

Spaceforsoul Newsletter

September 2018

Beyond patriarchy

'In this culture we tend to honor the masculine and neglect, or even, betray the feminine. At the societal level this betrayal enthrones masculine biases and maintains the patriarchal power structures of society. At the personal level those who neglect the feminine side of their personalities cut themselves off from their souls and impede their spiritual growth...'

David Elkins

We live in a world in which many contemporary societies are still predominantly patriarchal. Despite the undeniable victories that have been won in the battle against gender inequality over the last century, in many cultures throughout the world, male dominance is still the order of the day to a greater or lesser extent. Too many women throughout the world are still being dominated, oppressed and brutalised. Witness the Harvey Weinstein affair and the 'MeToo' campaign it has spawned. Witness the plight of female garment workers in Asia. Witness the current rape epidemic in India. Witness the practice of female genital mutilation in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. And there are countless other examples.

Patriarchy, however, is not a series of specific sexist acts but a deeply ingrained, multi-layered structure of power relations. It is undergirded by powerful cultural norms and upheld by tradition, education and religion. We see its face in our governments, our legal system, our schools and universities, our workplaces, our churches and our homes. We are so used to its baleful influence in our lives that we may no longer recognise it for what it is.

Furthermore, it is not just women who are damaged and oppressed by patriarchy. In her book, 'Heart of Flesh', the feminist Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister explores the impact of sexism on both women and men. She argues that despite the more superficial ways in which



they may appear to benefit from living within a patriarchal culture, men are also damaged by it. Too many men are taught that life is about competing and achieving and getting to the top. Too many men live with a constant fear of failure. Too many men's personal relationships suffer as they pour all their energy into their work lives. Too many men learn that it is not acceptable to be weak, out of control, vulnerable or dependent. Too many men are denied the freedom to express their pain and distress.

Men's social lives,' she says, 'become focused on independence, status, efficiency, prestige, and power. Their spiritual lives become focused on ritual and law, institutions and theories, dogmas rather than feelings, law rather than justice.' All too often, they become profoundly disconnected from the feminine side of themselves. And the tragedy is that more often than not, they remain unaware of what they have lost.

The inter-spiritual writer and teacher, Mirabai Starr agrees. She was born in New York to secular Jewish parents who had rejected the patriarchy of



'Compassion' by Mary Southard

institutionalised religion. In her book, 'The God of Love', she argues that patriarchy is an expression of an underdeveloped form of masculinity and that it is as much an attack on masculinity as it is on femininity. The psychologist, David Elkins echoes this when he argues that when men are taught to 'flee the feminine' within themselves, it prevents them from growing into what he calls 'a deeper masculinity'.

So if patriarchy is the problem, what is the solution? Chittister believes that if we are to undo the damage that has been done by patriarchy, we need to embrace what she calls 'a feminist spirituality for women and men'. But embracing such a spirituality, she says, is not about denigrating masculinity or seeking to diminish men. It is not about asking men to become less manly. And as Mirabai Starr argues, neither is it about replacing patriarchy with matriarchy.

It is instead about moving towards a new spirituality that honours and respects men and women equally; that acknowledges and values those principles, qualities and gifts traditionally labelled 'feminine' as much as those labelled 'masculine'; and that recognises that true wholeness can only be found in embracing both the feminine and masculine within ourselves, whatever our gender. 'A whole person,' Elkins believes, 'whether man or woman, is one whose masculine and feminine sides are well-developed and integrated, supporting and strengthening each other.'

Chittister argues passionately that embracing such a feminist philosophy takes us back to the very heart of Christianity, to the Christianity of Jesus who despite being raised in a strongly patriarchal culture, 'flew the flag' for feminism nearly two thousand years ago. The theologian, writer and broadcaster, Vicki Beeching points out that Jesus 'shocked his peers with the counter-cultural, radical equality that he extended to the women around him'. Like her, I find myself feeling very comfortable signing up to a movement that so powerfully reflects 'his heartbeat for gender equality'. The world desperately needs us to take 'the path of the anima' as Elkins describes it - to face the challenge of learning to honour and reclaim the feminine.

