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Book Review

The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice

by Cynthia Bourgeault

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conversation, Jay Emerson Johnson's *Peculiar Faith* is a welcome and valuable resource.

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***The Heart of Centering Prayer:
Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice***

Cynthia Bourgeault

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Drawing on an eclectic collection of sources, *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (hereafter *The Heart*) by Cynthia Bourgeault offers a radical new perspective on the purpose of contemplation and the unique role Centering Prayer has to play in Christian contemplative practice.

An explication of Bourgeault's primary thesis and its corollaries serves as the introduction to the volume. Bourgeault argues that the goal of contemplation is not a greater level of knowledge or a sense of enhanced relationship with God; rather, contemplation literally reformulates one's perception of reality, and, indeed, the way in which one perceives reality. In a metaphor to which Bourgeault

repeatedly returns, contemplation is a “rewiring of the ‘operating system,’” changing not “*what* one sees but *how* one sees” (Bourgeault, 48; italics original). As a way of talking about this change in perception, Bourgeault introduces the term “nondual,” a word included in the book’s subtitle and a key element of the book’s argument. More familiar to students of some Eastern traditions or of popular inter-spiritual systems such as those of Ken Wilber or Spiral Dynamics, “nondual” suggests an advanced level of spiritual development. Nonetheless, Bourgeault argues, it is a mistake to equate this term with the unitive way (following the purgative and illuminative ways) of the Christian contemplative tradition (3). Nonduality is not about union with God as such, because it is not a new awareness of some object. Rather, nonduality is a new mode of cognition, which changes the “*mechanics* of perception” (5, italics original). Whereas ordinary awareness perceives the world by distinguishing between objects, nonduality provides the capacity to perceive through “holographic resonance” (another favorite term of Bourgeault’s), which is the “capacity to sense the whole pattern as a single unified field” (5).

Bourgeault offers two corollary theses. First, while it does not use the term nondual, the Christian tradition nevertheless has a latent understanding of this mode of perception. Bourgeault points to the concept of “putting the mind in the heart” (5) in use throughout the literature of the Orthodox stream of Christianity. For Bourgeault, this is suggestive of the cognitive reformulation that is nonduality.

Second, Bourgeault argues that Centering Prayer, uniquely among contemplative practices, supports this change in perception by directing the practitioner repeatedly to let go of the faculty of attention, leading eventually to a radically altered way of being (5). Bourgeault observes that across religious traditions, most prayer and meditation systems (including *lectio divina*, the Rosary, mindfulness,

Vipassana, and the like) are concentrative practices, designed to focus the attention. By contrast, Centering Prayer is designed to cultivate a different kind of perception, in which focused attention gives way to a diffuse openness; Bourgeault likens this to *Dzogchen*, the Tibetan Buddhist practice of “objectless awareness” (2, cf. 107).

With this three-strand foundation of nonduality as change in perception, the significance of putting the mind in the heart, and the uniqueness of Centering Prayer, *The Heart* then unfolds its multifaceted argument in three major sections. The first (and smallest), “A Short Course in Centering Prayer” (11-39) is a condensed version of Bourgeault's month-long online course in Centering Prayer as originally presented on the Spirituality and Practice website in 2011. For practitioners of Centering Prayer, this is familiar territory. Bourgeault, however, makes a critical adjustment by emphasizing the nature of Centering Prayer as a kenotic practice (12); by letting go of any point of focus for the attention, the one praying imitates the self-emptying surrender of Christ. While this element has always been a part of the understanding of Centering Prayer, Bourgeault underscores it here as one strand in the argument she is weaving together.

The central section, “The Way of the Heart” (43-114), is by far the most wide-ranging; apropos for its title, it also serves in many ways as the heart of the book. Here Bourgeault draws together the various elements of her argument. Following an expanded discussion of nonduality, Bourgeault argues that the heart is “an organ of spiritual perception” (54), and thus, the seat of nonduality. As evidence for this, Bourgeault draws deeply on the work of Simeon the New Theologian (72-76; 94-101), the Gurdjieff Work (81, 89), and the fields of contemplative studies and new science (58-61; 102-114). Bourgeault also references Evagrius’s teaching on *apatheia*, suggesting that the heart must be purified of the passions (which Bourgeault defines as anything that entangles and divides the

attention), so that it no longer reacts to every passing fancy (62-63). Finally, Bourgeault argues that Centering Prayer, through the repeated letting go of attachments, purifies the heart, drawing the mind down into the heart and creating a new center and field of perception (66ff). In essence, Bourgeault is making the claim that Centering Prayer actually contributes to a neurological change, centering perception on the heart rather than the usual mode of knowing by distinguishing, which leads to a sense of wholeness and unity—nonduality.

