

A Conversation about Contemplative Practices

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Abstract:

My observation is that people inside and outside the church are looking for practices of meditation and mindfulness. At the same time, it is not clear whether and in what ways Dutch Baptist pastors experience contemplative practices springing from healthy sources in the Christian tradition. The question arises: what are the contemplative spiritual practices that Baptist pastors recognise, and how are these theologically rooted and at the same time connected with everyday life? This article explores the dialogue between contemplative practices of a few Dutch Baptist pastors, sources of contemplative practices, and connections to baptistic theology. This is done by listening to stories of Baptist pastors regarding their experiences with contemplation. These experiences are brought into dialogue with sources from the contemplative tradition and perspectives from Baptist theologians.

Keywords:

Contemplative practices; contemplation; Dutch Baptists; spirituality

Introduction

*One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.
(Psalm 27:4, NIV)*

Contemplation is not the first spiritual discipline with which Dutch Baptists identify. Although the main spirituality of Baptists is evangelical, in recent decades there have continuously been small groups of Baptists who have leaned towards more contemplative forms of spirituality. My interest is in exploring to what extent and in what ways contemplation takes shape in the life of Dutch Baptist pastors.

I discovered Renovaré¹ in my early twenties, and as I became involved with the Renovaré working group that started in the Netherlands eighteen years ago, I discovered the ‘contemplative stream’ as one of the spiritual streams which together could lead us to what Richard Foster in his books *Celebration of Discipline*² and later *Streams of Living Water*,³ called a spiritual equilibrium. The group invited Roy Searle, then chairman of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and involved with Renovaré in the United Kingdom, for a retreat. In that retreat, Searle shared about the Northumbria Community.⁴ A few years later, the Northumbria Community ran a student retreat at IBTS in Prague in which I discovered their Daily Prayers. Every morning, the daily prayer cycle opens with the verse in the introduction ‘to behold the beauty of the Lord’.

Over the last decade, my observation and experience is that there is a longing among people inside and outside the church for contemplation. We have seen explosive growth in literature that relates

¹ Renovaré was founded by Richard Foster in 1988. Renovaré has always sought to advocate, resource, and model the with-God life. ‘Through personal relationships, conferences and retreats, written and web-based resources, church consultations, and other means, Renovaré models’ spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines. See <<https://renovare.org/about/ideas>> [accessed 20 October 2021].

² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

³ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

⁴ The ‘Northumbria Community is a dispersed network of people from different backgrounds, streams and edges of the Christian faith’. It is based in Northumberland in the UK and has companions from all over the world. See <<https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/introducing-the-community/>> [accessed 20 October 2021].

to practices of contemplation, spirituality and silence.⁵ The popularity of new monasticism among segments of Dutch Protestantism is recognisable, although it remains marginal. Mindfulness is booming.⁶ Often this could be understood as a need for silence, stillness, or mindfulness as a counterpart to our ‘noisy, crowded, busy, stressed, electrifying, evolving’⁷ world, as Peter Traben Haas, Presbyterian pastor, explains in his book *Contemplative Church*.

Simultaneously, in conversation in both the academic realm and in churches, I experience a sense of discomfort and unfamiliarity with contemplation:⁸ is it not too much of an inward turn, too much focused on oneself, is God still there in the silence? My experience with contemplative spirituality comes mainly from an ecumenical setting. Because I am working in a Baptist environment, I wondered if and where Baptist pastors recognise contemplative practices in their lives. To begin to assess what the situation might be within Dutch Baptist churches, I decided that a conversational approach would be a useful exploratory framework within which to begin. So, I initiated a conversation on the topic with three Baptist pastors. As a small sample of three, these pastors cannot be representative of the broader Baptist

⁵ The books and activities of Mirjam van der Vegt on silence and Jos Douma on contemplation are read and participated in by more and more people. Miriam van der Vegt's, *De kracht van rust* [The Power of Rest] (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2020) was named the best spiritual book of the Netherlands in 2021. An online course by Jos Douma on contemplation and silence, easily attracts 600 participants. The Dutch health insurance brand ProLife, offers *Lectio Divina* in their programme ‘Faith and Health’. The newest version of the Prayer Course (Alpha) offers a theme about contemplative prayer.

⁶ Centrum voor Mindfulness, Radboud Centrum voor Mindfulness, for example. See ‘True Mindfulnessstrainingen en -opleidingen, Maastricht, Ontwikkeling en innovatie van het mindfulnessveld in Nederland’, (Amsterdam, Maastricht, Nijmegen, 2019) <<https://www.radboudcentrumvoormindfulness.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ontwikkeling-en-innovatie-van-het-mindfulnessveld.pdf>> [accessed 24 May 2021].

