

JOHN MAIN, OSB

(1926–1982)



The mystical tradition has its source in a God who makes him/herself known through human experience. There is a great richness and variety as the experience of God takes shape within particular lives and historical epochs. The “Word” is constantly being “made flesh” within the uniqueness of individuals and eras in which they lived.

There is diversity but also a common thread. Tradition is passed on, it develops, and it is this that makes it a true doctrine, a living word.

The continuity and adaptability of the mystical tradition can be seen in the case of John Main. Drawing on the teaching on prayer of the early desert fathers he took monastic spirituality beyond its traditional boundaries. He showed that “pure prayer” beyond thought and image was a universal calling, the birthright of all Christians and a normal flowering of baptismal grace. The purpose of the monastic channel was always to overflow its banks and make its teaching accessible to all people. The universal relevance of the monastic teaching on prayer took on a further and more expansive dimension in the relation between Christian meditation and the meditation practices of eastern religions. In the 1950’s John Main learnt the art of meditation with a mantra from a Hindu monk in Malaya and later discovered the Christian tradition of meditation in the Conferences of the desert fathers recorded by Cassian.

John Main’s teaching on prayer was never theoretical but always a way of experience. His concern was to draw people into an encounter with God in

the silent depths of their heart. In our global culture inter-religious dialogue has become very important. John Main felt that the wisdom of the monastic teaching on prayer was the practical response to the problem of human alienation and communal needs of our time. In “Word into Silence” he writes that:

“The modern Christian’s mission is to resensitise our contemporaries to the presence of a spirit within themselves... Our first task, in the realisation of our own vocation and in the expansion of the kingdom among our contemporaries, is to find our own spirit because this is our lifeline with the Spirit of God... Humanity finds its own spirit fully only in the light of the One Universal Spirit.”

John Main’s emphasis on personal experience and self discovery in God as well as the clear method of prayer he uncovered for Christians made Bede Griffiths call him “the most important guide in the Church today”.

John Main’s own life journey is a parable of his teaching. Like in a labyrinth, his movement towards “the one thing necessary” took him on a circuitous route. That one thing for John Main was the saying of the mantra.

He was born in 1926 in London of an Irish family. He was called Douglas; John was the name he took on entering the monastery. The Main family previously lived in Ballinskelligs on the western tip of Kerry. John Main’s Scottish grandfather had worked here setting up the first trans-Atlantic cable and where he met his wife, John Main’s grandmother. It is also an ancient monastic site within view of the Skellig rocks where the Celtic monks once lived and prayed. This spirit of the frontier, of adventure and new beginnings was to infuse John Main’s own monastic vision. John Main had a noticeably English manner and reserve, as well as a memorable sense of humour and exuberance he inherited from his close and fun loving family. The two sides of his character coexisted in rich paradox. When he later joined the Benedictines in London he said that if he joined an Irish monastery he would have lost his faith!

Douglas joined the army in the last year of the war and worked as a radiographer in the intelligence unit. Working behind enemy lines his job was to pinpoint the exact location of enemy radio signals. Later he was to use this as an analogy for the mantra. It was a time, he said, when accuracy was becoming much more possible because of the use of quartz crystal. The mantra similarly helped one to stop drifting in prayer but tune in with precision to the wavelength of Jesus, the Word or sound of God that vibrates in us and in all creation. The mantra helps us to pick up the signal of God, the prayer of Jesus in our own hearts, the frequency that puts us in contact with the Father. It's maybe curious how this metaphor John Main used was based on picking up enemy signals, but he was known for a rather mischievous and paradoxical sense of humour. During the war for example he was with his brothers on the roof of their house in Hampstead to watch the sunset. Down below on the street was a bus stop full of evening commuters. In a loud and clear voice he called, "Bomb! Bomb!". When the crowd quickly scattered he was impressed by the power of one little word - like the power of the mantra to dispel distractions!

One of the things John Main's life shows is that all our experience is related to what is central. Everything that happens to us is a metaphor of who we are and why we are here. After the war Douglas Main sensed that his life experience pointed towards a vocation to religious life. He joined an Augustinian religious Order, the Cannons Regular, and went to study in Rome. However the stuffiness and misogyny he encountered there put him off. All his life Douglas was close to his mother and sisters.

Many felt his temperament somewhat authoritarian but John Main was never life denying and was always open to others. Later on he was to teach that deep prayer leads to fullness of life; this was the real "religious life", one that was open to all people. On his return from Rome he studied law at Trinity College in Dublin. One feels that he revelled in the paradox of being a very English Irishman and a Catholic in a Protestant college. The boundaries of nationality, denomination and even religious faith were never a prison of identity for John Main but a rich part of the play of life.

