

Listening to the Prophets

CONTEMPLATION
AND ACTION

THE AWAKENING PROJECT

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PREFACE



Contemplation is a practice found in many of the world's religious traditions, including Christianity. It is generally connected to the search for experience that goes beyond the limits of human language and understanding. That is, contemplative practice aims for a more direct experience of the transcendent. It also aims to go beyond dualistic approaches to life, most prominently the distinction between Them and Us. Contemplative traditions aim at unitive modes of being that see the connectedness of all things with the divine.

How can we understand better what contemplation is and what contemplation does? What is its relationship to action in the world? A helpful place to start is to listen to voices of people whose contemplative practice and theology have led them to engage powerfully with issues of justice. This listening guide contains short biographies, selected quotations, videos and podcasts related to five such people. We might consider them 'prophetic' in the sense that their contemplative practices and accompanying social action are a powerful critique against societies marked by division, disconnect and scapegoating. In their own way, they each see contemplation as a basis for building a life of loving engagement with the world.

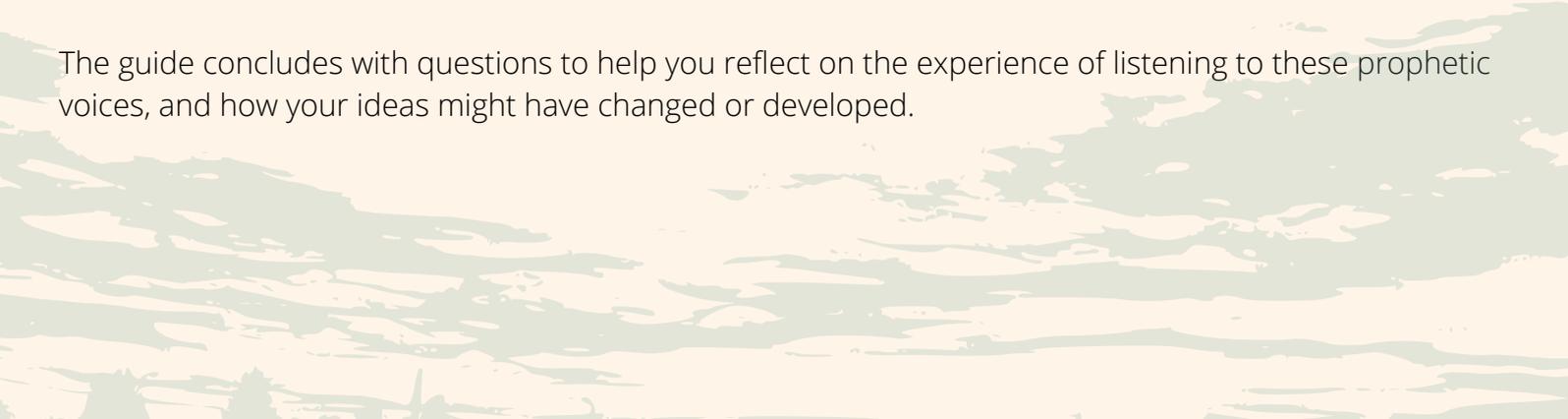
The voices in this guide are Christian. However, we hope that it will be useful to those of other faiths and none as well as to Christians. It can be used alone for personal reflection, or in a group to facilitate discussion. Our aim is not to convince you of any political or theological position. Our hope for this guide is that it help you:

- ***Get a sense of the kinds of ideas and practices associated with contemplative traditions***
- ***Explore the connection between the inner life and social justice***
- ***Explore the connection between contemplative traditions and interfaith dialogue***
- ***Feel inspired by, and connected to, the courage and creativity of these prophetic voices***

The guide has a three-part structure. The introduction consists of questions to help you reflect on your current ideas and experiences of contemplation. This is followed by listening guides for five prophetic voices. These are:

- Thomas Merton: *The West Explores the East*
- Henri Nouwen: *Theology, Psychology and Spirituality*
- Sarah Bachelard: *A Religionless Christianity?*
- Richard Rohr: *Transforming Death*
- Joan Chittister: *Contemplative Activism*

The guide concludes with questions to help you reflect on the experience of listening to these prophetic voices, and how your ideas might have changed or developed.

