

Hints of Contemplative Prayer in the Early Church

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Most of you have taken my Church History class...

and therefore you know that the Primitive Church was not as organized and did not simply move in one direction as the early fathers like to indicate.

I want to give you some indications of *spirituality* and *contemplative prayer*...

BUT,

I need you to know up front that this unique spiritual discipline was not obvious.

I will get to why shortly.

In the early second century
(120-128AD) we have

The Shepherd of Hermas.

This is an apocalyptic writing filled
with visions, angels speaking with
parables...

and the writer (Hermas) consistently
struggling and worried about being
righteous OR being rejected by God.

Hermas is told 2-3 times that he
MUST fast when he prays if he
wants to be righteous.

Around the same time we have
Ignatius of Antioch on his way to
Rome to be martyred.

This comes from the letter he sent to the believers in Rome *before* he arrived....urging them that he *must* die:

I beg you, do not to show an unwanted good-will towards me. Please allow me to become food for the wild beasts...so it will be granted for me to attain to be with God.

I am the wheat of God...let me get chewed up by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be the pure bread of Christ.

Instead, entice the wild beasts...so they leave nothing of my body;
so that when I have fallen asleep [died],
Then I will **truly be a disciple** of Christ...

This is the spirit of martyrdom...and a sick feeling that unless you die as

a martyr...you cannot be sure that you are even saved.

THIS is what you read in *The Shepherd of Hermas* as well.

In the previous lecture we looked at the *prayer* and *spirituality* in several texts from Clement of Alexandria.

Yet we do not get any texts like this when we read Tertullian in N.Africa.

After Clement, we get some hints in Origen of Alexandria.

Origen quite readily talks about *knowing God* or *seeing God*....

contemplation is HOW Origen has this dimension...contemplation, for Origen, is a *transforming vision*.

This comes out most clearly in his Commentary and Homilies on *The Song of Songs*.

Origen is **the first Christian writer** to use the Song of Songs mainly to describe Christ as the Bridegroom, wooing the soul of the individual believer as His Bride.

Discussing this *spiritual love* Origen says:

God is my witness that I have often perceived the Bridegroom drawing

near me and being most intensely present with me; then suddenly he has withdrawn and I could not find him, though I sought to do so. Hom. Songs 1.7

Origen is writing like this 35-40 years AFTER Clement is dead and gone.

Clement claims that what he is writing about is a *secret oral* tradition taught by Jesus to the disciples...

Then passed down thru oral tradition in the church.

Other than Origen, NO OTHER Christian writer says anything like this.

Where is Origen getting this? AND
If known...How is this being taught?

This is a hotly debated topic.

I had to rewrite a section of my PhD
thesis because I subscribe to this
theory.

Another scholar, Guy Stroumsa
presented a study titled
Hidden Wisdom...

An investigation of the existence of a
secret, hidden, oral tradition in the
early Church.

My personal opinion for the scholars
who reject this theory is that they

have never experienced the tangible presence of God.

There have always been Christians in every era who do not think God mingles with His people in a very real, spiritual presence.

"...finding hard data for a tradition which is both *secret* and *oral* is difficult." p.47, Baker, *Clement*

[11min]

Origen speaks of this *oral tradition*:

Jesus...is said to have spoken the Word of God to his disciples *privately*...what he said has not been recorded.

For it did *not* seem that 'these matters ought to be described...for the masses'.

Contra Celsum VI.6

As the NT canon became more certain, the need for oral tradition seems to have slowly disappeared.

In the third century more references of an "old secret" began to appear...

Finally, the church put a stop to it - it became too easy for the uneducated to come up with goofy stuff.

The NT Canon also started pushing the Church to rely mostly on written text...oral tradition started losing respect.

The Desert Fathers

The interesting thing about the

Desert Fathers is they were known to pray a lot...all night virgils....

They tried to pray without ceasing...

A brother said to Abba Antony: "Pray for me," The old man said to him: "I will have no mercy on you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make any effort and if you do not pray to God." (IHD p100)

Abba Macarius was asked: 'How should one pray?' The old man replied: 'There is no need at all to make long discourses. It is enough to stretch out one's hands and to say: 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows fiercer, say: 'Lord, help!' He knows very well what we need and He shows us His mercy.' (TDF 12.10)

Evagrius said, "When a distracting thought comes into your head, do not cast around here and there about it in your prayer, but simply repent and so you will sharpen your sword against your assailant." (TDF 12.4-5)

Hyperichius said, "Let your mind be always on the kingdom of heaven, and you will soon inherit it." (TDF 11.35)

The Desert Fathers. Sayings of the Early Christian Monks. (TDF) Translated by Benedicta Ward. Penguin books. © Benedicta Ward, 2003

In the Heart of the Desert: the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. (IHD) John Chryssavgis © 2008 World Wisdom, Inc

It was said that copies of Clement and Origen could be found in more than one or two Desert caves.

