2.3.2. Rituals and practices

Contemplation is integrated into many traditional practices, such as rites of passage or religious ceremonies, which aim to strengthen communion with the divine and the spirit world. Music, dance and storytelling play a crucial role as avenues of contemplation, enabling a deeper state of consciousness to be reached²⁶. It is in this sense that the Congolese Episcopate, speaking of gestures and attitudes in the Eucharistic celebration in the Roman Missal for the dioceses of Zaire, emphasises that: “The dance performed during the Gloria (...) manifests the desire to commune with the vital force that radiates from the altar”²⁷.

²⁵ B.-K. AKOTIA, Pourquoi les peuples d’Afrique noire connaissent Dieu sans lui rendre un culte ? Les enjeux du culte africain, CRA, V1, no 1(2020), 40.

²⁶ Supplément au Missel Romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre, ed. Secrétariat général, 17.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

2.3.3. *Identity and integration*

Identity is shaped by life experiences and defined by communion with ancestral roots. African identity is a continuous process of reappropriation, adaptation and self-affirmation as a singular and collective subject.

In Africa, human beings are fundamentally social creatures whose identity is constructed within the community, through family and ethnic ties. They are never alone, and their personal fulfilment depends on their collective integration. African societies emphasise that individuals have duties towards the group and that their individual rights must respect the rights of the community. The individual achieves full realisation within his lineage. Solidarity, family and community are the pillars of the world view²⁸. In addition, positive rituals of men gathered together mediate the encounter between the visible world and the invisible world.

Overall, many changes are inspired by the spiritual and religious vision of God in Africa: the communion of the visible world with the invisible world. In his time, Pope Paul VI said the following during his apostolic visit to Africa: “The spiritual vision of life, which is a deeper, broader and more universal conception, according to which all beings and visible nature itself are considered to be linked to the world of the invisible and the spirit”²⁹. From this conception emerges the idea of God as the first and last cause of all things.

Finally, contemplation is used to reflect on one's own cultural identity and place in the world, particularly in the face of outside influences³⁰. Debates about reconciling traditional African values with foreign beliefs, such as Christianity, can involve deep self-contemplation.

²⁸ Cf. A. MAKAMBU, Dieu et la conception africaine de la vie, « Religions (traditionnelle) », CRA, V1, n1 (April 2020); 57.

²⁹ POPE PAUL VI, *Africae Terrarum*, 1967, n° 7.

³⁰ J. NGALULA, Les dynamismes porteurs de l'expression « Religions (traditionnelle) », CRA, V1, n1 (April 2020); 15.

Conclusion

The first feeling that humans experience, alone or in community, when they come into the presence of the Holy God is the feeling of being creatures. When humans become aware of their human condition, they spontaneously place themselves before God, perceived as more powerful and the source of salvation, in an attitude of humility and religious contemplation.

Integrated into cultures, adherence to the Sacred takes the form of celebration through various ritual expressions. Indeed, contemplation is a cross-cultural phenomenon that structures the relationship between humans and their inner selves and their environment, through practices and meanings that vary according to the times and societies.

Beyond what each group says about contemplation, we note a few points of convergence and divergence, as follows:

- **Points of convergence**

For Christians, as for Muslims, contemplation aims at union with God, His Love, the search for His face, honouring Christ, who is revered as a prophet by Muslims, and prayer. Love of God, deep spirituality, recognition of God's presence. For Buddhists, contemplation seeks liberation from suffering (Nirvana), peace of mind, silence, love, compassion, inner transformation, and the importance of the body.

- **Points of divergence**

The concept of God: for Christians, an intimate relationship with a God who became man (Jesus); for Muslims, the absolute transcendence of Allah (nothing is like him), making any image or divine filiation impossible. Nature of God: Christianity conceives of God as triune; Islam insists on his uniqueness. Christian contemplation aims at union with God through Christ; Islam seeks constant worship of Allah. Christians seek union with a personal God, while Buddhists seek liberation from the illusion of self, without a creator God, relying on their own understanding and practice. Buddhism often uses

physical techniques, while Christianity emphasises relationship with God and faith.

However, contemplation in Africa is a holistic practice rooted in spirituality, ancestors and communion with nature. It is rooted in indigenous spiritual traditions where it focuses on ancestors and manifests itself in silent listening to God, seeking His presence for inner transformation, making one's heart like God's. A moment of listening and silence, stopping talking to listen to God, an act of spiritual maturity that allows one to receive divine guidance and let go of one's burdens.

