

# CONTEMPLATIVE AND CENTERING PRAYER<sup>1</sup>



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*Abstract. Centering prayer was developed to make accessible the rich Christian contemplative prayer tradition to young North American spiritual seekers. In the fifty years since its development it has become the centerpiece of an international movement, which promotes contemplative prayer through the practice of centering prayer. This paper looks at the history of this movement and its theological assumptions and its connection with mindfulness.*

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How can one make the riches of the contemplative tradition of the desert and monastery accessible to the contemporary spiritual seeker in a culture marked by a frenetic, individualistic, self-directed, and materialist lifestyle? Thomas Keating wrestled with this issue nearly fifty years ago as he observed Christian young people turning to Eastern religions and cults offered an inviting and accessible spirituality. He was convinced of the richness of his tradition, but he was also aware that Christian contemplative practices were perceived, for some good reasons, to be the domain of monks in monasteries.

Fr. Thomas Keating wrestled with this issue in the late 1960s as he observed Christian young people turning to Eastern religions and cults that seemed to offer an inviting and assessable spirituality. While he was convinced of what his tradition had to offer these seekers he was also aware that Christian contemplative practices were perceived, for some good reasons, to be the domain of monks in monasteries.

In 1974 Fr. William Menniger came across a copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in his monastery's library. He found in this book what he considered to be the very teachable process for fostering contemplative meditation that Fr. Thomas had tasked his monks to develop. He soon began teaching on contemplative prayer according to the *Cloud of Unknowing* during his

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retreats. Within the year his abbot, Fr. Thomas, began to teach this approach as well. Fr. Basil Pennington contributed by articulating the psychological and theological foundations for this practice. He adopted the term Centering Prayer from Merton at the suggestion of some retreatants. And while this paper focuses on the work of Fr. Thomas Keating, who has had a unique leadership role in this movement, he is the first to acknowledge that this practice grew out of the work of a community seeking to bring renewal to the spiritual life of Christians.

This prayer method has received a wide following in the United States and around the world. The organization Fr. Thomas founded to support and disseminate this practice, Contemplative Outreach, has chapters in several dozen countries, supports nearly a thousand prayer groups, and through its numerous seminars annually teaches several thousand people the practice of Centering Prayer.<sup>2</sup> Centering prayer has gained some national prominence, having been reported on in major newspapers and periodicals like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*<sup>3</sup>, and its effectiveness in shaping character has been the subject of recent empirical research.<sup>4</sup>

## THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER

Centering prayer is intended to be an individual prayer practice that is best learned in a group setting and maintained through periodic retreats where it is intensely practiced. While centering prayer is rightly classified as a contemplative practice, Keating has tended to portray it as preparation for contemplative prayer. This preparation comes through facilitating “the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift.”<sup>5</sup> The emphasis is that this prayer provides a method to

<sup>2</sup> Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org> (accessed Nov. 6, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Adler et al., “In Search of the Spiritual,” *Newsweek*, August 29, 2005; Rich Barlow, “Some Drawn to ‘Centering’ Prayer,” *The Boston Globe*, September 21, 2002, 1; Peter Steinfels, “Ideas & Trends: Trying to Reconcile the Ways of the Vatican and the East,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1990, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Spezio, “Mindfulness in the Brain: A Study of Contemplative Practice in Relation to Neural Networks of Social Judgment and Meta-Awareness” (paper presented as part of the USC Templeton Lecture Series, October 25, 2006); Andrew B. Newberg and Mark Waldman, *Now God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 48–9; and for comprehensive review of the pertinent literature see Kirk A. Bingaman, “The Art of Contemplative and Mindfulness Practice: Incorporating the Findings of Neuroscience into Pastoral Care and Counseling,” *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 3 (January 22, 2011): 477–489.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer* (Butler, NJ: Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., 2006), n.p.

respond to God's initiative and gives a method of being present to God. Centering Prayer is intended to provide a context and perspective for one's prayer practice, not to become the one's primary form of prayer.