On graduation John Main took a job with the British Colonial Service in the Far East. It was a time when colonies were being given their independence. Douglas Main would have revelled in this, politically he was always socialist and as an Irishman never sympathetic to British imperialism. He must have enjoyed the paradox of lending his skills to the process of political independence in Asia. He was sent to Malaysia.

One day Douglas was sent on an official visit to thank a certain Swami Saccidananda for his work running an Ashram and Orphanage outside Kuala Lumpur. Douglas was impressed by the holiness, the energy of joy and the deeply centred nature of the monk. They got to talking about prayer:

Saccidananda: "Do you pray?"

Douglas: "Yes"

Saccidananda: "How?"

Douglas: "Well, I read a piece of Scripture, I reflect on it, ask God to speak to me through it, make some resolution and try to apply that in my life".

(Comment: This is what we would call "discursive" prayer).

Saccidananda: "That is very good."

Douglas: "How do you pray?"

Saccidananda: "We pray slightly differently. We don't think, we come to an inner silence". (Comment: And here the Swami quoted from the *Upanishads*):

"The spirit of the One who creates the Universe dwells in the human heart and in silence is loving to all". Douglas: "How do you come to this inner silence?" (Comment: Douglas Main found here an echo of his own faith. The maturity of his faith is shown in that he responded with a "how" not a "what", practice not theory).

Saccidananda: "It is difficult, there are distractions, the mind is like a tree full of chattering monkeys, to clear a way through the jungle we take a single word, a Mantra, and repeat it ceaselessly in our mind and heart,

giving it our full attention.”

Douglas: “Could you teach me as a Christian to meditate?”

Saccidananda: “Certainly, it would make you a better Christian. Try to meditate every day, twice a day, half an hour in the morning, half an hour in the evening and we can meditate together at the end of every week.”

(Comment: As a Christian we often see the form of prayer as restricted to a particular religion, prayer for the Swami however was a universal human response to the mystery of life. It is a testament to Douglas Main’s ability to cross boundaries – ten years before the openness of Vatican II – that he felt able and willing to take this “Hindu” practice up, presumably taking a Christian Mantra.)

Douglas: “How long will this take?”

Saccidananda: “As long as it takes you to say the Mantra.”

Douglas: “What happens next?”

Saccidananda: “There is no next. Say your mantra.”

Douglas: “What about posture? What about distractions? What about insights?”

Saccidananda: “Sit still. Sit upright (there is no need to sit cross legged!). Say the Mantra. Listen to it as a sound within you. Give it your full attention. Let everything else go. It will lead you into the silence of oneness with God”.

Thirty years on, when teaching meditation from his own Christian tradition John Main said that he always came back to the wisdom, the simplicity, the purity of the teaching he received in the East. On his return from Malaysia, having done himself out of a job at the granting of independence, he taught International Law at Trinity College, Dublin. He enjoyed his work and friends and the cultural (especially musical) life of the city and he kept up his meditation practice. This was at a time long before the Maharishi and the Beatles had made meditation known. It was a solitary path. When he talked about it to religious friends and priests meditation was greeted with complete incomprehension, even suspicion.

The fact that he persevered shows the depth to which the teaching he received had affected him.

At the age of thirty five however two things happened that made him reassess life. Firstly, he fell in love. Diana Ernselsteen was a childhood friend of all the Main family, yet for Douglas it was a friendship that was blossoming into love. He asked Diana to marry him. She said yes. However later she changed her mind. John Main remembered later a moment when he and Diana were praying together in a Church in Dublin about their marriage and, he said, it seemed to dawn on Diana that it wasn't meant to be. They remained friends throughout John Main's life. The Main family never treated the relationship as more than a friendship but for Douglas it was a turning point. Deeper than the heartbreak of any rejection he may have felt was the realisation that he was not called to marriage. The love he felt called to would need to be expressed in another way. It was a painful moment. At the same time he was faced with another loss. The husband of his sister Yvonne was killed in the war and Douglas had helped to bring up his two nephews. He felt like a father to them and they lived close to him in Dublin. However at the age of eleven one of them developed a brain tumour. Douglas cancelled all work and stayed by the boy's bed for two weeks until he died.

These encounters with loss and death led Douglas Main to reassess the direction of his life. He realised that his meditation practice was the most important thing for him; he wanted to centre his life on that. The old sense of vocation to religious life returned and he decided to try to be a monk. Part of the letting go he felt called to was to let go of his beloved Dublin, work, family, friends, and to move back to London. At the age of thirty three he applied to join Ealing Abbey. There, at the interview with the novice master, he spoke of his meditation practice. But the words "Swami" and "Mantra" were greeted with suspicion. "This is not Christian prayer," he was told; "You should follow the Benedictine way." John Main later wryly observed that this meant the Jesuit way of prayer – using the imagination to pray scripture. "Imagination", John Main was later to say

(somewhat cheekily), “is the great enemy of prayer.” Still he accepted his novice masters advice wanting to commit fully to monastic life and obedience.

