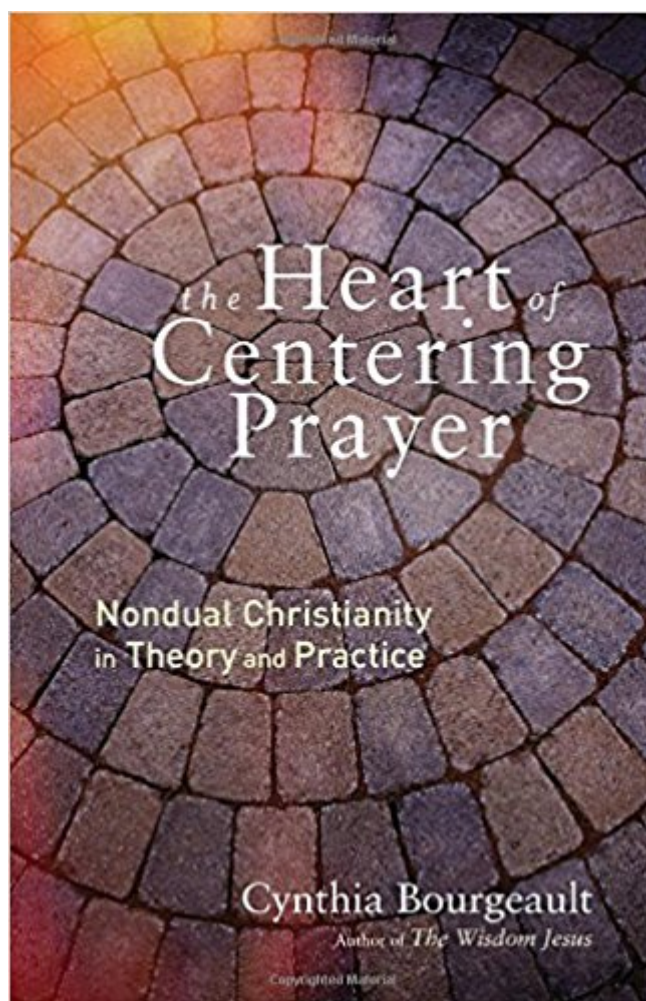


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# The Heart Of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity In Theory And Practice



## Synopsis

Perceiving nondual awareness through the Christian contemplative method called Centering Prayer--an in-depth introduction to theory and practice by the best-selling author of *The Wisdom of Jesus* and *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*. Centering Prayer is the path to a wonderful and radical new way of seeing the world. It is not, as is sometimes thought, simply an act of devotional piety, nor is it simply a Christianized form of other meditation methods. Cynthia Bourgeault here cuts through the misconceptions to show that Centering Prayer is in fact a pioneering development within the Christian contemplative tradition. She provides a practical, complete course in the practice and then goes deeper to analyze what actually happens in Centering Prayer: the mind effectively switches to a new operating system that makes possible the perception of nonduality. With this understanding in place, she then takes us on a journey through one of the sources of the practice, the Christian contemplative classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, revealing it to be among the earliest Christian explorations of the phenomenology of consciousness. Cynthia Bourgeault's illumination of the Centering Prayer path provides compelling evidence of how important the practice has become in the half-century since it first arose among American Trappist monks, and of its maturation and refinement over the ensuing years of sincere study and practice. It will resonate with beginners on the Centering Prayer path as well as with seasoned practitioners.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A masterpiece of spiritual wisdom firmly rooted in the Christian mystical tradition. A brilliant analysis of nondual Christianity in theory and in practice and a major contribution to the Centering Prayer movement and to interspiritual dialogue." --Thomas Keating, author of *Open Mind, Open Heart*

—A profound resource. *The Heart of Centering Prayer* provides a holistic, embodied, rounded and grounded depth to Centering Prayer for both the committed and the new practitioner. It also continues Thomas Keating's wisdom teaching in the most meaningful and singular way, so that the practice (and Christian contemplation itself) can stand in dialogue with other traditions and the sciences for the new millennium.

—David Frenette, author of *The Path of Centering Prayer*

CYNTHIA BOURGEAULT, PhD, is an Episcopal priest, teacher, and retreat and conference leader. The author of several books, she lectures and gives workshops throughout North America and the world

I have known Cynthia for many years. As a practicing contemplative in the Christian tradition I acknowledge and honor her as a practitioner of profound depth, a mystic, scholar, and teacher firmly rooted in the Christian contemplative tradition. I have loved and drawn wisdom and encouragement from all her books, but this is the book I have been waiting for. Heart centered Christianity rooted in actual praxis is what the Christian world needs, not more conceptual polemics of "correct belief" from the brain-mind. The organ of the spiritual experience of God is the heart, the center of our being and the locus of the Living Water of Trinitarian Life within us. What we hunger for is intimacy with the Christ experience of oneness with God. We cannot attain this experience through the brain-mind. Cynthia goes directly to this need and practice based fulfillment of our heart's desire, not to just hold consoling conceptual beliefs of God in Christ, but to directly experience God as Unitive Love, transcending all our brain-mind knowledge, relativizing it, but integrating and connecting the concepts with the Reality. Gregory the Great called the gift of contemplation "the direct experiential knowledge of God infused through love." In this writing Cynthia draws particularly on the shared experience and contemplative wisdom of 10th century Symeon the New Theologian to ground and connect her own experience of the inner life to bring forth a simple but deep teaching of the path of the Heart. I have been meditating daily since the age of 21, over 47 years. The first 17 years of practice took place under the teaching and guidance of Soto Zen teachers. I learned the discipline of cultivating pure awareness/attention in my consciousness, yet a realization of the love based teachings of my Christian roots was lacking to