The final section of the book, “*The Cloud of Unknowing Revisited*” (119-200) examines the fourteenth-century mystical classic—which is credited as the basis of what became Centering Prayer—in light of the previous lines of argument. Through a close reading of approximately one-third of *The Cloud*, Bourgeault suggests that the *Cloud*-author was years ahead of his time in understanding the role of contemplation to alter one’s mode of perception—even if he did not have the exact language to express this idea.

The Heart concludes with advice for both practitioners and non-practitioners of Centering Prayer on responding to and furthering its insights.

Bourgeault’s genius rests in combining widely disparate sources to develop radical new perspectives while often shedding new light on familiar material. In *The Heart*, for example Bourgeault clarifies the role of the sacred word in Centering Prayer, which has been the source of considerable confusion for practitioners (128). By holding up kenosis and eventual nonduality as its ultimate purpose, Bourgeault makes sense of the Centering Prayer guidelines that insist the sacred word is not a mantra. Rather, it is a symbol of one’s intention to let go of attachments, empty one’s self as the reference point for attention and thought, and sink into a new type of awareness.

Bourgeault also helps clarify apparent contradictions in *The Cloud* that have long puzzled its readers. Throughout *The Cloud*, the author suggests that thoughts cannot apprehend God; only love can. Nevertheless, the *Cloud*-author at times also states that, just like the intellect, emotion and affectivity are not adequate to see God. Bourgeault breaks this apparent impasse by arguing that *The Cloud* is not a treatise of affective mysticism, as most scholars identify it (144ff); rather, the *Cloud*-author uses “love” as the only word available to him to describe nondual perception. Indeed, using the lens of nonduality, Bourgeault unites the *Cloud*’s terminology and concepts into a coherent system.

Moreover, by suggesting nondual perception as the goal of contemplation, Bourgeault offers the possibility of a more measurable and stable objective for charting spiritual formation. For scholars, furthermore, the idea of nondual perception can provide a new perspective for analyzing contemplative literature, a project Bourgeault herself suggests (206-207).

Nonetheless, *The Heart* is not an academic work. Like much of Bourgeault’s oeuvre, it is written for an educated lay audience, whom Bourgeault identifies as “spiritually adventurous non-specialists” (60). Unfortunately, this often allows broad generalizations and a “flattening” of sources to creep into *The Heart*. Indeed, the lay reader could be forgiven for thinking that Evagrius, Simeon the New Theologian, Sufism, the *Cloud*-author, Gurdjieff, Ken Wilber, and the HearthMath Institute all say the same things and are equally valid sources. Moreover, Bourgeault refers broadly to the “wisdom traditions” (54) or “inner tradition” of Christianity (64, 81) without ever defining them, which allows *The Heart* to fold any number of ideas together without regard for historical or theological context; Bourgeault’s frequent use of the Gurdjieff Work (with which she had a long association) as part of this inner tradition is a case in point. Tracing this “inner tradition” in *The Heart* is also difficult;

Bourgeault refers to a “long line of Christian mystical masters” (168), but the endnote cites only Jacob Boehme (224), who is hardly a mainstream representative of Christian mysticism.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Heart* is a worthwhile book. Not only does it raise intriguing questions and perspectives for both further research and spiritual practice, it also serves as a culmination of all Bourgeault’s diverse work to date. There are mentions, for example, not only of her previous work on Centering Prayer, but also her volumes on the “Wisdom Jesus” and Mary Magdalene, as well as many of the other themes Bourgeault has engaged for the previous two decades. *The Heart*, therefore, provides a comprehensive look into the mind of its creative and expansive author. Like the practice from which *The Heart of Centering Prayer* takes its title, such a look can be enlightening and transformative.

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