Giving up meditation was the beginning of a long desert of prayer for the newly professed John Main. However, remembering this time in later years, he said he was grateful that he had learnt detachment from what was the most important thing for him. When he was to come back to meditation twelve years later, conscious of its Christian tradition, it was “on God’s terms not on my own.” His practice had been interrupted but he felt he had never left it. He found his life as a monk rewarding in many other ways. He was sent to Rome to study at the time of Vatican II and was greatly enthusiastic about the changes that tallied well with his adventurous, generous and life loving temperament. The Church was no longer a fortress of fixed identity but a pilgrim people journeying to God. There was a new openness to relating to the world. On his return from Rome John Main worked in the school at Ealing. However he, along with the then headmaster proposed some reforms that were considered too radical by many of the other monks – among them the opening of the school to girls, non-Catholics and children of other faiths. In the fallout John Main was sent to a sister monastery in Washington DC to do further studies and reflect. His leadership qualities though were soon evident and he was asked to become headmaster of the school there.

It was right at this busy time when John Main was raising money, reorganising and running the school that there was another major turning point in his life. For years the primary focus of his prayer had been the singing of psalms and the celebration of Mass. However a young student came to visit the monastery. He had been travelling in India had got interested in meditation and was asking about Christian Mysticism. John Main was asked to advise him (he was later to comment how interesting it is that turning points of our lives often come through moments of obedience – doing something we don’t want to do but have been asked to do). Anyway John Main was busy and tried to frighten the boy off by

advising him to read the seventeen century book on Benedictine spirituality “Holy Wisdom” by Augustine Baker. This profound but dense work was rarely read by the monks. To John Main’s surprise the boy came back a week later full of excitement: “This is great,” he said, “it is all about meditation, all this stuff about the Desert Fathers.” John Main felt his own spiritual impoverishment and read Baker himself. Baker led him to Cassian, and there amongst the conferences of the Desert Fathers John Main discovered the Mantra again:

“Take the formula (*Oh God come to my aid...*) and revolve it ceaselessly in the heart so that all the riches of imagination can be let go of, so we can come with ready ease to that first of the beatitudes; blessed are the poor in spirit.”

John Main began to meditate again, now conscious of the Christian tradition of silent prayer beyond thought and image. The whole experience led him to a reassessment of monastic identity. What is the particular form of education monasteries are there for? He came to realise it was to teach contemplation. After the school project at Washington was in place, he returned to Ealing and in 1974 founded a house for laymen in the grounds. This was to host the first meditation group. His vision of a contemplative renewal of monastic life was popular with many of the monks. After a very close abbatial election he was not elected Abbot and in 1977 was given permission to accept an invitation from the Archbishop of Montreal, Canada to found a monastic priory there based around meditation. Laurence Freeman, who had been at Ealing School, was later a part of the laymen community and then novice at the monastery, was to be his companion in the foundation.

So again John Main crossed the Atlantic that his grandfather and the Celtic monks had looked over. Every letting go was a deeper centring on God. In Montreal he was able to experiment with his vision of a new monasticism where laypeople and monks could meditate together. Monasticism was from its beginnings with the Desert Fathers and Mothers, a movement of

lay people, an alternative lifestyle based on values of silence, stillness and simplicity. The Oblate community in Montreal became a sign that these monastic values were relevant to people in many walks of life. The new monasticism would be primarily a lay monasticism. The practice of Christian Meditation was the distillation of the essential monastic spirit. In meditating every day, twice a day, people could share in the heart of what the monastic movement, which began in the fourth century, was all about - the search for God. He writes:

“All of us need to find something, some principle in our lives that is absolutely reliable and worthy of our confidence. All of us feel this impulse somehow or other to make contact with this rocklike reality.”

Alongside the sharing of practice, the teaching of Christian Meditation became John Main's principal work. The early monks had transmitted their wisdom by word of mouth. John Main took his place within this oral tradition, through the weekly meditation groups at the priory, through his retreats on Meditation in England, Ireland and the U.S. and through the tape recordings of his talks distributed to a growing meditating community. The other ancient Christian form of communication was the letter and John Main began his quarterly newsletter. He was pleased that technology and telecommunications could help the spiritual path. But he always reminded his readers and listeners that the important thing was commitment. He wrote:

“Meditation cannot be reduced to a commodity and the Spiritual tradition is not a supermarket to shop in or a stock market to gamble on. Because we do think in these terms however there can be a real danger that meditation is presented in terms of return and pay off... the only important thing is that your spirit lives.”