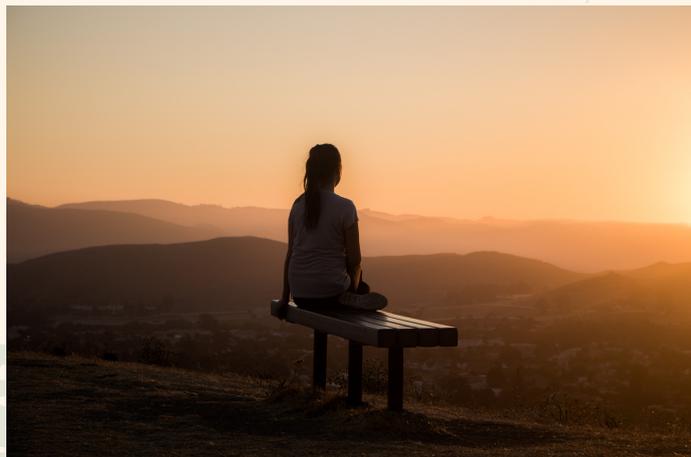


INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

The following questions are designed to help you reflect on your current understanding and experiences of contemplation. Take note of your present responses to these questions, as we will return to them at the end of this guide.

1. What is contemplation? Do you, or someone you know, engage regularly in a contemplative practice (e.g. meditation)?
2. Do you associate contemplation with a particular religious or spiritual tradition?
3. What are the limits of human language and understanding? Are there things that exist that are indescribable or unknowable? Is there anything that is completely describable and knowable?
4. What is prayer? If you are a part of a faith community, what are the common ways you pray?
5. What is the inner life? How, if at all, can we access and understand it?
6. What, if any, is the relationship between psychology and spirituality?
7. If you are part of a faith tradition, what are some of the tensions with your tradition in interfaith dialogue? That is, what are some the fundamental questions or obstacles your tradition brings to the table when considering the relationship between different religions?
8. Is faith more about escaping death or embracing it?
9. Is faith about finding answers or embracing doubt?
10. What is the connection between contemplation and social activism?



1. THOMAS MERTON

THE WEST EXPLORES THE EAST

Thomas Merton is an important figure in the resurgence of Christian contemplative practice in the Western world.

Read the Prophet Bio for Thomas Merton, read the selected quotations, and watch the online materials. [Click here](#)

Questions for reflection/discussion:

- For Merton, prayer should not be used to reinforce a distinction between the sacred and the secular. Prayer is an acceptance of things as they are and points to the connectedness of life and the omnipresence of God. If you are a person that prays, is this how you normally experience prayer? Is this complementary to, or in tension with, prayer for things (e.g. for health or courage)?
- For Merton, knowledge of God is acquired simply by doing ordinary daily things with love. What then, do you think, is the role of study in the knowledge of God?
- If knowledge of God is acquired by cultivating a consciousness of love, presumably knowing God is something that anyone, anywhere can do. Is this idea congruent with your faith tradition, or in tension with it? How, if at all, do you feel personally that you come to the knowledge of God?
- Merton describes the contemplative life as one without 'care', where all our 'cares' are entrusted to God. At the same time, Merton was a vocal advocate in various issues of justice (e.g. racism and militarism). What is the relationship between living 'care-free' and advocacy? Do you think they were connected for Merton?



2. HENRI NOUWEN

THEOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest and writer. He wrote on the connection between psychology, theology, and spirituality. He was also engaged in various social justice and community projects throughout his life.

Read the introduction for Henri Nouwen and listen to the following episodes of Henri Nouwen: Now and Then - Shane Claiborne, Dr. Michael Christensen, and Henri Nouwen "Being the Beloved". These are available on the Awakening Project website. [Click here](#)

Questions for reflection/discussion:

- In the interview with Shane Claiborne, the idea of a wounded healer is discussed. This was an important idea for Henri Nouwen and, for Christians, connected to Christ as the Wounded Healer par excellence. What does this concept mean to you? How can embracing our pain make us more able to care for others?
- Another idea discussed in the interview is that the way to the kingdom of God is downward mobility. That is, true blessedness is found by moving down the social ladder. Does this concept inspire solidarity with the poor, action to improve the quality of life of the poor or both?
- For Nouwen, spirituality involved a combination of theology and psychology. What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree?



3. SARAH BACHELARD

A RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY?

Sarah Bachelard is a theologian and Anglican priest. She is the director of Benedictus Contemplative Church – an ecumenical Christian community centered on contemplative practice.

Read the introduction for Sarah Bachelard on the Awakening Project website and listen to her talk "Religion-less Christianity in a Secular Age", available at: Religion-less Christianity in a Secular Age by Sarah Bachelard (JMS 2019) by WCCM | WCCM WCCM | Free Listening on SoundCloud.

Questions for reflection/discussion:

Bachelard suggests that benign secularism is a fruit of Christianity in the West. The logical conclusion of the unitive and iconoclastic elements in Christian thought is a kind of 'religionless Christianity'. For this reason, Bachelard suggests that Christianity is doing its job when it is barely visible.

- Do you agree with this vision of the trajectory of Christianity in the West?
- What would a religionless Christianity look like in practice?