The method of centering prayer is very straightforward. In terms of technique, the pray-er is asked to sit in silence for an established period of time, twenty minutes is suggested, with the intention of being present before God. The emphasis on the intentionality to be present is a distinctive of Keating's counsel. My additional review of the literature over the past three years has confirmed this delicate and well articulated balancing of what might be termed infused contemplation with and intentional openness to God makes Keating's approach quite distinctive. Often meditative and contemplative prayer becomes very technical, skill-oriented, and portrayed as an achievement of disciplines concentration. Centering prayer is not an achievement, but making and keeping an appointment with God—at the beginning of the time of prayer one simply declares to God your desire to sit in his loving presence and during your practice you seek to honor this intention.

Because the practice of intentional and focused silence is a learned discipline there is significant teaching devoted to cultivating this practice in Keating's writings and Contemplative Outreach's retreats. There is an assumption that *lectio divina* is the entry way into centering prayer. Keating writes, "Centering prayer is a method designed to deepen the relationship with Christ begun in *lectio divina*."<sup>6</sup> The person with a well-developed practice of *lectio divina* has learned some measure of stillness, an appreciation for contemplative prayer, and a stance of quietly receiving from God. The commitment of the originators to *lectio divina* as preparation for centering prayer is often ignored when this method is presented on retreats or to youth groups.

The method employed by centering prayer has two dimensions. The first dimension is one's intention. Many forms of contemplative prayer place great emphasis on attention, but for Keating the emphasis is on intention, that is, our desire to be with God. In contrast, a popular book on meditation by an American Buddhist indicates that "meditation takes gumption."<sup>7</sup> And the concentration needed for it is "developed by force, by sheer unremitting willpower."<sup>8</sup> Keating does not discount the effort involved in prayer, but he portrays centering prayer as a way of grace in which we "co-operate with the gift" of God's presence.<sup>9</sup> Our intention can be represented as hands open to receive. The second dimension is a strategy for respecting

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Keating, *Foundations For Centering Prayer and The Christian Contemplative Life: Open Mind, Open Heart, Invitation To Love, The Mystery Of Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 118.

<sup>7</sup> Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Keating, *Foundations*, 118.

one's intention by remaining mentally engaged with the prayer practice. In large measure this dimension consists of strategies for dealing with distracting or wandering thoughts.

Keating provides four guidelines to help us consent to God's presence and remain with this engagement. The first is "choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within."<sup>10</sup> The pray-er is to ask in prayer for a word from the Holy Spirit, which will uniquely help him or her to focus in prayer. Keating advises one not to change this word during a prayer session, but does not indicate that one must keep this word for the indefinite future. It is also important to note that this word is not a classic mantra. The word is not viewed as powerful in and of itself, but merely serves as a shorthand for one's consent. Instead of declaring, "I intend to place myself in the loving presence of God with open hands of receptivity," one merely repeats the prayer word as a summary of this intention.

The second guideline is "sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within."<sup>11</sup> There are just a few passing references to how to sit for prayer. He emphasizes the need to find a posture which embodies respect and receptivity. In centering prayer there is a sensitivity to embodied spirituality, but there is not the precise attention to posture and sitting that one finds in some approaches to meditation. The second step points to the essence of this prayer form, self-surrender.<sup>12</sup> This prayer word is to be used gently to recall one's intention and not as a club to beat away distractions or drawn out mental noise. Keating asks the pray-er to "introduce the sacred word . . . as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton."<sup>13</sup>

His third guideline asks one, "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."<sup>14</sup> This advice shows his Benedictine commitment to Cassian and his concern about thoughts. His choice of the term "thought" is carefully chosen, and he elects to avoid terms like distractions. Keating does not advocate an "emptying of the mind," but does favor a prayer posture similar to what is often described as "no-thought." Consequently, he does not encourage the use of mental images in Centering Prayer. The swirls of thoughts are not defeated by a direct frontal attack, but are allowed with the confidence that God, in his grace, will deal with them.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Keating, *Method*, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer as Radical Consent," *Sewanee Theological Review*, 40, no. 1 (1996): 52. See also, Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004) for an extended discussion of Keating's emphasis on intention.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Keating, *Method*, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

[A]s soon as a thought emerges, one returns “ever-so-gently” to the sacred word. The gentleness is important here. One invites God to do the work. Grace moves one away from each and every distraction toward the silent presence of God within. The pray-er’s role is to intend to return to God’s presence through the use of the sacred word.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike some forms of meditation, centering prayer does not seek to suppress thoughts or “empty the mind,” but exercises a “willingness to let go of thoughts as they arrive and return to the sacred word as a symbol of one’s consent to rest in God.”<sup>16</sup> Four, one is to conclude the prayer by remaining “in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.”<sup>17</sup> It is suggested that this gentle ending be accompanied by a prayer such as the “Our Father” and a statement of gratitude to God.

## THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

His writings are marked by a gentle certainty and clarity. He is content to posit his position, explain it and suggest applications, but seldom argues or defends for his position. He locates his work as standing squarely in the Christian contemplative tradition and credits *The Cloud of Unknowing*, with suggesting this prayer practice: “It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g., *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form . . .”<sup>18</sup> He sees his project as making accessible the riches of the contemplative tradition: “It is a way of bringing procedures to be found in the contemplative teachings of the spiritual masters of the Christian tradition out of the dusty pages of the past into the broad daylight of the present.”<sup>19</sup>

The present indwelling of Christ in each believer is his theological touchstone. In what is essentially the official tract for Centering Prayer, written by Keating and widely distributed by Contemplative Outreach, he provides the following one-paragraph statement of “Theological Backgrounds”:

The source of Centering Prayer, as in all methods leading to Contemplative Prayer, is the indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. It tends to build communities of faith and bond the members together in mutual friendship and love.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Ward, “Centering Prayer: An Overview,” *Sewanee Theological Review*, 40, no. 1 (1996): 24.

<sup>16</sup> Bourgeault, “Radical Consent,” 48.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Keating, *Method*, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Keating, *Foundations*, 31–32.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Keating, *Method*, n.p.

The “indwelling Trinity” and “relationship with the living Christ” are constructs that appear throughout his writings. While quite orthodox in his official writings, his statements on the indwelling of Christ belie a universalism more evident in his lectures. He is willing to push the envelope with his language of indwelling: “The risen Jesus is among us as the glorified Christ. Christ lives in each one of us as the Enlightened One, present everywhere and at all times.”<sup>21</sup> The language he employs to describe this indwelling is more evocative than precise, and he seems bent on portraying this principle as utterly attractive. The primacy of this construct can be seen in a statement like, “Thus the fundamental principle of the spiritual journey is the Divine Indwelling” that despite its stated importance he does not nuance or develop this perspective.<sup>22</sup> His concern is to suggest ways for Christians to live and pray in light of this reality.

The main practice of the spiritual life, then, is to “be in” and participate in the indwelling Trinity through Christ. For Keating origins of centering prayer are Trinitarian, this union is not a direct communion of the soul with God, for this intimacy is always through Christ.<sup>23</sup> The language of intimacy in current spirituality often evokes an image of interpersonal warmth, support, care, and romance. For Keating, the intimacy emphasizes transparency, vulnerability, receiving care, and participation. There is the “embrace element” in his intimacy, but he places more emphasis on a therapeutic intimacy. He writes, “As we sit in centering prayer, we identify with Christ on the cross and are healed of our emotional wounds.”<sup>24</sup> Keating sees that Centering Prayer allows us to experience the reality that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:8)<sup>25</sup> and that our vulnerability, fostered by this unconditional love, allows “the fullness of grace to flow through us” healing “these wounds.”<sup>26</sup>

In contemplative prayer the Spirit places us in a position where we are at rest and disinclined to fight. By his secret anointings the Spirit heals the wounds of our fragile human nature at a level beyond our psychological perception, just as a person who is anesthetized has no idea of how the operation is going until after it is over.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Keating, *Foundations*, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Keating, *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit* (New York: Lantern Books, 2007), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Gustave Reininger, “Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Tradition,” *Sewanee Theological Review*, 40, no. 1 (1996): 34.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Keating, “The Theological Foundations of Contemplative Outreach: A Commentary by Thomas Keating,” *Contemplative Outreach News*, 15 (Spring/Summer 2001): 2.

<sup>25</sup> All Scripture taken from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Keating, *Foundations*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

The solitude offered by Centering Prayer becomes a place of transformation. While it is a retreat from the world, it is not an escape. It is a time to do serious business with God. Keating's understanding echoes that of Nouwen: "Solitude is the furnace of transformation."<sup>28</sup> His language is never as raw as Merton, who describes meditation as being "brought naked and defenseless into the center of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness."<sup>29</sup>

## AS A WAY OF PROMOTING MINDFULNESS

Another feature of centering prayer is that it promotes the life skill of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a broad term used in everyday language when we urge someone to "be mindful of what you say"—meaning essentially be careful, or the declaration of Psalm 8, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"—here mindful would seem to mean essentially to "lovingly pay attention to." You may hear of a friend who is suffering with chronic pain and is learning mindfulness meditation. Some writers and researchers have explored the connection between centering prayer and the life competence of being present to what we are currently doing.

