



Global Research Centrum:

Chicago

Week Three Plenary

1/24/75

ON CONTEMPLATION

We want to do this weekend what we did in a partial way last weekend: to reflect upon one of the New Religious Mode charts, the area of Contemplation, as well as think about what we are doing in our task forces this weekend.

The things I wrote down in preparation are these: make an apologetic attempt; do not make dogmatic statements. I will not make dogmatic statements about contemplation because I do not have them dogmatized. I can only appeal to Jesus. There are three things that I would submit to you in my apologetic manner. One of them is that contemplation is undoubtedly a function of the People of God. I do not mean to be pious about that, or religious. I mean it is a function of people who are giving up their lives and who intend to give them up comprehensively, futurically, intentionally, etc. Contemplation is a function that occurs when a person is "out there", on the point of history, but that is not its origin. Its function occurred because it is an intensification of what happens to anybody, anywhere, practically any time.

I went through Tillich's Systematic Theology and found that in volume three he points out that in most people's thinking contemplation is the stepchild of reflection about the dedicated, contemplative life. Most people, including Mr. Tillich and ourselves, do not know very much about contemplation. However, I agree with him because he said it in that book, and he is a meditative companion of mine. He says contemplation is very much akin to science, and therefore very much akin to adoration, adoration of the mystery of life. It is the sort of thing you try to get to in a mundanity spin.

In the new religious mode charts we were out to prepare people for those times in life when the new social vehicle would so thrust them into the depths of their life, into their own reflections, and emotional and phenomenological experience, that as Joseph Campbell says in

his paper on schizophrenia, it would be helpful if you provided them with a few images before they got there. That is what we are trying to do. And we are using ourselves again as guinea pigs, self-conscious experimenters in this arena. That goes for contemplation, too.

We are trying to get to a nonsuperstitious understanding of contemplation, as we have in other areas. There are many ways of having superstitions in the twentieth century, just as there were in past centuries. One happens to be when people sometimes think that their growth is really a constant rehearsal of their birth. Does that make sense to you? They superficially feel they are growing when they constantly rehearse their birth over and over again. That refers to people like myself who know RSI up one side and down the other and could tell you at exactly which point the zipper image, as we have called it, zips up and so forth. That is the rehearsal of one's birth, so to say, on the side of justification.

However meaningful and powerful RSI may have been for one, one can destroy its power by making it lapse into a superstition. I am thinking of the hangup that either ignores human guilt, or divine forgiveness, in the actual situation in which one lives. That is all I mean by superstition. To ignore either one of those things is just dumb.

Now I want to tell you part of my problem. I have always thought that contemplation was reached by degrees, that you got there in some way or another by degree, that you worked your way up into contemplation. This is a sort of medieval mysticism, and I now understand that not to be the case. This approach is based on taking religion by storm. You know that attitude. You experience it daily. Maybe you do; I do not know whether you do or not. It says I am going to take this reality by storm. I am going to will myself into being an iron man. No, you never have it that way.

You see that presumes that God, or the mystery, has got to be gotten to, that the way life is has got to be gotten to, and taken over, and handled in some way. I submit that the message in the gospel of Jesus Christ is that God has already surrendered, if you can stand that kind of poetry. In his forgiving grace, in the symbol of Jesus Christ, the very thing we are called to imitate is that

Another introductory remark is that God does not particularly care about how you think about contemplation. Have you noticed that? God does not really care. God cares about a lot of things, but He does not care at all about how you reflect on contemplation. And that is his job. His job is not caring about how you reflect on contemplation. But your job is to worry about it a great deal, about how you figure out contemplation. That is an old Kierkegaardian insight.

Now I want to pause for two stories. The first story has to do with the time several years ago when I was working in Dallas in a radio station. Our studios were in a building with a penthouse, and the penthouse had a bridge across the street to the next building. You have seen that kind of arrangement before. That bridge had a very understandable attraction for would be suicides. While I was working there nineteen people had jumped off that bridge and killed themselves. I had heard about it, but I did not think about it much. Then there was one warm February afternoon in Dallas, as it happened, when the sky was peculiarly red. You have seen that kind of afternoon, when it is supposed to be cold but it is warm, the sky was supposed to be blue but it was red. It was between five and six in the afternoon. I was inside studio E, where we did small announcements and the station breaks, and I heard a scream. It was the telephone operator at the reception desk, screaming. You are trained to ignore things like that. Then a few seconds later there was a thump, thump, thump, as the janitor came down the hall, yelling, "My Lord, Lord, she say he jumped. My Lord, she say he jumped." He was going down the hall in the opposite direction as fast as he could. I ran out of the studio, and saw the telephone operator adjacent to the door to the bridge, and heard that some guy had jumped off head first, just stood there and jumped off into the street. I went out onto the bridge and looked down, and it was a mess.