⁷ Peter Traben Haas, *Contemplative Church: How Meditative Prayer and Monastic Principles Can Help Congregations Flourish* (Austin, TX.: Contemplative Christians, 2018), p. 47.

⁸ I experienced this in conversation about contemplative spirituality in teaching in the master's course on Spirituality at the Theological University of Kampen and in workshops I have led on *Lectio Divina* in different Baptist Churches. In the same groups there was also an openness and willingness to bear the discomfort to discover contemplation.

community, but their conversation indicates if and where there is an opening for contemplative spirituality.⁹

In the first part, the stories and conversation about contemplation is shared. In this phase I observe the experience, stories, and interpretation of the pastors. From there on, I explore different dimensions of contemplation connected to their narratives and conversations. Next, I narrow the conversation down to three contemplative practices engaged in by the pastors, and bring this into dialogue with contemplative sources from the broader Christian tradition to reflect on these practices and to see if there are connections with baptistic theology. In the last phase, I bring the conversation to a close and highlight one theme. In this way, the practical theological cycle of experience, exploration, reflection, and reaction¹⁰ is explored in connection to the experience of these three pastors with contemplative practices.

As this enquiry took place within the restrictions of the covid-19 pandemic, it was decided that the conversation would be a group online Zoom meeting, centred on three specific questions:

- What is contemplation, and what are contemplative practices?
- How do you shape contemplation in your own life?
- What are our baptist contemplative roots?

The pastors in this conversation have different backgrounds: one comes from a Baptist background from the northern part of the Netherlands. Another grew up in a Roman Catholic environment in the southern part of the Netherlands. The third one has a reformed background and was raised in the western part of the Netherlands. All three of them have studied at the Dutch Baptist Seminary in the last fifteen years. These pastors represent a small stream within the total population of pastors who exhibit an interest in contemplative

⁹ This is not an exhaustive article about different contemplative practices or themes. I decided to focus on the practices shared by the pastors themselves. Themes such as centring prayer, dark night of the soul and Ignatian spiritual exercises were not mentioned.

¹⁰ Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 17–27.

practices.¹¹ Still, at the same time, they are interpretative leaders who are experts in reading and connecting our culture to their sources and traditions. In this conversation, they are interpreting the experiences they share from a contemplative perspective. The questions were sent in advance, so everyone had time to ponder on them. This conversation took place by Zoom,¹² and in a sense, it was also a contemplative conversation. Participants first had time to share their response in the chat box and then the chance to read each other's reactions. In the conversation, I sought after experience and depth; the pastors were first invited to share all three of their stories and respond to each other. As a moderator, I chose to intervene as little as possible and let the conversation unfold between the pastors.

What Is Experienced as Contemplation?

In the chat box, the pastors first wrote comments about contemplation. The following represents a number of their definitions in the order that the pastors presented them. Pastor Noa began: 'Contemplation is dwelling on who God is. It requires a reflective attitude and consciously seeking connection with God. It is growling.' Growling in the sense of the way a dog chews on a bone in enjoyment. Pastor Rens: 'Contemplation is watching and beholding; it is a sensory experience, everything in view of God. It is being open, listening, a total experience

¹¹ I aimed at having a focus group with five pastors, whom I knew or understood were interested in contemplative spirituality. I invited seven pastors — five men, two women — three of them from Baptist Union churches, four of them from ABC churches. In the end I made an appointment with four of them; during the day of the interview one of the pastors canceled because of personal circumstances. I decided to continue the interview with three pastors to see if this conversation would be rich and thick enough. These pastors are not representative for all Baptist Churches in the Netherlands, but shared their experience and wisdom. Two of them were female, one of them male. Besides experience as a pastor in a local church, one of them also has experience as a pioneer, another also as a pastor in an institution. The names of the pastors have been anonymised and general names chosen through which to identify each of their comments in this conversation. Participants signed an informed consent form in which they were informed about the goals and procedures, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the interviews. The initial version of this article was shared with them and they gave permission for their comments and quotes to be used in this way.

¹² The Zoom conversation was recorded and relistened to several times. Parts of the conversation are transcribed.

and connecting.’ Pastor Anne: ‘Contemplation is pondering and seeing in silence. It is observing and dwelling. I also link it to a meditative life, which I understand as an attentive life — meditative prayer is then a practice. It is a moment of reflection, and in *Lectio Divina*, contemplation happens to you. It is focused on experience. When it comes to practices, there are moments in the liturgy — silence — words. I would also link it to embodiment.’ Rens: ‘Indeed, it is more than what you do yourself; it happens to you.’