Mindfulness is perhaps most easily defined by its opposite, mindlessness, which is the tendency to run on autopilot, to be so preoccupied as to miss the interpersonal cues around one, to fail to savor the delights of life. So mindfulness is simply, "Knowing what we are doing while we are doing it."<sup>30</sup> This is a fundamental move in the spiritual life; without it, one is not able to deeply attend to the text of Scripture or be present in prayer.

By the 1970s mindfulness had made its way into the literature of psychology and personal growth texts in the U.S. Certainly multiple factors contributed to the growing interest in this construct. However, two persons served as remarkably effective proponents of it. The first is Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist who gained notoriety thorough his compassionate and creative outreach to the victims of the violence in his country and who held brief, but high profile teaching positions in the U.S. brought mindfulness to the attention of Westerners.<sup>31</sup> The medical researcher, Jon Kabat-Zinn, began to use mindfulness in medical treatment in the 1970s and went on to empirically demonstrate the efficacy of mindfulness in treating a variety of diseases. His method of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduc-

<sup>28</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Prayer of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Nathaniel Branden, *The Art of Living Consciously: The Power of Awareness to Transform Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 66.

<sup>31</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Mobi Ho, and Dinh Mai Vo, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: an Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

tion (MBSR) has been widely adopted around the world and has given rise to therapies such as, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).<sup>32</sup>

The initial successes in medicine and psychiatry caught the attention of researchers in related areas and by the 1990s mindfulness research was being conducted in education, psychology, management, and related fields. In the late 1990s when Martin Seligman was formulating what became known as Positive Psychology, mindfulness was included in what was seen as a known correlate of human flourishing.

One of the challenges secular researchers face with mindfulness is that a working assumption of the North American mindfulness research is that it can only be cultivated or evoked through a practice of "mindfulness meditation" which is typically framed as rooted in Buddhist practice. One of the few dissenters to this assumption is the Harvard social psychologist, Ellen Langer, who offers an alternative view of mindfulness and how it is cultivated. The connection between mindfulness and meditation is so strong that many researchers operationalize mindfulness as being an attribute of those who meditate, and the research protocols give far more attention to assessing the robustness of the meditation practice rather than the presence of mindfulness in the subjects. In the past decade several conceptual pieces have been published which attempt to operationalize mindfulness apart from being the byproduct of mediation. Yet, the widespread assumption is that meditation is the only empirically demonstrated intervention for promoting mindfulness. Centers such as UCLA's MARC (Mindful Awareness Research Center) tout a thoroughly secular version of mindfulness meditation.

Christians have a rich tradition of interest in mindfulness, not only do we find it throughout the Scriptures, but the construct is explicitly discussed by many early Christian writers, to be sure the terminology varies. While mindful is used a few times in English translation of the Bible (ten times in the KJV) the term could easily be substituted with a synonym like "attentive." The construct of mindfulness is not to be uncovered through a simple word search. Some Orthodox writers cite *nepho*, "watch, sober, discipline" ("But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer." 1 Pet. 4:7, KJV) and the construct of *nepsis* as an equivalent term for mindfulness. However in the *Philokalia*, *nepsis* really has an emphasis on guarding the perimeter of one's mind more than cultivated quality of thought.

Certainly a number of biblical passages call for care in one's thought life in a way that goes beyond the content of one's thoughts. For example, the quality of one's heart is to be safeguarded above all things (Prov. 4:23) and this is done in part through the eyes and ears which are its gates and in

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<sup>32</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: 1990).

some way shape it (2:2, 4:21–23). The quiet and humble faith of the child-like in Psalm 131 pictures something akin to mindfulness. Certainly, Jesus' concern about the futility of worry in the Sermon on the Mount is also another related attribute of mindfulness. Paul, in Philippians 4:4–10, describes the content or object of one's thinking as well as a humble and non-striving quality that should mark it.

