Meditation

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Words of Spirituality
by ENZO BIANCHI
Christian meditation, does not consist in a technique, nor can it ever assign to the subject his or her own subjectivity as a goal

In early Christianity, the defining characteristic of Christian meditation was its application to and relationship with the Bible. This bond was broken, or at least weakened, during the centuries in which Scripture was exiled from the church, and during the *devotio moderna* period - and the Baroque era in particular - there was an efflorescence of methods of meditation. Increasingly schematic, complex, isolated, and considered authoritative points of reference in themselves, these methods were applied to subjects that became more and more detailed (saints' lives, theological doctrines, etc.), with the consequence that meditation became, in many instances, an artificial, complex act of rationalization, a purely intellectual and psychological excercise. These developments took place, significantly, during the historical period that witnessed the emergence of the 'I' as a subject of reflection. In the Bible, the verb 'to meditate' (*hagah* in Hebrew), which means 'to murmer,' 'to whisper,' 'to recite softly,' is used with reference to the Torah, the written revelation of God's will. Biblical meditation is intended to lead those who practice it to understand God's will and to obey it by putting it into practice in their lives. The Latin verb *meditari* refers us to the idea of exercise, intended in the sense of repetition leading to the memorization and assimilation of a Word that we are asked not simply to understand, but to make incarnate in our lives. Meditation, then, is vital if our act of reading is to become an 'incarnation' of the Word. Significantly, we find both in Biblical terminology and in early Christian literature the idea of 'eating' or 'chewing' the Word, as a way of expressing the act of pondering the words of Scripture.

As a result of linguistic convention, the Latin *exercere* is now used with reference to physical activity, while *meditari* is used with reference to spiritual activity, but meditation was understood in early Christianity as an activity that involved the entire personal self. "For the ancients, meditating meant reading a text and learning it by heart in the most profound sense of that act, with one's entire being: with the body because the mouth pronounces it, with the memory that grasps it, with the intelligence that understands its meaning, with the will that desires to put it into practice" (Jean Leclerq). This connection between meditation and the body, between prayerful reading and physical gestures, is clearly visible in Koranic and Talmudic schools, where the recitation of verses of Scripture is accompanied by rhythmic movements of the body and head. In Christian monasteries as well, there has always been an effort to unify reading and the body through the practice of *lectio divina*: the Word should imprint itself on the body! Hugh of St. Victor (12th century) distinguished *cogitatio*, conceptual analysis of the words one reads, from *meditatio*, which is identification and unification. Meditation thus begins with the act of reading, but evolves toward prayer and contemplation. We can understand why any discussion of Christian meditation leads us to the subject of *lectio divina*, the practice of reading-listening to Scripture in which our approach is not speculative but sapiential (wisdom-oriented) and respectful of the mystery the text contains. In *lectio divina* we first let the Word of God emerge from Scripture, and we then apply ourselves to the text and the text to ourselves in a dialogical process that becomes prayer and results in our living in conformity with the will of God expressed through the biblical page. The Christian tradition has described four steps in this process: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*

, and *contemplatio*.

Meditation is the spiritual activity (generated by the Holy Spirit and involving the entire person, body and mind) that leads us from listening to the word to responding, in prayer and in our lives, to the God who makes his will known through the Scriptural word. The centrality of the Bible in Christian meditation is not accidental, but fully consistent with the nature of Christianity: God reveals himself by speaking, and his definitive revelation is the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. For this reason, Christian meditation will always be a path of assimilation and interiorization of the Word of God. Scripture is a sacrament of this Word, but the Word also reaches us through our interactions with others and through the events of our lives, which we are also called to read, listen to, reflect on and interpret. Through our meditation we give meaning to the events of our daily life, we discern the presence and Word of God in the world and in history, and we become capable of living in conformity with the Word. As we read the book of Scripture, we should also read the book of nature and the book of history. Christian meditation, then, does not consist in a technique, nor can it ever assign to the subject his or her own subjectivity as a goal. Rather, meditation always seeks to open us to alterity, love and communion by guiding us toward the goal of having in ourselves the same attitude and will that were in Christ Jesus.

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