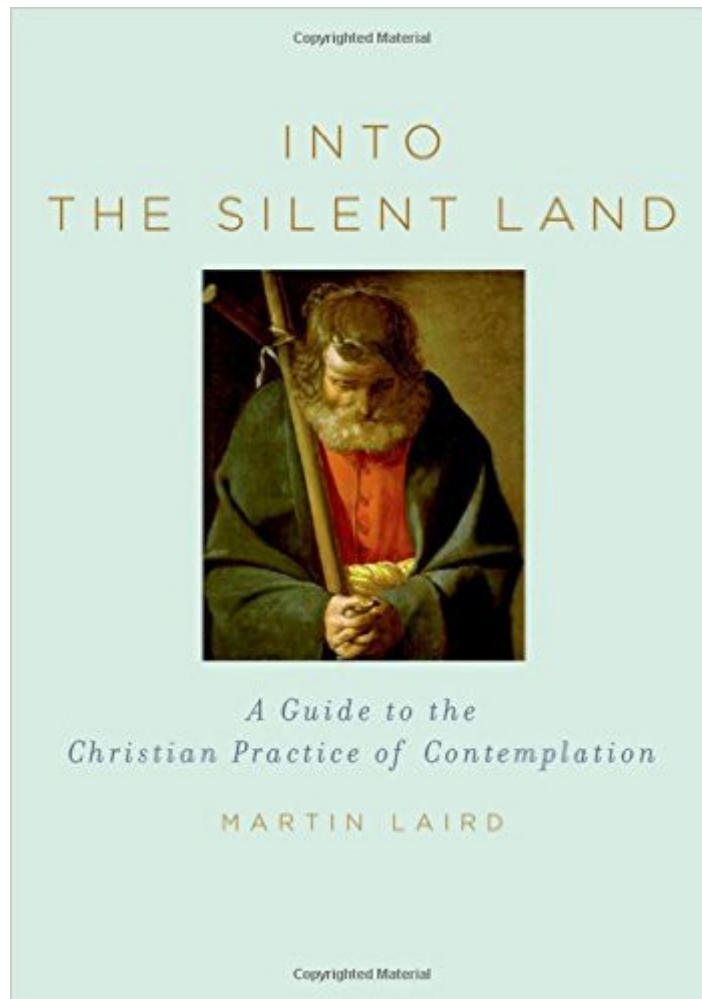


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# Into The Silent Land: A Guide To The Christian Practice Of Contemplation



## Synopsis

Sitting in stillness, the practice of meditation, and the cultivation of awareness are commonly thought to be the preserves of Hindus and Buddhists. Martin Laird shows that the Christian tradition of contemplation has its own refined teachings on using a prayer word to focus the mind, working with the breath to cultivate stillness, and the practice of inner vigilance or awareness. But this book is not a mere historical survey of these teachings. In *Into the Silent Land*, we see the ancient wisdom of both the Christian East and West brought sharply to bear on the modern-day longing for radical openness to God in the depths of the heart. Laird's book is not like the many presentations for beginners. While useful for those just starting out, this book serves especially as a guide for those who desire to journey yet deeper into the silence of God. The heart of the book focuses on negotiating key moments of struggle on the contemplative path, when the whirlwind of distractions or the brick wall of boredom makes it difficult to continue. Laird shows that these inner struggles, even wounds, that any person of prayer must face, are like riddles, trying to draw out of us our own inner silence. Ultimately Laird shows how the wounds we loathe become vehicles of the healing silence we seek, beyond technique and achievement. Throughout the language is fresh, direct, and focused on real-life examples of people whose lives are incomparably enriched by the practice of contemplation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a true gem. It is a wonderful guide for anyone seriously interested in contemplative

prayer. Laird draws on the spiritual traditions of both Eastern and Western Christianity to produce a true classic, filled with practical guidance about the method of contemplative prayer, the difficulties and distractions (and how they can become gifts), and the way contemplation can teach us to deal with afflictive emotions and situations. Laird writes for the experienced person as well as (perhaps even more than) the beginner. He draws primarily upon the Jesus Prayer as his method, with nods to Centering Prayer as an alternative approach. He includes passages from some of the greatest writers on (and practitioners of) contemplative prayer in the Western Church and the Eastern Orthodox tradition which may be less familiar to readers but has much to offer us. This book has real depth, and is obviously written by someone who knows the silent land well himself. It is a treasure!

In this book Laird explains passages on the contemplative journey in ways that were new to me. (Perhaps I should admit here that I didn't even know there were identifiable stages of silence.) He names the doorway into each stage, the treasure one finds there, and what is entailed in opening the door - the riddle that must be solved before entering. As a student and practitioner of centering prayer for 15 years, I found these insights fascinating as well as wonderfully presented. But Laird doesn't just leave us with theories; he offers practical applications of his lessons. Here are real people struggling with real difficulties, practicing contemplative methods, solving the riddles, moving through the stages, gaining new freedom and joy. Laird offers not only mysteries and metaphors, but tools and tips! I would recommend this book to anyone on the contemplative journey.