Kaitlyn Steele

Qualities traditional labelled 'feminine'

intuition
connectedness/relationality
receptivity/sensitivity
empathy/compassion
nurture/care
tenderness/gentleness
harmony/co-operation/collaboration
interdependence
emotional responsiveness
creativity/imagination
surrender
flow
mysticism
preoccupation with the inner life
soul oriented

Qualities traditionally labelled 'masculine'

strength
stoicism
firmness
assertiveness/dominance
competition/ambition/adventurousness
independence
logic/analysis
rationality
focused consciousness
agency/action
goal directedness
structure/organisation
preoccupation with the outer world
spirit oriented

Various sources

An extract from 'Heart of Flesh'...

'Patriarchy and Christianity are not synonyms. One can certainly exist without the other and does. In fact, to be Christian is to be called to reject anything that excludes the other, that diminishes the other, that denies the other the fullness of life, that uses the other for its own gratification and profit. Any spirituality that justifies oppression, invisibility, domination and exploitation mocks the very essence of Christianity.'

Joan Chittister

A portrait of Sister Joan Chittister - a progressive voice within Catholicism

'Spirituality is about the hunger in the human heart. It is a commitment to immersion in God, to the seeking that has no end.'
Joan Chittister

Sister Joan Chittister is an American Benedictine nun. Having spent much of her early life as the terrified and traumatised daughter of a woman held hostage by her alcoholic, abusive husband, the church and wider society, Joan entered the religious life at the age of 16. Some years later, she became a prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, a position she held for 12 years. She is now an international lecturer and award-winning author of over 50 books. She has been described as one of the most influential religious and social leaders of our time and as one of America's visionary spiritual voices. Her life's work has been focused on developing a contemporary Christian spirituality, on redefining Benedictine life for modern seekers and on fighting for justice for the oppressed and marginalised. She is an outspoken advocate of justice, peace and equality, especially for women world-wide.

She is co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, a UN-sponsored organisation creating a worldwide network of women peacemakers. She is also the founder of Benetvision, a research and resource centre for contemporary spirituality, and Monasteries of the Heart, an online movement which seeks to share Benedictine spirituality with contemporary spiritual seekers.

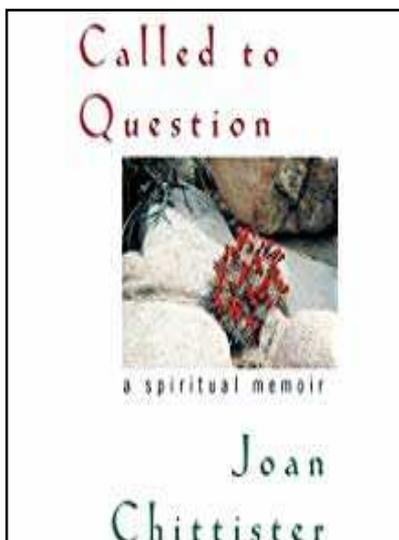
Joan Chittister is a Christian feminist. Once described as 'a Catholic force of nature', she was condemned by the Vatican in 2001 for her outspoken support for



women's ordination. The Vatican even went as far as trying to prevent her from speaking on discipleship at the Women's Ordination Worldwide conference in Dublin that year. But this maverick (some would say, heretical) nun, who is not afraid to challenge the authority of the church she belongs to and loves, spoke anyway. As she sees it, the role of women raises 'theological, scientific, sociological and human questions that you cannot stop thinking about. You have to open the door to the conversation in the name of the integrity of your theology.'

She is now over 80 years old and still has a strong passion for God, for justice and for life. She is still true to the Rule of Benedict that has guided her all of her life, still writing books, still actively connecting with and fighting for the oppressed and marginalised all over the world and still seeking to create the kind of Christian community she believes in - one that is a model of peace and justice and equality.

She is indeed a force of nature to be reckoned with and an inspiration to women all over the world.



Extracts from 'Called to Question':