The most amazing thing was that I wanted very much to go down there. I mean I could look down and see all the people gathering. I wanted to experience what was going on. So I got on the elevator and went down, and looked at it, and then got back on the elevator, and went back to the studio. The police came, and they asked questions and then the ambulance came and gathered up what they could of the flesh and bones splattered there. The next thing was that the newspaper reporters arrived and wanted to know what had happened. Then there was a fire truck. After the remains had been carried off, the firemen used their hoses and cleaned off what was left behind. And there was a considerable amount because the guy had in fact jumped off head first.

Now my point concerns what happened to me there. What happened to me when I heard that scream? What happened to me when I heard the janitor running down the hallway? What happened to me when I looked down off the bridge, went downstairs, looked at the mess? What happened to me when I returned? What happened to me the next day as I reflected on the piece in the newspaper only two sentences long reporting on the incident? Something happened there that happened in your imagination as I told the story, perhaps, that is akin to contemplation, if it is not contemplation itself. In other words, contemplation is a very human activity. It is not meditation and it is not ratiocination. It has to do with coming up against your intuitive, total limitation, your own finitude, not in some rational or thoughtful way, but in a very dramatic and existential way.

In order to say the next thing I want to say, I have to explain what I mean by polar tension. Many people do not understand, when they teach the Bonhoeffer paper in RSI, for example, that you are talking about a polar tension, and not a balance of freedom and obedience. A polar tension is when you run to one pole and the very pole that you run to, because you take it to its extreme, becomes its opposite. Do you understand that? Using the Bonhoeffer paper, you can say that when you take freedom, and understand it to its limits, you see

that there is not such a thing as a free person. He is obedient to his peers, to all kinds of interior councils, all kinds of things like that. That is his freedom. Freedom becomes obedience. When you take obedience to the extreme, and hold people accountable, like in Judgement at Nuremberg, you see that even though they were obedient to Hitler, and doing what they were told, they freely chose to do what they were doing. That is what you mean by a polar tension, Or take the individual and the community. You have only individuals who were created by communities, and only communities that are made up of individuals. It is really simple, isn't it?

Now to talk about being itself. When talking about meditation, contemplation, and prayer, we talk about that middle category called contemplation as it stands between meditation and prayer. As you know, contemplation is on the being pole. It is about being itself, and therefore it is either totally, absolutely visible, or totally, absolutely invisible. Either you cannot see it because it is an intensification of meditation on the one hand, and prayer on the other hand, or you can see contemplation because it is an intensification of meditation and prayer on the other two poles.

Why say such a thing? I'd like to push our reflection down the road a little bit, and talk about contemplation as a function of prayer. Since we have been trying to examine prayer in some depth, I do not know whether you experience it or not, but when people do not pray in prayer time at Daily Office, I become uncomfortable. When they do pray, I become uncomfortable. I ask myself, well, why is that? What is the nature of the discomfort? The discomfort is that the prayer, when unuttered means that I cannot contemplate. I do not have anything to contemplate. I am off in an abyss, an absurd abyss. On the other hand, when people do pray, I am thrown immediately into contemplation. I'm thrown into the kind of reflection that I did when that woman screamed because a man had jumped off the building, or when I looked at the remains, or when the janitor ran down the hall, and all the sociological implications of all of those. I am not talking about a psychological phenomenon, except as just a minor part of what I am saying.

Let me see if I can come at this another way. The other night, when we were studying Heilbroner together in the ecclesiola, I experienced something very similar to what I have read on the "certain death" studies done in recent times. These studies were done with people who have faced sudden death. They wanted to examine what their experience was. These were people who experienced sudden death, for sure, and then miraculously had not died. For example, someone falls from an airplane, and falls all the way down and does not die. I do not know why, I have not figured that out. But these are people who faced death, and survived. There are different categories people who fell from mountains, people who knew that they had taken poisons and were facing certain death, with all kinds of unexplainable recoveries from what they were sure was certain death. They did not tell the people who they were talking to that they were making a study. Then they correlated their information.

