

# Rediscovering the hidden gardens of Christianity

**Simon Spence** considers why Christianity's meditative practices often seem hidden from view

**R**ecently, in a city and finding myself with time to spare, I entered a church for some quiet and exited through a side door I had not noticed before. I was surprised to come out, not into a street, but a small garden. I ate my lunch in the warm sunshine among colourful, well-tended flowers. I could hear traffic, but this garden felt a world away from the noise, pollution and stress of modern city life. Eating sandwiches there brought more profound nourishment than I had

expected when I bought them earlier. Leaving the church by the front entrance, I noticed its austerity and wondered if anyone not already familiar with this place would be attracted to enter, let alone discover the garden. Similarly, if the Christian faith offers peace, beauty and nourishment for modern people, it is often hidden from view. How is it that the beauty of its traditions and insights have become so overgrown that their existence is not generally known, even to people who consider themselves to be Christian? What are the 'gardens' of the Christian tradition? Why have they become so concealed, and is it possible for them to be better known and more accessible?

## Communities of faith

I have long been nourished by two 'communities of faith': that of counselling, and that of the Christian church. It is an uncomfortable position. I sometimes feel there may be suspicion there - a reluctance to recognise the wisdom available in each. I write from this in-between place, hoping to convey how Christian approaches to human experience - properly understood - may offer helpful ways of thinking about healing, growth and flourishing.

Psychoanalytic therapist, Colin Kirkwood, said:

'In my view, we carry forward the caring practices aspect of our religious inheritances. We are reinventing charity (ie love), the confessional, atonement and forgiveness, prayer and relatedness. And we are reinventing something older still; the practice of self-knowledge, as a lifelong option. And a reaffirmation of good news.'

# Perspectives

To many therapists, Christianity is not good news and is not appreciated. On the contrary, Christian churches are often viewed suspiciously as a reactionary force, keen to assert superior worldviews and undermine social change.

St Irenaeus of Lyons, bishop and theologian of the early church, wrote that ‘...the glory of God is a human being fully alive.’<sup>2</sup> In my experience, it is rare for a thoughtful contemporary person to see Christian faith as a path towards becoming ‘fully alive’. What has happened since the 2nd Century CE, when the cause of such excitement for Irenaeus has become, at least in the West, something of an irrelevance? Does Christianity have anything to offer thoughtful and reflective contemporary people looking for a deeper and fuller life?

## Christianity and meditation

Generally, Christian churches have not played an active role in introducing meditation practices in the West. Mindfulness is viewed as a secular activity, good for general wellbeing and an effective response to problems such as anxiety and depression.<sup>3</sup> Mindfulness exercises are modern presentations of Buddhist practices, based on Zen, Vipassana and Tibetan meditation. Indeed, Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the original developers of mindfulness, describes it as ‘...meditation as taught by the Buddha, but with the Buddhism taken out’.<sup>4</sup>

The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) teaches the meditation tradition of early Christianity dating to the 4th CE. It has many similarities with Buddhist practices, and the WCCM website speaks of meditation being ‘...as natural to the

soul, as breathing is to the body’; a human reality expressed and practised within a specific religious tradition.<sup>5</sup> In seeking to introduce meditation in areas such as healthcare, the WCCM, like Kabat-Zinn, does not seek to proselytise, but to share its fruits.

Many would be surprised to discover that a close colleague of Kabat-Zinn, the clinical psychologist Mark Williams, is an Anglican priest and Honorary Canon of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. Valuable practices seem to be acceptable and appreciated by modern people when presented as secular, or even as spiritual. There is then no requirement to accept the historical and cultural ‘baggage’ that inhere when such practices are described as

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‘religious’. As Kabat-Zinn says: ‘To insist mindfulness meditation is Buddhist is like saying gravity is English because it was identified by Sir Isaac Newton.’<sup>4</sup> Might Christianity benefit from becoming similarly less proprietorial about its ways of nourishing inner life and human growth? Writers such as Tim Stead offer mindfulness as a way

for Christians to deepen their faith.<sup>6</sup> Many Christians, especially those who sit somewhat uncomfortably in the Christian churches, may be pleasantly surprised to discover that similar practices are to be found within their own tradition.