In the conversation that follows, attention to the liturgy’s non-verbal and sensory side emerges, for example, in music, in silence or the sharing of bread and wine at the Lord’s Table. Here, reference is made in the first instance to experiences in the Roman Catholic liturgy and an experience in a Russian Orthodox monastery. These refer to the experience of being close to God. At the same time, it is mentioned that this closeness was also experienced in large and exuberant Pentecostal services.

A conversation about embodiment and the senses in contemplation ensues. Anne: ‘Contemplation is a sensory experience that comes into me. It has to do with my body. I feel it, like a deep experience of happiness and sometimes mixed with pain. It always has to do with the painful sides of life as well.’

Seeking silence to listen to God, to be with God is mentioned. Reading Psalms, walking, and taking pictures are indicated as practices by Noa: ‘When I am alone on the road, there is silence. If I look, the images come to me: landscapes, animals, everything from God’s creation [...] When I come home, I have become a different person.’

For Anne, ‘Contemplation moves away from us, towards God, towards Christ. In that movement, we come closer to ourselves; God is coming to us. It is a back-and-forth movement of God and humanity. Because it is focused on God, I also get to know myself better.’

The pastors experience contemplation as a reflective, meditative, sensory experience of connecting with God. It asks for an open, listening, and watching posture. The above remarks call for more conversation and reflection, and the section below elaborates on several of the themes raised.

Perspectives on Contemplation

With Foster, I perceive contemplation as one of six streams in Christian spirituality, next to the holiness, charismatic, social justice, evangelical and incarnational traditions.¹³ I would take issue with Foster as to whether this is the full range of streams; the more key point is the way that diverse streams come together to form a holistic and balanced spirituality. This does not mean that the balance in the various spiritualities needs to be the same for everyone; the balance will shift over time and through different stages of life.

It is instructive to see the description of contemplation as it emerges from different sources. As with the Dutch Carmelite Kees Waaijman,¹⁴ Rowan Williams¹⁵ emphasises the image of the birdwatcher; someone who takes time to look attentively, to see, to gaze. In a sense, contemplation is an attitude that can relate to many parts of life. It has to do with looking and observing in general, just as a birdwatcher can look at birds, just as a nature lover can immerse themselves in photography, just as one can observe people's lives. According to Traben Haas, 'to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord' in Psalm 27 is connected with the idea of seeing the beauty of God, being with God himself. It is not only a rational view of God or Scripture but an 'intuitive experience of knowing and being known by Love in silence'.¹⁶

Contemplative prayer 'is the opening of the mind and heart, body and emotions — our whole being — to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, and emotions'¹⁷ as Thomas Keating, Cistercian priest and monk, asserts. In his *Conferences*, theologian and

¹³ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*.

¹⁴ Kees Waaijman, *Spiritualiteit, vormen, grondslagen, methoden* (Kampen: Kok, 2001), pp. 341–343. 'Contemplatie' wordt afgeleid van con (samen) en templum (een door de augur met zijn staf afgebakende ruimte waarbinnen hij de vlucht van vogels observeert). Contemplatie is dienovereenkomstig: zich begeven in een waarnemingsruimte om daar aandachtig de bewegingen van het goddelijke te schouwen.' ['Contemplation' is derived from con (together) and templum (a space delineated by the augur with his staff in which he observes the flight of birds). Contemplation is accordingly: going into a space of observation in order to contemplate attentively the movements of the divine.] See also Traben Haas, *Contemplative Church*, p. 71.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian life* (London: SPCK, 2017), p. 7.

¹⁶ Traben Haas, *Contemplative Church*, p. 70.

¹⁷ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind Open Heart* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1991), p. 14.

monk Cassian (c.360–c.435 CE) wrote that contemplative prayer was prayer in silence, in which

the mind enlightened by the infusion of that heavenly light describes in no human and confined language, but pours forth richly as from a copious fountain in an accumulation of thoughts, and ineffably utters to God, expressing in the shortest possible space of time such great things that the mind when it returns to its usual condition cannot easily utter or relate.¹⁸

Contemplative prayer is a practice that could lead to a deeper experience or mode of contemplation. Contemplation is, according to Traben Haas,

the timeless draw of humankind toward inwardness. Yet an inwardness connected to an everywhere-ness [...] To be contemplative is to say yes to the inward presence and action of the Spirit of God [...] Contemplation is, at its heart, a participation in the presence of love that births wisdom, kindness, mercy and understanding in us.¹⁹

In this sense, contemplation is more than an activity and more than a practice;²⁰ it will lead to an inner receptivity to seeing something of God, in which self-forgetfulness is essential.²¹

Elijah's story on Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19: 8–13 is a biblical example of a contemplative encounter: God passed by, but God was not in the strong gust of wind, God was not in the earthquake, God was not in the fire. And then there is the gentle breeze, unexpected and whispering. God is in the silence of the breeze. Elijah stands with his cloak over his face before the One. And the One speaks.