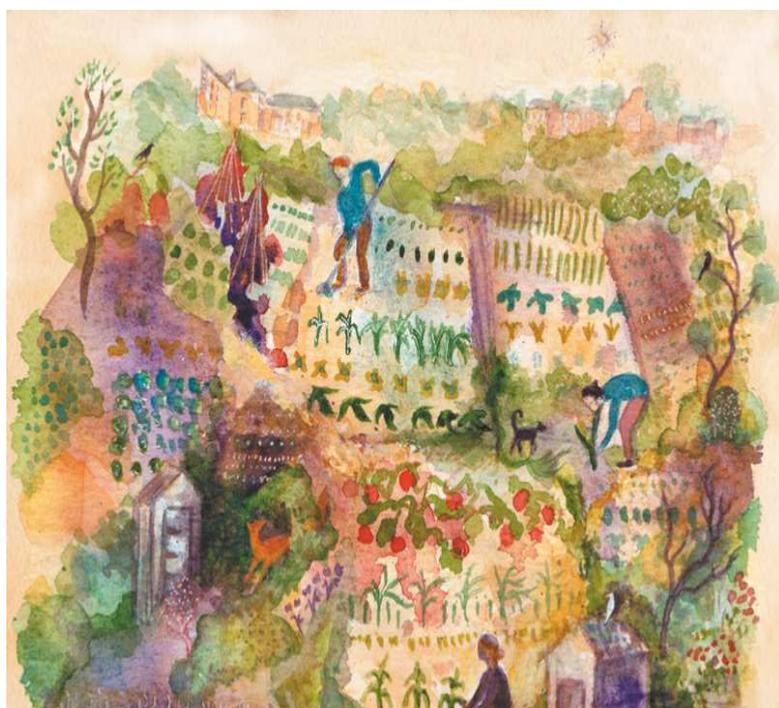
'Clearly the function of answers is to preserve what is. It locks up the world, calls it finished, brooks no disturbance of its sureties....But, social psychologists know, as soon as an institution, an organization, or a culture has no more questions, it has no more possibilities.'

'When religion makes itself God, when religion gets between the soul and God, when religion demands what the spirit deplores - a division of peoples, diminishment of the self, and closed-mindedness - religion becomes the problem. Then, spirituality is the only valid answer to the cry of the soul for the kind of life that makes life possible.'

The latest news



The next meeting of our Spaceforsoul Book and Film Group will take place on **Wednesday 19th September at 7.00 pm** in the Stapleton area of Bristol. This time, they will be discussing Rob Bell's book, 'Love Wins'. If you would like to join them, please contact Julian Clover at cloverjulian@yahoo.com for further details.



Emma Burleigh

Imaginative Art Workshop with Emma Burleigh

Sunday 14th October 2018
10.00 am – 1.00 pm

Cost: £20

Venue: The Old Library, Muller Road, Eastville, Bristol BS5 6XP.

Flyer and booking forms are
available from

spaceforsoulbristol@gmail.com

The 2018 Marcus Borg Memorial Conference

'Days of Awe and Wonder: How we see makes all the difference'

Saturday 20th October 2018 11 am to 4 pm at St. Marks Broomhill, Sheffield

Cost: £18 - £20

Speaker: Rev Canon Marianne Wells Borg

Find out more at www.pcnbritain.org.uk





Centring Prayer: a contemplative spiritual practice

'Centering prayer is not just sustained attention to a special word or image or to one's breathing, but the surrender of one's whole being to God.'

Thomas Keating

Centring prayer is an ancient prayer practice which is taught in some form or other by most of the world's major religious traditions. The term 'centring prayer' actually derives from the writings of the American Trappist monk and theologian, Thomas Merton. Within the Christian tradition, however, the practice has its origins in the medieval spiritual classic, 'The Cloud of Unknowing' which is essentially a kind of manual for contemplative prayer.

In the late 20th century, its key teachings were distilled into a simple method of prayer by three American Trappist monks - Thomas Keating, William Menninger and Basil Pennington. More recently, the practice of centring prayer has been further promoted by the American Episcopalian priest and writer, Cynthia Bourgeault.

Thomas Keating originally defined centring prayer as a very simple method of opening ourselves to the Divine presence and allowing it to work within us. He speaks of it as a process of 'waiting on God' and likens it to 'two friends sitting in silence, just being in each other's presence'. It is essentially a form of receptive or passive meditation and unlike many other meditative practices, it relies more on intention rather than attention.

The heart of the practice can be summed up in four basic guidelines:

1. Choose a sacred word of no more than four syllables as a symbol of your intention to open yourself up to the presence of the Divine within (for example, Jesus, Buddha, love, peace or your chosen word for the Divine). The actual meaning of the word does not matter.

2. Sit comfortably with eyes closed and introduce your sacred word inwardly. Try not to hold onto your sacred word - let it come and go as it will.

3. Whenever you become aware of thoughts, feelings or other distractions, gently bring yourself back to your sacred word. Meditate in this way for about 20 minutes, remaining as still as you can throughout.