It is as though, to enter the garden of Christianity, one must pass exams in horticulture. How different might it be if the beautiful gardens were open to all? Those who choose can learn more about gardening, and may become knowledgeable gardeners, but that is not required of all who enter. Timothy Radcliffe alludes to this radical inclusivity when he speaks of Christianity as being for ‘...anyone, of any faith or none, who engages with the complexity of being human, with falling in love, struggling to forgive, finding themselves in a mess, trying to make sense of their lives’.<sup>7</sup> So how can the gates of the garden be opened wider?

## Beyond language and traditions

The ways in which language and tradition are used in Christianity often obscure rather than clarify meaning. Many Christian concepts and customs originated in times and cultures strikingly different to our own, and their meanings are not easily understood in a contemporary idiom, even by those professing a Christian faith. Christianity has developed many life-giving words and practices. However, as time passes, these traditions can become mistaken for the reality they are trying to communicate, like a telescope being given the significance that was meant for the stars to which it was pointing. The composer Gustav Mahler reputedly described tradition as ‘...tending the flame, not worshipping the ashes’. So where is the life or the flame to be found? And how can it be tended?

Mark Vernon, a psychotherapist and former Anglican priest, has recently explored the work of Owen Barfield, the gifted contemporary and friend of CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. As a philologist, Barfield was aware of how words can change in meaning over time and can be treated therefore as 'fossils of consciousness'.<sup>8</sup> If we recognise them as such, these fossils can tell us a lot about the times before they became fossilised; but in the present, their meaning has to be continually rediscovered.

An example is the concept of 'sin'. For many Christians, 'sin' has become a primarily moral term denoting 'bad things' and carries a pervading sense of personal shame and unworthiness. It communicates a worldview in which ordinary human thoughts, emotions and responses are branded 'sinful', setting us in permanent opposition to parts of ourselves. This is made even more complicated and confusing when churches describe as 'sinful', behaviours which seem entirely unremarkable to a contemporary person.

Barfield's insight about words as fossils offers alternative ways of understanding concepts which can develop Christian tradition and render it more comprehensible in a contemporary setting. Thus 'sin' can be understood, not primarily as a moral issue, but as a way of understanding what Francis Spufford calls 'The Human Propensity to F\*\*\* Things Up' (HPtFTU).<sup>9</sup> This opens up new ways of engaging with our human experiences of rivalry, weakness, disappointment, failure, vulnerability and anxiety; many of the experiences which bring clients to therapy. So, when Christians pray to God to '...forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin

against us', this does not need to imply a religious equivalent of recalling our 'bad' behaviour and unrealistically promising we won't be bad again, but instead can be a profound and challenging engagement with our and others' vulnerability, surely a prerequisite for living life fully.

### A tool for becoming whole

Other terms with Christian currency are similarly rejected when characterised as legalistic moral concepts, or when their meaning becomes obscured within very specific schools of Christian thought. For the American theologian AT Robertson, translating the Greek word *metanoia* as 'repentance' (commonly understood as being sorry for something) is '...a linguistic and theological tragedy'.<sup>10</sup> For Robertson, *metanoia* is a transformational change of heart. It is about becoming more whole and living life more fully, rather than taking on a thankless task of trying always to be morally upright. Carl Jung said, 'I'd rather be whole than good'.<sup>11</sup> This perhaps communicates this sense that Christians sometimes short-sell our faith when it is limited to conformity with expected norms, rather than facilitation of the exciting and risky task of becoming ourselves. As in counselling and psychotherapy, the changes that occur can often be uncomfortable.

For a long time, the gardens of Christianity have been deserted. And yet, they are there. And I believe they are waiting to be found. They wait patiently, freely available as support and nourishment for the human journey towards a fuller and deeper experience of life - the same journey that counselling and psychotherapy exist to support.

### Biography



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