

Why do Christian Meditators call the prayer word a 'mantra'?

The mantra, taking us into the present moment and beyond the ego, slips through the narrow gate into the city of God. (John Main, Word Made Flesh)

I

The tradition of 'monologistic' prayer – prayer that employs one sacred word recited continuously in the heart and mind in faith – is a venerable tradition in Christianity. It began perhaps with reverence for the name of Jesus (at which every knee shall bend' Phil 2:10). This use of the Holy Name also became established later in the various forms of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox Church. In the western Church the first master of this prayer was John Cassian.

The first detailed description of this form of prayer is found in the Desert tradition in Conference X of Cassian. Here he recommends the verse (Psalm 69.2) 'O God come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me'. St Benedict later adopted this as the opening verse of the Divine Office, a place it occupies to our day. A thousand years later in England the anonymous author of the Cloud of Unknowing recommends the same form of prayer but suggests the use of a single monosyllabic word such as 'God'.

In the twentieth century John Main inheriting and passing on the same tradition recommended the early Aramaic Christian prayer 'maranatha'. This is a scriptural phrase meaning 'Come Lord' (1Cor: 16:22), in the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic, and a sacred phrase in the early Christian liturgy. There are many other examples of suggested prayer-words in the history of Christian prayer reflecting the particular epoch or the personality of the master of prayer who was leading others into contemplative silence and stillness (*hesychia*) in the heart. Common to the tradition is the emphasis on continuous repetition of the word with deepening faith and fidelity to the same word as it becomes rooted in the heart and opens the grace of contemplation – our entry into the prayer of Jesus himself in the Holy Spirit.

Those who used the name of Jesus would call the word simply 'the Name' or the 'Holy Name'. Cassian does not recommend the name and calls the verse he suggests calls it a 'formula'. This term meant 'rule or principle'. That is, 'formula' did not have a specifically sacred meaning but referred to a template or the standard use of the same word or phrase recited faithfully in all conditions of mind and leading the one praying to poverty of spirit.

John Main refers to the prayer-word as 'the word' or the 'mantra'. Why does he use the term 'mantra' especially as this term is associated with eastern forms of meditation?

To understand this it is necessary to remember the religious environment in which John Main personally recovered and first began to teach meditation in

the Christian tradition. Before he entered monastic life John Main had first encountered this practice in the East though he always practiced it as a form of Christian prayer. It was there that he first encountered the term 'mantra' which carried the sense of a 'word or formula chanted or sung as an incantation or prayer.' Twenty years later when he had re-read Cassian and encountered this way of prayer in the Christian tradition he resumed his own practice and was led to see its universal relevance for contemporary Christian spirituality.

By 1975 various forms of eastern meditation had become popular in the west, in particular Transcendental Meditation. Thus the word mantra had entered popular language. Today the word is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, defined as a 'sacred text or passage' with a first English usage dated 1801. Most often today the word is used in a secular context to refer to politicians' repeated promises!

II

Some people hearing the word 'mantra' used in connection with Christian prayer may feel uncertain or confused because of its eastern associations. Since 1975, since John Main used it as a Christian term with no specific debt to the east it has, however, become familiar to many Christians. We can now say it belongs to the vocabulary of Christian spirituality.

In the same way the full import of the word 'meditation', which of course goes back to the roots of the Christian tradition, also needs to be recovered and understood in its original, more contemplative sense. For many Christians 'meditation' became restricted to mental prayer, employing thought and imagination especially in reflection on the scriptures. This is very valid form of prayer – also and sometimes better described as 'lectio'. 'Meditation' in its original sense of leading into to non-discursive, silent, imageless prayer or contemplation was also popularized in the west in modern times through eastern spiritualities and methods. The challenge John Main addressed was to recover and reinstate the full meaning of 'meditation' in the Christian world.

There are then two reasons supporting the use of the term 'mantra'. First, that it has acquired a universal usage and is widely understood in a Christian context. Second, that for some people learning of the contemplative dimension of prayer for the first time may require some careful reflection and discussion. Being encouraged to think about what 'mantra' and 'meditation' mean can be a stimulus for the modern Christian to understand and recover the contemplative dimension of their faith and prayer-life.

For a more traditional audience this will need sensitive help from the person presenting Christian meditation. So the word *mantra* may need to be explained when it is first used in a teaching session. For example in introducing Christian meditation to a new audience, especially a non-English speaking one, it may be wiser first to use the terms *word* or *prayer word*. Then at the point in the introduction when a specific word is recommended – for example, *Jesus* or *Abba* or *maranatha* the speaker can refer to them as 'early Christian mantras or sacred

words’.

Keeping these sensitivities and background in mind it has been the experience of The World Community for Christian Meditation, now present in more than a hundred countries, that the term ‘mantra’ is not at all a serious impediment to the transmission of this teaching. The greater challenge is to help people already praying in sacramental or devotional ways to understand, through their own experience, the full meaning of contemplation and the prayer of the heart. Even though for some people the term ‘mantra’ may cause an initial confusion, being helped to understand its meaning may help them grasp better what meditation itself means as a way beyond words, thoughts and images into the silence of Christ. This is expressed in the opening prayer which John Main composed for Christian meditation:

Heavenly father, open my heart to the silent presence of the spirit of your Son. Lead me into that mysterious silence where your love is revealed to all who call *maranatha*, come Lord Jesus.

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