Here is one of the loveliest, most poetic, and most useful books on the practice of mature Christian prayer that I have ever read. First of all, what this book is not. It is not a comprehensive guide to Christian spirituality, or even to Christian prayer. The author does not bother discussing the sacramental or liturgical life of the church, or *lectio divina*, or the quest for personal or collective holiness. Nor is this a manual on meditation in its classical Christian sense -- e.g., meditation as reflection on the spiritual life, such as found in the writings of Ignatius of Loyola. And while there are some superficial similarities (particularly in the emphasis on the "prayer word"), this is not about centering prayer or John Main's approach to Christian meditation. Laird anchors his approach to contemplation in the desert and eastern traditions, quoting authors such as Evagrius, John Climacus, Theophan the Recluse, Hesychios, and Gregory of Sinai. But he doesn't ignore the west: John of the Cross, Augustine, Meister Eckhart and John Ruysbroeck are frequently cited as well. If you're the kind of reader who pays attention to footnotes, you'll probably come away, as I did, with

the sense that this is a book thoroughly grounded in the tradition of Christian spirituality. Laird discusses the Jesus Prayer and the scripture-based prayer of John Cassian, but he clearly prefers -- and thus, writes about -- monologistic prayer: the prayer of gentle, unforced awareness, anchored in a synchronized attention to one's breath while repeating a single prayer word. This, of course, is the approach to contemplation advocated by one of the towering giants of mystical literature, "The Cloud of Unknowing." By praying this way, we enter into our own deeper place of always-existing silence -- what Laird calls "the silent land" -- where we do not find God so much as we allow God to find us, or, perhaps even better said, where the idea of creator and creature finding each other simply falls away as just another thought gently laid aside within the all-encompassing presence of the Divine Mystery. This approach to prayer -- and spirituality -- is thoroughly mystical, which is to say it is predicated on the theology of God's presence within us, even "while we were yet sinners." As Laird puts it, "When Paul looks within and sees Christ, I do not suggest he sees Christ as an object of awareness. Paul speaks of something more direct and immediate, which pertains to the ground of awareness and not to the objects of awareness. The awareness itself is somehow about the presence of Christ in Paul." In other words, moving into the silent land means moving beyond some sort of subject-object duality where "I" find, see, or in some other way apprehend "God" or "Christ." When Paul said "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me," Martin Laird takes the apostle at his word -- and invites us to do the same, affirming that it is only in the silent land that we can experience this reality for ourselves. The entire book is a delight, but what I found particularly useful is Laird's gentle, hopeful, and practical discussion of how to deal with distractions during silent prayer. He notes that distractions are normal, indeed are simply the mind doing its work: the mind is about thinking just as the heart is about beating. The point is to gently, and over a several stage process that Laird describes as "thresholds," disengage ourselves from the normal pattern of becoming caught up in our thoughts -- and weaving elaborate stories (more thoughts) out of them. As we move deeper and deeper into the silent land, we learn to watch thoughts arise and fall, without needing to comment on them or otherwise get engaged by them. We learn to "look over the shoulders" of our thoughts at the pure, vast, depthless depth within, beneath, and beyond the chatter of the mind. Laird uses the analogy of weather patterns on Mount Zion: our thoughts are the weather, and the silence is the mountain: the mountain where true prayer may occur. "As our silence deepens we are able to meet our thoughts and feelings directly, without commentary, without telling a story to ourselves about them... Gradually we see the simplest of facts, so simple and yet we have missed it all these years: our thoughts and feelings appear in something deeper, in a great vastness. This vastness is not yet another object of awareness but the ground of awareness

itself." Here we are closing in on what George Fox called "the inner light" and Thomas Merton described as "le point vierge": that place where, in the words of Meister Eckhart, "The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love." Laird recognizes that this way of thinking might frighten those who are afraid of anything that smacks of pantheism. "Some who are tediously metaphysical might worry that all this talk of union with God blurs the distinction between creator and creation. Far from blurring this distinction it sets it in sharper focus. John's Gospel says that we are the branches and Christ is the vine." But he avoids getting mired in theological debate, rather simply describing the experience of contemplation and how to best respond to the kind of mental and emotional resistance that inevitably accompanies the quest to be silent before God. The book ends with down-to-earth considerations of how contemplative practice can be beneficial for those who suffer (as in serious illness), or those who are engaged in the process of letting go of debilitating fear or temptation. Acknowledging that such deep inner work often may require the assistance of a professional therapist, Laird nevertheless makes a convincing case that contemplation is not just something we do to feel good with God -- it has holistic repercussions for anyone seeking to live a life of what the Cistercian tradition calls "joyful penitence," in other words, ongoing transformation in Christ. This is a wonderful book. Any aspiring contemplative will, I believe, find it helpful and inspiring. And even those who have been exploring the silent land for many years now will find it useful.

Of all the books I've read on this subject, this would be the first I'd recommend to anyone interested in contemplative meditation/prayer. Many other helpful books can be found in Laird's footnotes. My favorites are "The Cloud of Unknowing" by an anonymous 14th century Christian monk and the "Art of Prayer" edited by Ighumen Chariton. But this small book speaks directly to the modern practitioner of contemplation in ways that are both very helpful and illuminating. Nor is this simply a guide book for Christian contemplatives. Virtually everything Laird describes can be applied to contemplatives of every tradition and even those practicing beyond all traditions. I've called this an "introduction" to contemplative meditation because in a sense all works on mystical contemplation are introductions since words can only lead one into practice and only through practice can one be carried into the kingdom within, beyond all words and concepts.

I'm a liberal/pantheistic Quaker and have over the years read manuals and practiced meditation in Christian, Buddhist and Taoist traditions. This is the best meditation manual I have ever

encountered in any tradition. It's also the only one I've ever recommended online. With its combination of clear description and deep intuition, I think that almost anyone who is interested in contemplation in any tradition would gain from reading it. I wish somebody had written it thirty years ago--it would have saved me a lot of time and trouble.

Great Guide for Beginners! Very Simple Instructions, and Good Explanations of the Ground-lay of the "Silent Land." Instructions are again repeated as from a gentle teacher, so that the reader understands, so that the info can saturate.... I recommend the book for the Christian who wants to go deeper in his communion with Christ Jesus.

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