Below are some comparisons between the perspectives of Sarah Bachelard and Henri Nouwen:

1. Sarah Bachelard has an affinity with those who are on the fringe of organized religion whereas Henri Nouwen lived comfortably within the institutional boundaries of Roman Catholicism.
2. Sarah Bachelard understands contemplation as seeking to move from dualistic thinking (e.g. Them and Us) towards unitary modes of thought. Nouwen, understood spirituality as a movement between poles (e.g. from fear to love).
3. Sarah Bachelard sees silent contemplation as key tool to help us move beyond the limits of language. Henry Nouwen used Visio Divina (i.e. spiritual visual art) to achieve the same goal.

Do you see these as complementary perspectives, or in tension? Which resonate with you more?

4. RICHARD ROHR

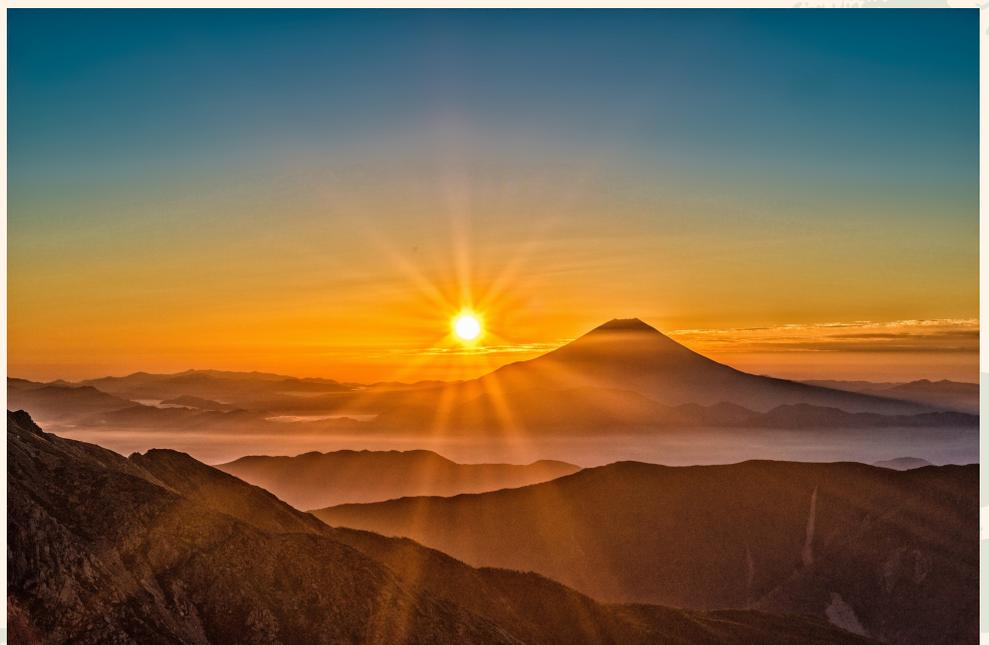
TRANSFORMING DEATH

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan Friar and founder of the Center for Contemplation and Action.

Read the Prophet Bio for Richard Rohr, read the selected quotations and listen to/watch the online materials. [Click here](#)

Questions for reflection/discussion:

- Rohr describes a three-fold progression in life: order, disorder and re-order. What do you think he meant by this? Does it resonate with your experience of life and faith?
- For Richard Rohr, we should embrace death is part of the structure of the universe and a steppingstone towards resurrection. Do you think your society and/or faith tradition does well at confronting the reality of death?
- Rohr describes three nested stories: my story, our story and The Story.
 1. What do you think he means by this?
 2. In your own words, how would you tell The Story?
 3. Rohr suggests that many social justice activists get stuck at our story, missing the contributions of The Story to life and action. Do you agree? In what ways does our understanding of the overarching story of the universe affect our efforts to build a better society?



5. JOAN CHITTISTER

CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM



Joan Chittister is a Benedictine nun and social activist.

Read the Prophet Bio for Joan Chittister, read the selected quotations and listen to/watch the online materials. [Click here](#)

Questions for reflection/discussion:

- For Chittister, the separation of Church and state is a problematic idea because it makes faith a private endeavour, not a public one. Do you agree? Does a life of faith necessarily imply engagement with politics?
- For Chittister contemplation is fuel for social activism. Do you think social movement that you are aware of would benefit from a deeper base in contemplation? If so, why?
- In her talk on the relationship between peace and religion, Chittister decries the historical and present abuses and injustices permitted and propagated by religious institutions. Is contemplation one of the keys to 'purifying' religion of these abuses? Is contemplation enough? Is religion a source of peace in the world, or a source of conflict?
- Chittister describes the evidence-based worldview of science as a contributor to woman's liberation from patriarchal theologies of classical antiquity. Do you agree? Is science a contributor or an obstacle to gender equality?



