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by Dana Greene

Contributor

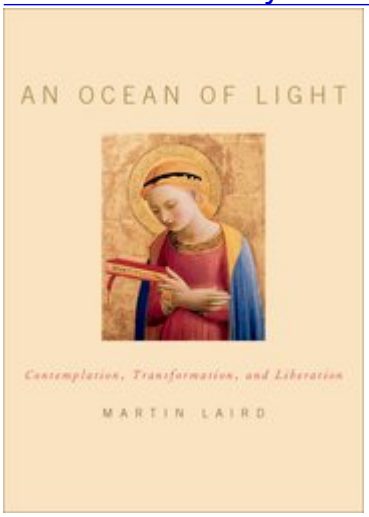
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AN OCEAN OF LIGHT: CONTEMPLATION, TRANSFORMATION, AND LIBERATION
Martin Laird
264 pages; Published by Oxford University Press
$18.95

An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation is to be read slowly, not because its language is opaque or its concepts esoteric but because its message is disarmingly simple. The author, Augustinian Fr. Martin Laird, professor of early Christian studies at Villanova University and author of several books on the contemplative life, offers this practical guide for those who have a mature contemplative practice. His message is summarized in the book's subtitle: The practice of contemplation with all of its challenges can lead to transformation and liberation.

Laird is steeped in the literature of the mystics — Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec — and the early church fathers, especially Evagrius Ponticus and of course Augustine. Based on their psychological and theological insights, he proposes a new way of understanding contemplation, one that jettisons much of the language and conceptualization of contemporary spirituality.

His diagnosis of the current human condition is that we perceive ourselves as separate from God and hence from each other. Contemplation is the "revolutionary" gift that transforms and liberates us from this false separation and reestablishes God no longer as an object one seeks but as the ground of one's being. For Laird and

those who have shaped his understanding, God is at the center of one's being; the human soul and God are one. It is through contemplation that one discovers this given but obscured reality. What contemplation does is clear away clutter, allowing the individual's grounding in God to become evident. When one experiences being in God, self-referencing drops away.

At the heart of this book is Laird's suggestive descriptions of three types of mind: the reactive, the receptive and the luminous. He insists that there is great fluidity among these minds and that they are not stages of development or reflections of progress, but rather interrelated awarenesses of what is real. He proposes a series of questions about each of these "minds": What is contemplative practice like for each mind? What is the ego like? What contemplative skill emerges for each mind, and what special challenges are pertinent to each? Throughout, Laird advocates for a process of subtraction rather than addition. Decluttering is the principal work of each of the three minds.

The reactive mind is still distant from God, generally self-referential, and acquisitive of spiritual progress, nonetheless through contemplation it begins to experience a clearing away of mental clutter, a greater inner spaciousness, and a falling away of self. The receptive mind is differentiated from the reactive mind in that it is less cluttered, manifests a greater inner stillness and an expanded awareness. It is not that thoughts are eliminated, but rather the mind is reoriented and is not as fixated on the self.

This subtle shift from self-awareness to an awareness of the ground of being itself is the work of grace, but this movement nonetheless requires continual contemplative practice, which allows grace to operate. The luminous mind is characterized by an even greater diminishment of mental clutter and a greater inner silence. Here the vast spaciousness of being in God is revealed. The self is unselfed and regrounded in the source of all being; one experiences no separation between the self and God. One's awareness has been made simple, self-forgetful, open and trusting.

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The final section of the book, "Depression and Its Friends," is offered as an illustration of how, even in the most difficult of human situations of depression, anxiety, isolation and self-loathing, contemplative practice provides some

redemption. Laird is not arguing that contemplation cures depression, but rather that it can remove the illusion of one's separateness from God and others. This is an acknowledgment that pain is personal, but not private. As such, contemplation offers the possibility of being in solidarity with all who suffer affliction.

Ocean of Light, conceived as an aid to those engaged in contemplative practice, reviews the challenges of this practice and explores how it both can transform and liberate. In it, Laird offers what he calls "signposts on a pathless path." If this reader has a lament about this engaging book it is not for what is there, but what is not there. If the goal of Christian life is to become fully oneself in God, that transformation and liberation inevitably imply greater compassion for one's fellows. While Laird hints at this implication, that link is not substantially developed.

As Julian of Norwich knew well, love was the meaning, and as Paul attested to the Corinthians, it is love that lasts. Having now proposed a way by which one can reclaim one's inseparable connection with God, one awaits another volume in which Laird connects personal transformation and liberation to increased compassion and love for one's brothers and sisters.

[Dana Greene's latest book is *Elizabeth Jennings: The Inward War*.]

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