Before this encounter between Elijah and God on Mount Horeb, there is darkness and suffering in the desert. The desert

¹⁸ John Cassian, *Conferences of John Cassian*, trans. and notes by Edgar C. S. Gibson, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Kindle Edition (New York: [n. pub.], 1894), p. 186, chapter xxv.

¹⁹ Traben Haas, *Contemplative Church*, p. 66.

²⁰ As understood by Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 187 and Nancy C. Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation, *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 21.

²¹ Traben Haas, *Contemplative Church*, p. 77, referring to Josef Sudbrack, 'Contemplation' in the *Encyclopedia Christianity A-D* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 677–678.

experience or dark night of the soul, as John of the Cross describes it, is an experience familiar to contemplatives that is not addressed in depth in the experiences of the pastors.²² In contemplation, you do not escape yourself and your situation; you do not join the Las Vegas of distraction, but you enter the depths of your inner turmoil. Thomas Merton says,

The contemplative is [...] simply the one who has risked his mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust, that is to say in the surrender of our own poverty and incompleteness in order no longer to clench our minds in a cramp upon themselves, as if thinking made us exist.²³

This is what happens in that contemplative meeting between Elijah and God. Without words, in silence, in the desolation of the desert, at the moment when he cannot but let go and surrender himself. A moment of grace, of transformation.

About that merciful moment of contemplation Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk, says the following:

It is a change in the consciousness marked by two elements. On the one hand, there is a recession from ordinary sensate and intellectual awareness and all the concerns and programs that depend upon it. At the same time, more subtly, it is being possessed by the reality and mystery of God. Having emptied oneself in imitation of Christ (Philippians 2:7), one is filled with the fullness of God. Of his fullness we have all received, grace for grace (John 1:16).²⁴

Contemplation is more than becoming silent; it is more than an encounter experienced or not. Ultimately there is a transformation of the inner self, often through a dark birth canal, through the practice of contemplation, which bears fruit in life.

²² ‘Along the way the believer will experience the dark night of the senses wherein she will renounce all good things that she desires, as well as the dark night of the Spirit, characterized by alienation and isolation [...] Both of these dark nights, however, are gifts from God and are used in a person’s life to help bring one to union with God.’ (Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 222.)

²³ Thomas Merton and Patrick Hart, *The Monastic Journey* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), p. 173.

²⁴ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1996), p. 39.

Looking back at the conversation with the pastors, the stillness, pondering, observing, and attentiveness that is part of contemplation comes to the fore. And at the same time, the comment is made that ‘contemplation happens to you’. This touches on what Traben Haas describes as an ‘intuitive experience of knowing and being known by Love in silence’. Most times, it is a two-way movement. Someone opens themselves up to God in a contemplative practice or a contemplative environment, and the intuitive experience of knowing and being known can happen. However, a contemplative practice will not always lead to a contemplative experience. According to Keating, the experience is not the goal; it is the inner transformation and the beholding of the face of God. All three pastors mention the inwardness, mainly as a positive encounter, but at the same time, there is often something from ‘outside’ that moves them. Even if it is only making space and time to turn inwards, it is interesting to note that in the experience of one of the pastors, it is precisely in mass worship that something of this contemplation, being with God, is experienced.

The changing power of contemplation, mentioned by Traben Haas, Merton and Casey, is implicitly visible in the words from Noa, ‘when I come home, I become a different person’, and Rens, ‘I get to know myself better’.

Contemplative Practices

Heuristically, several themes emerged that might provisionally be categorised as three sorts of practices. I elaborate on one story and two conversations from the interviews because they each illustrate a theme of contemplative practices from the pastors in this conversation. These are sensory and holistic practices or spiritual exercises that could lead to contemplation. In the contemplative tradition, spiritual exercises are an inseparable part of the contemplative path. I connect these practices with contemplative roots in history and identify connections with baptist theology or Baptist theologians.

Scriptural Contemplative Practices

As an example, I explore *Lectio Divina* because this came up in the conversation. Students are introduced to this practice in the module ‘Spiritual Liturgical Formation’ at the Dutch Baptist Seminary and learn to use it in sermon preparation. *Lectio Divina* seems to be the most accessible form of contemplative practice in Protestant Netherlands because it is closely linked to Scripture.