They almost NEVER use the term *contemplation*...and rarely do you see a text that illustrates what you get from Clement.

But the emphasis on praying unceasingly...alone...in your cave... and the emphasis on being silent, ALL of these point to *contemplation*.

Of course, the Desert Fathers is what led to the organized monastic movement.

It was men who lived alone in a cave that saw the need for community and a more structured life...

Pachomius, Evagrius, and eventually Benedict and Basil.

Again, the various Rules and organized monastic groups did *NOT* mention *contemplation* much,

They did not openly teach it...

yet this *spirituality* continued in the monastic movement...as you will see and read about.

Some scholars (Stroumsa, a minority of others...and me) believe that this

spirituality continued to be taught by oral tradition...

And came to be known as the *disciplina arcani* (the ancient discipline) and probably included teaching on HOW to interact with the Holy Spirit.

The *disciplina arcani* is mentioned in writings, but always in a context that is difficult to fully understand.

Now I want to show you the next VERY CLEAR historical marker of *contemplative prayer*.

[22 min]

Basil of Caesarea, known as Basil the Great, along with his brother Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus....

Started monasteries in the East.
Now, these men openly taught *contemplative prayer*.

All three were trained in Athens...
in Platonic philosophy and theology.
All three were raised in a strong,
pentecostal environment.

Basil and his brother Gregory, along with their sister Macrina, grew up with strong Christian parents under

the pastoral care of
Gregory Thaumaturgus also known
as Gregory "the Miracle-Worker."

So they grew up with Holy Spirit stuff
ALL around them.

Basil started a few monasteries.
Eventually his brother, Gregory
became the bishop of Nyssa.

Greggory was the most prolific when
it came to *contemplative prayer*.

He wrote the now famous
Life of Moses in which he uses 3-4
stories of God interacting with Moses
as metaphors for the *spiritual* life.

As we read this passages you would

see Clement's influence IF you had read Clement.

Gregory read Clement (and studied Plato)...BUT he took Clement's more nuanced presentation of *contemplative prayer* and made it FAR more practical...presenting some of the spiritual lessons learned thru the Desert Fathers.

Gregory sees the life of Moses revolving around three important encounters with God:

1. The **light** of the burning bush,
2. The **cloud** that seems to hide God,
3. Meeting God on the mountain in utter and **terrifying darkness**.

It is in the darkness where *contemplation* happens.

[Now, remember...Gregory is not really telling us what was happening with Moses -- he is more sharing what he thinks is part of *spiritual growth* in the lives of Christians.]

The text in *Exodus* after God gave Moses the 10 Commandments:

18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, **they trembled with fear**. They...said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. **But do not have God speak to us or we will die...**"

21 The people remained at a distance, while **Moses approached the thick darkness where God was**. Ex 20:18-21

=====

Now Gregory (Life of Moses):

What does it mean that *Moses entered the darkness and then saw God*...?

Here Gregory says that in our faith we are taught that God is Light...and that Darkness is the enemy.

But then he says:

as the mind progresses...as it approaches more nearly to **contemplation**, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated...This is the true knowledge of what is sought; *this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness*. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, No one has ever seen God. *Life of Moses II.162,63*

[27 min.]

Gregory describes this place as “**luminous darkness**.” This is the **negative theology** of Gregory at its best and it is really *the beginning of contemplation*.

Remember, we talked about the "alpha primitive," OR "Negative Alpha".

Again, this is Gregory focusing on the idea that *contemplative prayer* is going beyond the intellectual understanding... because God's ways and thoughts are HIGHER than we can ever imagine.

Yet, for Gregory a Christian CAN
find the presence of the Lord....

sense and feel His presence,

Because though God is
transcendent, He is immanent thru
Jesus the Savior.

Close to the end of *Life of Moses*
Gregory gives the men and women
living in community this wonderful
hope:

...to be known by God and *to become his
friend*...we regard falling from God's
friendship as the only thing dreadful
and we consider becoming God's friend the
only thing worthy of honor and desire.

This, as I have said, is the perfection of life.

Life of Moses II.320

QUESTIONS?

PRACTICUM

- 20 minutes to "practice" and write down some thoughts in your journal.
- 10-15 minutes for question/answer time.