John Main's teaching on prayer was always practical. His concern was to help people into the silence of pure prayer, into accepting a state of poverty, with no thoughts, no images. This was, as Julian of Norwich put it, a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything. He

taught the way of the Mantra not as a technique but as a discipline. A technique would involve the ego trying to get something but the mantra helps to purify the heart through the letting go of desire. That was why it is important to stay with the same mantra. Rootedness leads to growth as the word moves from the mind to the heart. By saying the word we learn commitment; by listening to the sound of the word within us we learn attentiveness. These are the first steps beyond self-consciousness as we realise that it is not us who are praying but the spirit is praying within us. “Say the Mantra”, John Main says; “Until you can no longer say it”. Gradually we enter into the silence beyond the ego, but precisely because this is beyond the ego we don’t choose when to stop saying the word. There is a pernicious peace where we stop the work of meditation and try to possess the experience. Rather, John Main says, we should “enter into the experience” by saying the word continually, letting go of self-consciousness.

The ideal mantra John Main recommended was the word *Maranatha*, meaning “Come Lord” but repeated silently interiorly as four equally stressed syllables *Ma-ra-na-tha*. Not only was this one of the most ancient Christian prayers, in the language Jesus spoke, but it also has a harmonic quality that helps to bring the mind to silence. Other words or short phrases could be used but he saw it as important that during the meditation one doesn’t think about the meaning or use the imagination. The use of a sacred word in an unfamiliar language, like Aramaic, helps to lessen this. Also if possible it is best to receive a mantra from a teacher so that from the beginning one practises as part of a tradition and in a spirit of self-transcendence. Distractions will always come but one simply comes back to the word, with no discouragement and, at the end, no evaluation. Meditation is a pilgrimage, the important thing is simply to be on the way, not where one is on it. In fact in meditation we are all beginners. Each time we sit down, morning and evening for our two half hours, we are beginning again.

In this practice of Christian meditation John Main felt was distilled the

heart of monastic spirituality; pure prayer lived out in obedience, stability and conversion of life; turning away from selfishness, finding ourselves and the whole world centred in God. This tradition of poverty of spirit, he felt, could be made accessible to people in all walks of life. Twice daily meditation and complete fidelity during those times to the sound of the Mantra was a monastic tradition well suited to our modern need for silence, stillness and simplicity. It was also true that meditation created community. A growing Oblate community and an extended world community started to share a common life inspired by a common practice.

In John Main's quarterly newsletters from Montreal he kept people connected, encouraged them to continue "on the way" and began to offer a profound Trinitarian theology of meditation. The basic fact of Christian awareness, John Main felt, was that the human consciousness of Jesus dwells within us and is in union with us. If we can be open to that then the union is consummated, is fulfilled, then we go with Jesus on his journey to the Father. This love of Father for the Son and Son for the Father is the Holy Spirit which prays within us. Therefore the prayer of Jesus, his Spirit, his life, in us, is our prayer. In meditation we give up my prayer and become one with his prayer, his journey beyond himself to the Father. That is what it means to pray in the Spirit and Truth. In this Trinitarian communion we find our full humanity by sharing in the Divine nature.

In 1980, after only six years of teaching Christian meditation, and at the age of fifty-four, John Main was diagnosed with cancer. The community at Montreal had expanded into new premises, was accepting monastic novices and had opened a women's community. John Main continued to lead the Meditation groups and keep up his correspondence with mediators around the world. Weakened by his illness many felt him to be more and more transparent to God. Faced with the vulnerability of the human condition his last talks convey more and more the urgency he felt in the communication of Christian meditation and also the gentleness whereby that practice is lived out. In one of his last talks he was asked "what was the best way to prepare for meditation?" He answered "by little

acts of kindness”. It was he felt the genius of St Benedict’s rule that self-transcendence was always in the fullness of our humanity. In his last months he lived more and more completely in the present moment. When one morning he was found fallen from his bed during the night, his disciple Fr Laurence said they would laugh about it one day; John Main looked at him, smiled and said: “Why not laugh about it now?”

On December 30th 1982 John Main took the last step on his pilgrimage. He died peacefully. The community he had founded had attracted people from all over the world because of the depth of its practice and teaching. In that community he had always been an icon of Christ. The more vulnerable his illness made him the more obvious the source of his inner strength became. “As we are unformed”, he said, “Christ is formed in us”. “The mystery of love”, he wrote, “is that we become what we delight to gaze upon, and so when we open our hearts to his light we become light.” John Main was often felt to be a larger than life personality. The meaning of his life certainly went beyond his death at the early age of fifty-six. He once said that “humanity is most Godlike when we give ourselves without measure; when we love, and it is without measure that God gives himself to us.” The expansiveness and generosity of his spirit showed a life rooted in God. His humour and humanity showed, as he said, that “the saint is not superhuman but fully human.” His vision of a “new lay monasticism” continues in the World Community for Christian Meditation, founded in 1991. What began as a small seed has grown into a tree, with meditation groups, retreats and seminars all over the world. That seed was the life and teaching of John Main.

Stefan Reynolds

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