Creative Contemplative Practices

Noa spoke about taking pictures of God’s creation as a contemplative practice. I will explore creativity and arts in contemplative practices. The focus is on visual arts and creativity, which is part of broader art and creative streams.

Bodily Contemplative Practices

Could the body with all its senses be a gateway to contemplation? This is hardly ever discussed or thought about among Baptists in the Netherlands, but at the same time, this theme was introduced as essential by one of the pastors.

Scriptural Contemplative Practices

As mentioned, all three pastors experienced *Lectio Divina*, one more as an individual, the others with groups or in sermon preparation. *Lectio Divina* is an ancient way of meditating on the Bible, which might lead to contemplation. *Lectio Divina* has four phases that can overlap. The first phase is *Lectio*, reading a Bible text, often a small section, and letting it sink in slowly. The second phase is *Meditatio*: pondering what is written; this can go in different directions, more exegetical or more ruminating and reflexive. The third phase is *Oratio*: prayer, bringing what you have received to God. The fourth phase is *Contemplatio*: being with God, beholding God. In the conversation, the pastors shared the following thoughts and questions about *Lectio Divina*.

Anne noted that ‘as Baptists, we are communities of believers with a focus on communal hermeneutics. Something like *Lectio Divina* seems to be an individual activity where the experience is that people

are wary: Are we not interpreting God's words too much? Does this fit in a community of believers? Is it not too much of my own voice?' The pastors experienced that *Lectio Divina* with a group has a unifying effect, as Noa noted: 'Even if nothing happens, a lot happens. Sharing something personal can feed the whole group.'

Growling was mentioned at the beginning by one of the pastors as a way to contemplation. Eugene Peterson observes that the Hebrew word usually translated as meditation, also means growling, and connects this idea with Psalm 1: meditation is like a dog growling when chewing on a bone.²⁵ Noa commented, 'We are invited to do that. You are happy when you are engaged in the contemplation of God's Word. This is not an option; God's Word calls you to do so. Besides sound exegesis, this means feeling and experiencing, ruminating and growling, discovering a tough bone.' Rens observed that 'it is both tasting and enjoying the goodness of the Lord and connecting it to good exegesis; it also requires awe'. Anne stated, 'It is also holy, God's Word that is allowed to come to me, that I can wrestle with, but that also consistently has distance.' Rens stated, 'Precisely because the Word is alive and moving, it has great authority.'

Reflecting on this conversation, I see that the different phases and words around *Lectio Divina* are used interchangeably. I want to separate meditation from contemplation. In *Lectio Divina*, 'meditation' is used for meditating on the Word, as Peterson mentioned. Contemplation is the last phase of *Lectio Divina*, and needs to be considered more broadly in line with what has been discussed on contemplation above.

The Sources of *Lectio Divina* as Related to Practices

Lectio Divina is a prayerful formative practice. In meditating on a Bible text, this text enters the reader's life and shapes the reader. This reverse movement is essential to keep in mind: it is not an individualistic interpretation of a text; the reader chooses to question themselves. In

²⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 1–2.

this way, the question will be asked: how does the Word read or interpret our lives? Guigo the Carthusian (12th Century), writing in *Scala Claustralium* (The Ladder of Monks), puts it this way:

Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading as it were, puts food whole in the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation itself is the sweetness which gladdens and refreshes.²⁶

In the Benedictine tradition, before Guigo wrote his *Claustralium*, monks and nuns were encouraged to practise personal *lectio* as an integral part of their lives and vocation, reading a whole book part by part, day by day.²⁷ Casey explains that *Lectio Divina* is embedded in monastic theology in three ways. First, as mentioned before, *lectio* leads people in prayer, which leads to contemplation. Second, *lectio* is meant to be done in community as learners; this protects people against subjectivism. *Lectio*, which leads to contemplation and union with God, means that it leads to solidarity with humanity. And third that we need each other to understand the truth.²⁸

With the Reformation, the Radical Reformation and the suspect status of sixteenth-century monasticism which then arose, *Lectio Divina* as a practice disappeared in the Protestant and Anabaptist traditions.²⁹ However, as I compare what Casey points out about *Lectio Divina* to the arguments made by James Wm McClendon in his book *Ethics* about communal hermeneutics of the Baptist Vision — ‘This is that and then is now’³⁰ — I see a similarity.

²⁶ Janet K. Ruffing, ‘Meditation: Christian Perspectives’, in *The Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, ed. by William M. Johnston (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), p. 849. *Scala Claustralium* is considered to be the first structured description of *Lectio Divina* in Western spirituality.