CONCLUSION

LISTENING DEEPLY

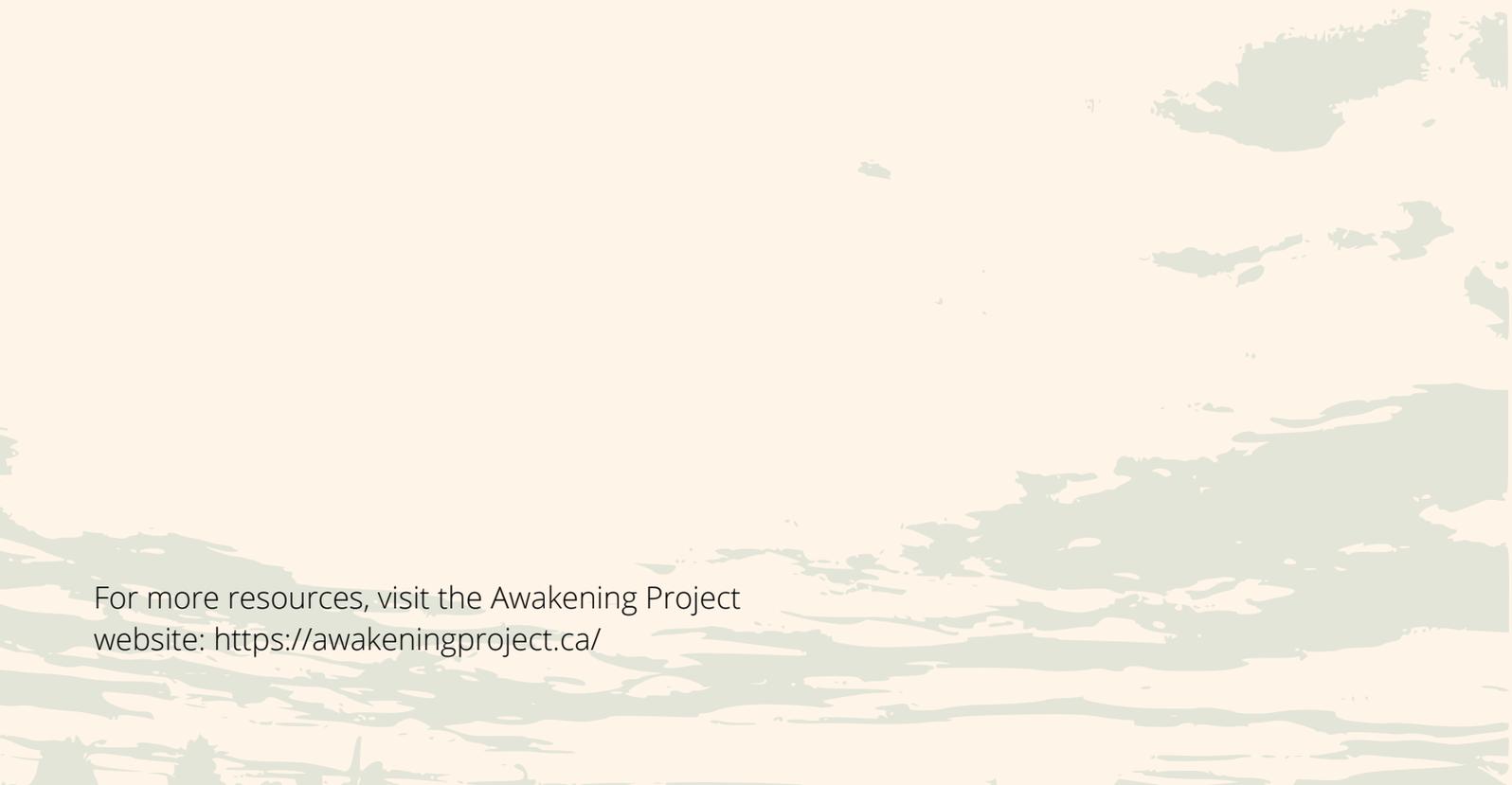


We have briefly looked at the lives and projects of five people deeply steeped in religious contemplative traditions. Whatever our own political and religious perspectives and what ever our hopes are for society, it is important to listen to voices like theirs as we seek to engage compassionately with the world. To listen deeply means a willingness to let the lives of these individuals change us in some way.

Look back to the responses you gave to the questions in the introduction of this guide. Having listened to these five prophetic voices, have any of your perspectives changed or broadened? Which?

To conclude, think about the following reflection questions:

- Which, if any, of the five people discussed in the guide inspire you?
- Are there any contemplative practices or traditions you would like to know more about?
- If you are a person of faith, do you feel that these ideas and practices are congruent with your faith tradition? Have they changed your perspective of your faith tradition or of a tradition not your own? If you have no religious affiliation, do they inspire you to consider faith anew?



For more resources, visit the Awakening Project website: <https://awakeningproject.ca/>