The construct of mindfulness per se is not central in Keating's teachings. Although, he advocated centering prayer as way of growing into a state of equanimity where one is less captivated by the opinions of others and more able to hear from God. Several researchers have examined centering prayer to see if it produces measurable changes in brain functioning. The number of studies are small but they do show, that like its more clinical counter part mindfulness meditation, centering prayer does produce lasting neurological changes associated with lowered reactivity and greater serenity.<sup>33</sup> In a review article which examined the potential positive benefits of centering prayer Bingaman concluded, "[R]epeating a 'spiritually powerful phrase' in the context of Centering Prayer has the capacity to re-sculpt the brain over time, until as contemplative practitioners would say, we feel it taking up residence in our heart."<sup>34</sup>

## UNIQUENESS OF CENTERING PRAYER

The writers on Centering Prayer tend to want to have it both ways when they appeal to history. On the one hand, they portray Centering Prayer as part of the long tradition of Christian contemplative prayer. And on the other hand, Centering Prayer is a new and distinct method. For this discussion I will grant both claims and am most interested in what might be unique about this method especially in terms of other contemporary approaches to Christian Contemplative Prayer. I see four unique emphases of Centering Prayer:

1. The movement has developed a clear and concrete method of prayer and a widespread and effective network of training.
2. It promotes mindfulness in the sense of being more present to what is going on and less reactive and judgmental.
3. Centering Prayer asks that one not only pray, but also locates one's prayer in a contemplative construal of the world.

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<sup>33</sup> Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 48–9.

<sup>34</sup> Kirk A. Bingaman, "The Art of Contemplative and Mindfulness Practice: Incorporating the Findings of Neuroscience into Pastoral Care and Counseling," *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 3 (January 22, 2011): 477–489.

4. It places a unique emphasis on intentionality rather than on will power. Of the four this is the one that I will give the most attention to.

*Emphasis on Intentionality.* Keating makes it clear that the practice of Centering Prayer is enhanced by careful attention to practices like seated pose, posture, breathing, and attention to the space in which you pray. However, he places his primary focus on having a proper intention as you go to prayer. Many forms of mediation and quiet prayer place a great emphasis on your attention. One can find instruction in attention-oriented mediation books on how to sit motionless for multiple hours. The emphasis is locking on something as a primary focus.

Cynthia Bourgeault writes, "Centering Prayer works with an entirely different property—not attention, but *intention*."<sup>35</sup> During centering prayer the pray-er is invited to repeat a sacred word, but this is not to become the focus of one's thoughts; it is intended to be a "reminder of one's intent for the duration of the prayer period to relinquish attachment to one's surface flow of thoughts and associations, and to rest" in God's presence.<sup>36</sup> The contrast with methods that focus on attention can be seen in a story told by Keating. At a Centering Prayer training, a nun approached him to confess that her session had been an utter failure. "In twenty minutes," she says, "I must have had twenty thousand thoughts." Keating replies, "How wonderful! Twenty thousand opportunities to return to God."<sup>37</sup>

The emphasis on intentionality by Keating is a remarkable gift. A perusal of the current literature on forms of mediation and contemplative prayer, unless informed by Centering Prayer, shows that by and large meditation is portrayed as a human achievement obtained through increasing one's powers of focus and concentration. Keating's emphasis on intention allows for a gracious tenor to pervade this prayer practice. It is not a practice of human achievement, but one of intentionality and receptivity.

Fr. Thomas has certainly succeeded in his quest to make the riches of the contemplative tradition available to a wider audience. He has also accomplished his apologetic aim of showing young people that Christianity offers a rich contemplative tradition. He has shown the power of a clear technique coupled with compelling foundational teaching to provide a life-long method of prayer. I think the most enduring legacy of Fr. Thomas will be his emphasis on intention. In the past fifty years many writers have sought spiritual guidance on contemplation from Eastern religions, which place a great deal of emphasis on attention and concentration in prayer. In his quiet way Keating challenged this orientation by his gracious words: "Centering prayer is not so much an exercise of attention as intention . . .

<sup>35</sup> Bourgeault, "Radical Consent," 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

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you intend to go to your inmost being, where . . . God dwells. You are opening to Him by pure faith."<sup>38</sup> His writings show contemplative prayer not as an achievement of human will, but the gracious gift of the God who loves his children and longs to embrace and heal them.

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Keating, *Foundations*, 36.



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