²⁷ Casey, *Sacred Reading*, pp. 4–16.

²⁸ Casey, pp. 35–47.

²⁹ There is a lot more to say about this, also in a nuanced way, but it will transcend the theme of this article. For a more in depth treatment of this see Anglican scholar Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), chapter 12, ‘The Reformers and Counter-reformers’, pp. 205 ff. and chapter 13, ‘Protestants and Monasticism after the Reformation’, p. 224 ff.

³⁰ James William McClendon, Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 30–34; especially p. 32.

The Baptist 'is' in 'this is that' is therefore neither developmental nor successionist, but mystical and immediate; it might be better understood by the artist and poet than by the metaphysician or dogmatist.³¹

It is a stimulating question as to where the artists and poets in our churches are. But *Lectio Divina* provides space for these mystical and immediate experiences because it shapes space for a more holistic way of meditating on Scripture. It focuses on a relationship with God and teaches people to read Scripture with new eyes every time, precisely because the Word reads people.

As the pastors mentioned, *Lectio Divina* is mainly practised individually because it is part of their daily spiritual rhythm and sermon preparation. Subjectivity can be avoided in a community of learners. The questions about interpreting the Bible, such as whether people hear their own voice or God's voice, has everything to do with communal discernment. Do churches have a culture of reading and interpreting the Bible together? Can *Lectio Divina* not have its place in this culture?³² If pastors practice *Lectio Divina* in their sermon preparation, how do they connect with that in their preaching? Traben Haas argues that in their sermon preparation, pastors stop in the stage of *meditatio*. How does this affect preaching itself? Is it not essential to make a mystagogical turn in preaching? I am glad that we stress the importance of *Lectio Divina* in the first phase of sermon preparation in the Dutch Baptist Seminary. But do our students learn to address the mystagogical turn in our preaching? And do they learn to read Scripture with and in community?

Creative Contemplative Practices

Two pastors shared a story about creative contemplative practices³³ or experiences. I will go deeper into one story. Noa offered the following

³¹ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 32.

³² Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo, *Shaping a Culture of Communal Discernment* (unpublished master's dissertation, IBTS Prague, 2014). On pp. 50–52, I reflect on the Baptist Vision related to communal discernment, and refer to examples of how *Lectio Divina* can help to read the Bible in community.

³³ Christine Valters Paintner writes about creative contemplative practices, for example in Paintner, *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2013).

account: ‘I like to go into nature and take pictures of landscapes, animals, in fact, everything from God’s creation. The longer I do this, the more I notice moments of silence in it because sometimes you walk alone. In my mind, I am more and more with God. Then when I come home, I discover: hey, I have become a different person. That has to do with the pictures I have spoken about and things that do not need language but come to me in images. I love macro photography, magnifying the smallest things enormously, and in this, I see the miracle of God’s creation. The macro image, things that at first glance seem to be hidden, have a whole world within them. But you have to look carefully.’

Reflection

In this story, the same path can be identified as in *Lectio Divina*: from reading, watching or listening, a meditative movement or posture arises that leads to stillness, wondering or *oratio* (prayer/response), and contemplating, standing on holy ground.

Baptist scholars Graham Sparkes and Richard Kidd write in *God and the Art of Seeing*³⁴ about arts and experience. They underline the experience of the pastors in our conversation:

Western Christianity, it seems, has focused so strongly on words, creeds and doctrines that many Christians have forgotten that the visual image is the primary human experience – we ‘look and see’ long before we ‘speak and hear with understanding’.³⁵

Seeing and hearing are two of the sensory experiences next to touching, tasting, and smelling. They are a first step to a more embodied spirituality. All our senses connect us with everything which is around us. Sparkes writes a chapter, ‘Imagine the Depths’³⁶ on the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, and he describes why she painted flowers. It ‘is a

³⁴ Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing: Visual Resources for a Journey of Faith*, Regent’s Study Guides, 11 (Oxford and Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003). More recent articles from Kidd and Sparks about arts and theology can be found in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2019): ‘The Art of Seeing’ by Kidd, pp. 21–36, and ‘Imagine the Infinite’ by Sparkes, pp. 37–50. They especially address why there is a long-time disconnection between arts and faith and how there needs to be a way forward.

³⁵ Kidd and Sparkes, ‘Preview: Before entering the gallery’, in *God and the Art of Seeing*, p. ix.