It turned out that the people had a threefold experience in common. The first experience is illustrated by the person who fell out of the airplane. As he is sailing toward the ground, he knows he is going to die. There is no way out. He is sailing toward the ground, going to hit any minute. His experience, in that period, or the first thing that he said, was, "No!" Everyone else who had an experience like this said the same thing. No. This cannot be. This is impossible. I cannot have this. There is no way in the world. It is an absolute no. Then the second thing that they at I experienced was that there was a big turnaround of their whole life. The so-called superstition that your whose life goes before you just before you die was spelled out by the people they investigated. The person's whole life is experienced in glorious Technicolor, as a joyous experience. It was experienced as joyous. And then, the third act of that drama was an ecstatic experience. They embraced what was now coming. No longer no, but "give me that good old wham." Give me that death, ecstatically.

t am trying to say that contemplation has to do with those moments, when your time, your space, your substance, your causality, your quantity, your quality, all those categories of being in your consciousness, and at I of the images concerning those categories, are thrown into radical chaos and you face raw reshuffling of everything.

In day to day experience, we have a custom, a semiunconscious custom around here, of shunning. Have you noticed that? I suppose we picked it up from the Quakers. When a person says something stupid, we just shun him. Or when someone says something that does not relate to the conversation or the way that things are going, we shun him. You know the experience. If you do not know it directly, you know indirectly of the experience of being shunned, or ignored. People do not have anything against you, they just say, "that's what he said, O.K." Shunning is one thing, one way contemplation happens that is just as radical as if someone made a thousand word speech. Do you understand that? I used to think people who did not speak to one another weren't communicating. Why, they were communicating more than people who just sit around the table and talk. In other words, shunning is not a lack of communication. My point is that shunning can thrust one into the experience of contemplation and does in fact do it.

Incidents in your day to day life can do it, can cause you to contemplate. I will wear a certain tie and people will say that it is an interesting tie. Now, maybe the guy wasn't even thinking about it and was just trying to make a comment on the elevator to get out of my reach or something. He says, "That's an interesting tie," and I think "By golly." I am then a different being by virtue of that contemplative experience. Recently I got a hair cut. People would say, "You got a hair cut." I confess that I went and looked in the mirror and thought, by golly, now that is all right. I become, in that dialogue, a different human being. I was giving a dramatic illustration, like a guy falling out of an airplane, to try to get clear the categories we are trying to point to. Your total imagery has been shaken up, reshuffled, and not just in a pip-squeak fashion.

In Bultmann's "Faith" paper, he is talking about a true deed, where there is the old self left behind, and the new self comes into being. Contemplation is in that ball park. A new self now comes into being, because of some mundane, day to day experience. I wanted to give you the illustration of the Jonah story by Irene Orgel. We picked up that little short story because it was so good. The first contemplation that I could recognize as contemplation happened to me when I read that story. She tells it in a regular way. There is a guy and he wants to run away, and he is finally caught up with. He got caught up in the sea. He got rescued, and after being rescued, he is rushing along and God walks along with him. God grabs him by the shirt tail, and says, "What is your rush, son?" He says, "Well I'm going off to preach your word. I mean, these people really don't pay any attention to your word." "Now what are you going to do?" asks God. "I'm going to go out and fire a blast," says Jonah. God pulls him back and says, "Now son, don't be like that." He doesn't say these words, but I want to transpose a little bit. "Now don't be dumb. There is nothing wrong with those people in Ninevah. They are just ordinary folks just like you are." That is not the point where I came to contemplate. Where I did come to contemplate is when Jonah talks to God, when God is sort of talking rhapsodic nonsense, to a human being. God says, "I just learned this from Sir James Jeans, but I think I'm going to find out next from Einstein. I'm learning more and more these days from Einstein . . . You know, when I was in the inchoate gas just forming the world..." Jonah gets upset about this. I did too. Jonah and I said, "Do you mean to tell me that you don't know what you are going to become next?" God says, "I don't know. I don't know. I'm waiting to be told."

The moment that happened to me, I submit to you, I experienced contemplation. I said, "God, what are you going to become next?" And God says, "I don't know. What are you working on there, huh? How are those things coming?" That is for me what you mean by contemplation at the very mundane level.

Joseph Pierce