4. At the end of your prayer time, remain sitting silently with your eyes closed for a few more minutes.

Keating identifies four distinct but related 'moments' or stages that people may experience when they pray regularly in this way:

the Sacred Word - introducing our sacred word, waiting on the Divine, being aware of but not troubled by remote thoughts and feelings

Rest - a deep sense of peace, quiet, stillness and refreshment and a tangible sense of the presence of the Divine

Unloading - as our defenses become relaxed, this may sometimes lead to the release of an intense flood of previously unconscious, unprocessed memories, thoughts or emotions which stem from previous life experiences

Discharge - the discharge of these thoughts and emotions which then frees us from their hidden influence.

It is clear from this that Keating sees this form of prayer as having the potential to play an important part in the process of inner transformation and of enabling us to become aware of and hence grow beyond what he calls our 'false self'. He calls this process 'the Divine Therapy' and believes that as well as connecting us more deeply with the Divine, it also has the potential over a period of time to bring about growth and healing.

See the Resources page for details of some additional resources you can draw on in exploring Centring Prayer.

*Be still and know
that I am God.*

Psalms 46.10

Resources for the journey...

Inspiring quotes...

'The important thing is not to think much, but to love much, and so to do whatever best awakens us to love.'

Teresa of Avila

Centring Prayer: Some useful resources:

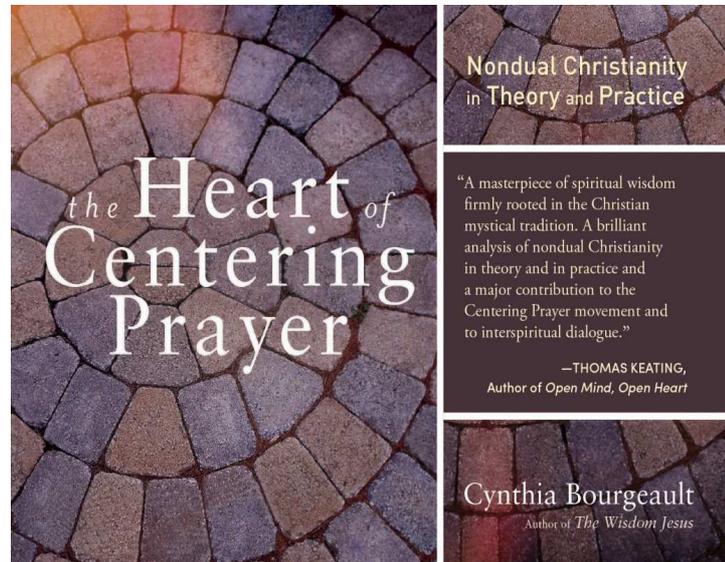
Thomas Keating (2009) 'Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer' Crossroad Pub.

A YouTube video of Thomas Keating talking about Centring Prayer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTxIzNAYGAs>

Cynthia Bourgeault (2004) 'Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening' Cowley Publications

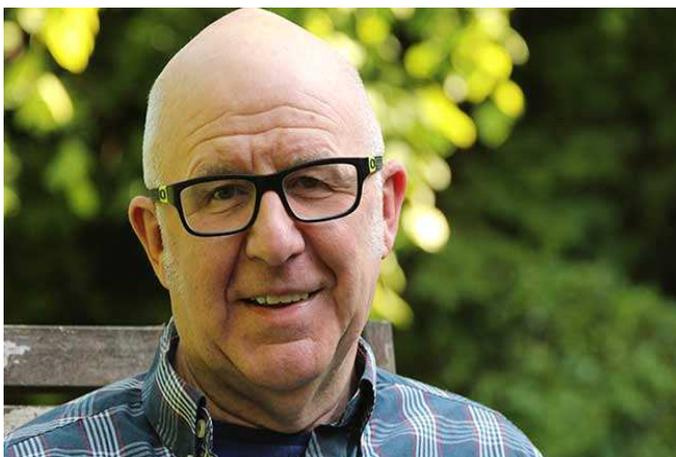
Cynthia Bourgeault (2016) 'The Heart of Centering Prayer' Shambhala Pub.



Heresy, holiness, and Oprah: Rob Bell interviewed June 2018

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/15-june/features/features/heresy-holiness-and-oprah-rob-bell-interviewed>

You can also listen to the full Church Times podcast of the interview.



An afternoon with author, Dave Tomlinson

Saturday 6 October 2018 2.30 pm

Location: Christchurch, Abbeydale, Gloucester, GL4 5EQ

Cost: £5 on the door

Contact: Hilma Wilkinson

Email: hilma.wilkinson@pcnbritain.org.uk