³⁶ Kidd and Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing*, chapter 4.

spirituality rooted in a loving attention to detail and that leads to an encounter with a deeper reality'.³⁷ This is what Noa experienced in macro photography; this is a description of contemplation. Creating art, attentive looking at art or nature in its greatness and details, can lead to stillness, even contemplation. 'This commitment to careful and loving attention demands effort and is one that Christian mystics and theologians have often spoken of as the heart of our search for God.'³⁸

Even more than *Lectio Divina*, which could lead to an apophatic experience, people experience creative contemplative practices even more as apophatic³⁹ because no words are used. Ultimately even images are limited, and silence takes over.

Bodily Contemplative Practices

Anne introduced the theme of embodiment⁴⁰ and sensing in a bodily way. On the one hand, there was a personal experience of tension during the covid-19 situation due to all the pressure and the desire to feel peace in the body. On the other, the understanding was shared that much of what has to do with bodily contemplation is associated with Eastern religions. Can embodiment simply be linked to contemplation?

In conversations in church, this also comes up, for example, in discussions about mindfulness. Rens shared this: 'Some people work with mindfulness in their jobs. Others ask the question whether practising mindfulness is allowed. Aren't you then treading on territory that is prohibited from a biblical point of view? Simultaneously, it is mainly about being attentive; the Christian tradition has good credentials in this area. It does not have to be connected to other traditions. It is not strange that other traditions have it. At the same time,

³⁷ Kidd and Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing*, p. 122.

³⁸ Kidd and Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing*, p. 123.

³⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard L. Kidd, *Communion, Covenant, and Creativity: An Approach to the Communion of Saints through the Arts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), p. 63.

⁴⁰ I use both the words embodiment and bodily. At the Dutch Baptist Seminary, we learn a lot about embodiment in the sense of people as embodied beings. This has mainly a relational or outward focus, as McClendon addresses in *Ethics*, pp. 85–86, or is related to self-awareness and reflexivity, but it is less focused on our own bodily experiences or awareness.

contemplation is a sensory experience that comes into me that I can feel in my body. I feel it, a deep happiness experience, and sometimes it is mixed with pain because it has something to do with the painful side of life. It is really in me, in my body, and my body is me. That connection is robust. Contemplation moves away from us, towards God, towards Christ. In that movement, we come closer to ourselves, from God to us. Entering God's love also creates space to face my own wounds, sorrows, shortcomings. Contemplation is going through suffering and letting it pass through me.'

Anne asked: 'To what extent can we as a church make room for embodiment, for breath, for being grounded? In church, we are so focused on being filled, while sometimes I long for rest or nothing, or is this too empty? Is there room for the earthly, for finding rest in my body and my mind? Is this our area?' Anne spoke further: 'Meditative prayer requires a different attitude than a speaking attitude. To believe with spirit, soul and body requires space for physicality. The metaphor of breath, of the Spirit, God's breath, can help us in this way. Here lies a treasure of richness that we have much to offer, especially in these times.'

Reflection

Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them.

Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house. (John 12:1–3, The Message)

In John 12, we read a story of embodied contemplation. All the senses of touch, smell, and taste are in these three verses. Without words, Mary anointed and massaged the feet of Jesus, was it *meditatio*, *oratio* or *contemplatio*? Maybe it was all three in one. Mary did disturb the people around; if we were around, I presume that it would disturb us as well. Is it too intimate, too vulnerable, too physical? If I reflect on the conversation between the pastors, I see the questions about, and embarrassment with, bodily contemplation. There is a long story of

dualism in the Western Christian tradition. As McClendon and Murphy explain in *Ethics* and *Witness*, our bodies have been treated as enemies of the spirit because of a misperception of *sarx* (flesh).⁴¹ Baptist scholar Brian Haymes argues against dualism and emphasises embodiment because we live in an embodied relationship with the triune God.⁴² McClendon highlights that ‘at the Lord’s table we feed body and soul alike and at once’.⁴³ Anglican scholar Sarah Coakley argues for a ‘théologie totale’, which

puts contemplation at its heart, but spirals out to acknowledge the complexity of the entanglement of the secular and spiritual realms for those who dare to practise it. For there is no escape from such messy entanglement. Théologie totale [...] insists on the sweated-out significance of embodied (and thus gendered, and socially located) contemplation, not mere verbal play or abstract thought.⁴⁴

In this way, Coakley shapes embodied contemplation more broadly. She connects it with daily life or ‘action’. However, the question remains whether Haymes and Coakley connect embodied contemplation to bodily practices, as was discussed by the pastors. The protestant theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel writes that a theology of embodiment calls for awareness of the human body as a spirited body. A turn to embodiment reminds us that God has become flesh and bones and has thereby affirmed and sanctified the embodiment of us all.⁴⁵ With this, she makes a closer connection to contemplative bodily practices. If our bodies are affirmed and sanctified by God, if we live and breathe in Christ and Christ lives and breathes in us, it means that our whole body is involved. So, if we are used to

⁴¹ McClendon, p. 85 ff. Nancey Murphy in James Wm McClendon Jr, *Witness: Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 124 ff.