me. I had the grace and good fortune of finding a mentor, a Christian Cistercian Abbot, Bernard McVeigh, to help me learn gradually over time to ground awareness in the inner sanctuary of the heart, the locus of abiding in God. With his encouragement of good sound teachers, like Father Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeaul, and others, over time my perceptions of the world and my self shifted, and healing of soul happened. And I learned that meditation is not confined to the structures and methodologies of formal sitting meditation practice, but is the every moment return to anchoring attention/awareness **\*\*in\*\*** the heart as contemplative masters in the Prayer of the Heart and other Contemplative traditions have guided us to do. In this book Cynthia validates powerfully what my life long journey of contemplative practice and transformation has been in its simplicity and power. Cynthia states: " As practitioners gradually learn the art of withdrawing energy from all objects of attention, they are..... developing an inner capacity to distinguish by feel, the difference between attention **\*\*in\*\*** and attention **\*\*on\*\***. Letting go is first and foremost a gesture- a subtle inner drop and release- and every opportunity to practice it strengthens the patterning..... But as the magnetic center begins to develop, we acquire a root within us that can stay connected to our deepest spiritual aim and steer a true course independent of reactivity to external circumstances." This is true freedom to give ourselves ever more fully to our heart's desire of oneness with God through the heart as portal to Divine Indwelling. In this way we are fulfilling the invitation of Jesus to "enter the Kingdom" of unitive Trinitarian love, and to validate the teaching of St. John, "God is Love, who abides in Love abides in God." This abiding, is not just an idea, but a practice/praxis of ongoing kenotic release and freedom of the energy of attention/awareness from entrapment in the attractions and misdirections of the brain-mind, to come home -release and fall-into the sanctuary of the heart. In this process the center of gravity of our consciousness and will shifts from a brain-created egoic stance of the false self to being increasingly rooted and identified with the I AM Trinitarian Life flow of the Divine Indwelling. Over a lifetime our ordinary consciousness based on separateness is transformed into the unitive consciousness of the Mind of Christ, where we realize the affirmation of St. Paul, "There is only Christ. He is everything and He is in everything." Col.3:11. This change from ordinary to non-dual consciousness is foretold by Jesus, "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." John 14:20

I already had four decades' experience of meditation and silent prayer when our church started a centering prayer group. I plunged in right away--and what joy I have found! Centering prayer turned out to be what I'd been longing for all those years: a truly Christian method of growing closer to God through silence. Cynthia Bourgeault's latest book, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, helped me

develop better centering prayer skills. In fact, if you're a beginner experimenting with it, you'll appreciate the practical tips. Even if you have no one available to teach you in person, with this handbook you'll be able to get started on your own. The book explains the neurological science behind centering prayer. It brings together insights from the latest laboratory research, scholars in Eastern and Western Christian traditions, and even the fourteenth-century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*. If at times you get the feeling that Bourgeault is talking over our heads to other professors, don't let that bother you. It's OK to skip ahead to the parts that seem relevant right now. As you go forward, you'll be dipping into the book again and again to re-read interesting passages. Was Mary Magdalene Jesus' best student? Did *The Cloud of Unknowing* prefigure 21st-century laboratory discoveries? What part does our physical heart play in our development as Christians? I sincerely recommend *The Heart of Centering Prayer*. Alison P. Nylund, MLSformer Collection Development Coordinator, West Texas Library System

I'll serve it straight-up: this is the book I've been waiting for. Cynthia Bourgeault takes readers directly to the heart of Christian contemplation and locates it within contemporary work and writing on non-dual consciousness. Using "*The Cloud of Unknowing*" as a guide, she writes for those with an established practice of Centering Prayer, as well as for those new to the method, keeping both groups of readers in mind. Theological, philosophical, and pragmatic sticky wickets are treated with humor, grace, and--never underestimate her intention--an underlying seriousness of purpose. (This *is* about installing a radical, Lovely, new operating system, after all.) One especially-appreciated piece is her careful explication of Eastern and Western metaphysical models. Not an extended discussion, but a succinct understanding, arising from experience with/in each. The 'Coda' chapter also gets a specific mention. With characteristic 'compassionate ruthlessness', Bourgeault gently and clearly identifies some of the limitations of and invitations for the Christian contemplative movement. Maybe, just maybe, this is the book you've been waiting for, too.

After "*The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*" was released in 2010, my wife and I had the opportunity to meet Cynthia Bourgeault at the New York Open Center. It was a luminous experience. Before and since then, her books have been a blessing to our journey of conscious love. *The Heart of Centering Prayer* is a most welcome addition. This latest text presents the topic in a richer, evolving way. My Ph.D. training included a healthy dose of neurobiology and chapter six - "*Centering Prayer: Perspectives from the Neurosciences*" should be of particular interest and a bookmark for following further progress in this area of scientific inquiry. As she readily admits, the evidence is tantalizing

but sparse on the precise nature and significance of Heart-Mind entrainment; I believe that further investigation will be rewarding. (I would hope that those who practice centering prayer and are in mature relationships based on conscious love would be included.) Finally, after I finished reading this new text of hers, a re-read of "The Meaning of Mary Magdalene" was both necessary and more illuminating; I regret that my first read lacked enough context to "get" her thinking. That has been more than remedied!

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