⁴² Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Communion, Covenant, and Creativity*, pp. 130–31.

⁴³ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 95.

⁴⁴ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 59.

⁴⁵ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Mein Körper bin Ich, Neue Wege zur Leiblichkeit* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), pp.132–135. The English translation does not stress the human body as ‘beseelten Körper’, and translates ‘geheiligt’ or sanctified with ‘healed’. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (London: SCM Press, 1994), pp. 103–105.

reading with our eyes, listening with our ears, and thinking with our minds, why not use our whole body in this? Especially breathing and body awareness exercises could be a start of a pathway to *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*.⁴⁶

My first training was in physical therapy; I specialised in psychosomatic, relaxation and breathing therapy. My experience was that people became more inward-focused and closer to themselves if I started a session with breathing exercises. For years, working as a theologian, I did not do anything with it. In these latter years, I have connected it with contemplative practices. When I guide a *Lectio Divina* group or start with a contemplative practice in spiritual direction, I begin with lighting a candle symbolising that Christ is in our midst, and then with a short breathing exercise to focus on his presence. When I guide walks in silence — an embodied experience — I often take the time for meditation, sometimes with body and breathing exercises, other times with a poem. Often, I hear people commenting that they are so used to connecting spirituality to their minds, not to their bodies. I hope that we can create a safe space in churches where an embodied spirituality can transform the lives of people to live and breathe in Christ.

Conclusion

In this article, I started to examine a few contemplative practices used by Dutch Baptist pastors and explored different perspectives on contemplation, concluding that contemplation is actually more than a discipline; it is about inner transformation and the beholding of the face of God. I identified three sorts of practices: scriptural contemplative practices, creative contemplative practices, and bodily contemplative practices. Scriptural contemplative practices such as *Lectio Divina* are reasonably well-known. I contend that although *Lectio Divina* is not a part of our baptist heritage, it fits within the broader idea of the Baptist Vision, and conclude the discussion on that particular theme with questions about how we can embed *Lectio Divina* in our sermon preparation to affect the mystical turn in preaching. The Reformed

⁴⁶ Christine Valters Paintner, *The Wisdom of the Body: A Contemplative Journey to Wholeness for Women* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2017), pp. 33–51.

pastor Jos Douma writes about this extensively in the popularised version of his doctoral thesis ‘Veni Creator Spiritus’.⁴⁷ Creative contemplative practices happen more unconsciously, and in the conversation between the pastors, it came to the fore. It is interesting to see a good connection to the theologies on the arts from Haymes, Kidd and Sparks. This opened a perspective on the apophatic way in contemplation, which could deepen our spiritual lives. Bodily contemplative practices are a more sensitive area. McClendon and Murphy have written extensively about embodied theology, both connected to outwardness and inwardness. From there, I sought to extend this to bodily contemplative practices in which all our senses are involved. I realise that this is a small step, and that more thorough research is needed on such bodily contemplative practices.

A kataphatic spirituality in which truth and revelation are essential is known ground for Dutch Baptists. Contemplative spirituality opens up a way for apophatic spirituality that we, as Dutch Baptists, are less familiar with. McClendon invites us to open ourselves up with the *is* in ‘this is that’ for a mystical and immediate perspective as a way of interpretation.⁴⁸

Perhaps great mystics have always recognised that the two [apophatic and kataphatic] need to be held together in mutual tension, the one enriching the other. Our sense that God cannot ultimately be known has to be balanced with our belief that something can be known of the God revealed in creation. Our embodied humanity means that we cannot avoid the use of images, this must be balanced against a recognition that God cannot be reduced to any one image. Both apophatic and kataphatic traditions say something important about the spiritual journey.⁴⁹

Is it a balance that might want to be kept securely, or is it more of a paradox that enriches life? I presume the latter. Openness to the apophatic way in contemplation could teach us to deepen spiritual lives and help us to learn to live with uncertainties.

⁴⁷ Jochem Rein (Jos) Douma, *Veni Creator Spiritus: de meditatie en het preekproces* (Kampen: Kok, 2000).

⁴⁸ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Fiddes, Haymes and Kidd, *Communion*, p. 144. It is beyond this article to elaborate on the apophatic tradition; for more on this see Fiddes, Haymes and Kidd, pp. 147–149.