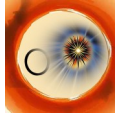


Series: From Ego to...?



Episode: 2.

Ego and Transformation

Encountering the ego is often the threshold of the spiritual journey. But who precisely are the voices guiding us beyond the illusions of self? Who speaks of the ego, and from what spiritual experience? In this episode, we meet the luminaries of Christian contemplation whose varied perspectives open a rich, nuanced conversation on the ego and the profound transformation that the spiritual path invites.

The Christian Contemplatives: Who Speaks, and From Where?

Our journey into the ego's nature does not follow a single teacher or doctrine; rather, it unfolds like a symphony of voices, each contributing a vital tone from diverse spiritual traditions within the Christian contemplative heritage. These are monks and mystics, lay teachers and writers, poets and theologians. They share a common concern: the spiritual life is less a pursuit of moral perfection or religious performance and more an awakening to the true self in God. (*Merton, 1961; Keating, 2016; Rohr, 2013*).

Although they do not all belong to cloistered solitaries, these contemplative voices

do not speak from theory alone, but from lives shaped by silence, solitude, communal prayer, dark nights, crises of faith, and moments of sudden union with the Divine. Their reflections on ego emerge not just from theological study, but from the wellsprings of mystical encounter, daily contemplative habits, and struggles with self that mirror our own (*Nouwen, 1981; Burrows, 2006; Rohr, 2013*).

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and modern mystical exemplar, named the ego the “false self” that lives “outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love” (*Merton, 1961*). To Merton, this self is a veil of separation, yearning for autonomy but spiritually alienated. He wrote from the experience of solitude and silence at Gethsemani, shaped by contemplative prayer and regular mystical insight—a sense of deep union and sometimes alienation from self.

Thomas Keating, also a Trappist and a pioneer of Centering Prayer, describes the false self as patterns and addictions wounding the soul but capable of being transformed by divine grace (*Keating, 2016*). He offers deep hope: ego can be healed, rather than doomed. He grounded his teaching in the lived practice of Centering Prayer, where practitioners encounter the gradual deconstruction of ego through repeated surrender in meditation.

Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite nun, insists the ego must be dethroned for true union with God (*Burrows, 2006*). For her, the false self’s dethronement is essential surrender. speaks from intense Carmelite inner prayer, characterized by spiritual poverty and what John of



the Cross would call “the dark night”—direct experience of helplessness and gradual awakening.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar whose work bridges Christian and universal spirituality, calls the ego a “constructed identity” in contrast to the true self rooted in God (*Rohr, 2013*). His language embraces the ego’s complexity without demonizing it. His insights are often born from the interplay of pastoral ministry, retreats, and active engagement with both traditional spiritual disciplines and experiences of “falling upward”—a term he uses for transformative loss or crisis.

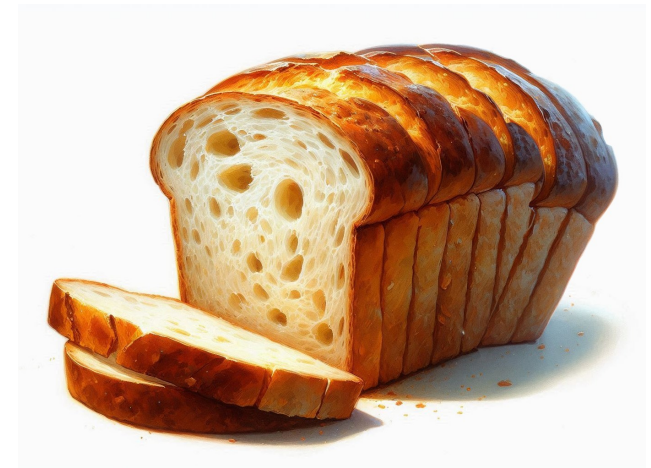
Henri Nouwen, the beloved Catholic writer, locates the false self in the social

compulsions that fabricate our defensive masks, while the true self remains “beloved by God” (*Nouwen, 1981*). His teaching flows from periods of loneliness, service among marginalized communities, and profound interior struggles—what he described as “the wounded healer” experience.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and storyteller, sees ego transcendence emerging in humility and embodiment within the ordinary life (*Taylor, 2009*).

Parker Palmer, Quaker educator and author, highlights the long, patient journey from masking to wholeness (*Palmer, 2000*).

Carl McColman, a lay contemplative, emphasizes the ego’s potential to be reorient-



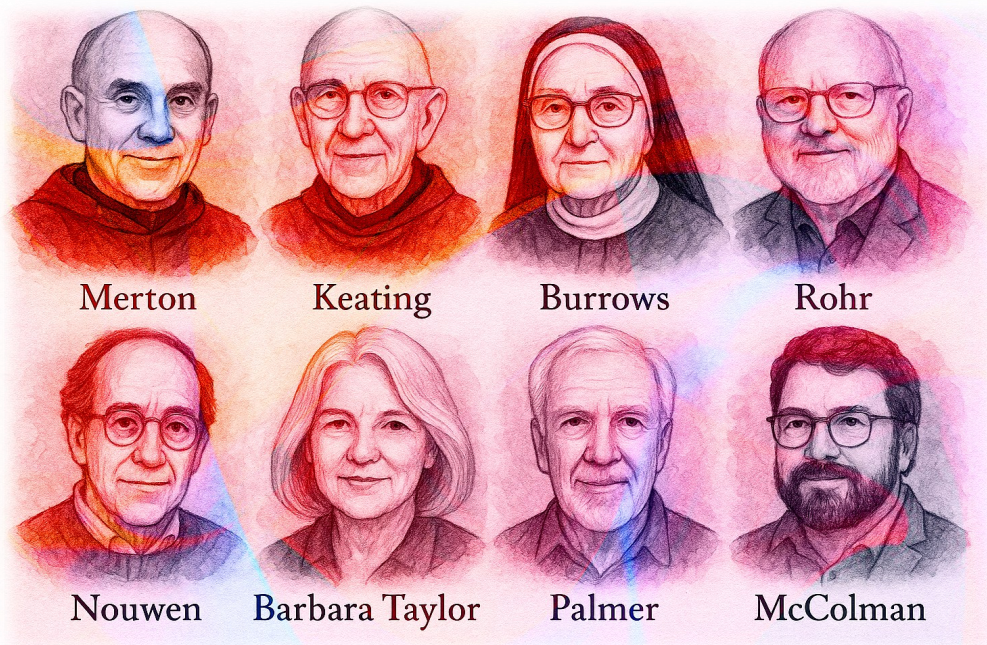
The ego may have components, or “slices.” At any time, some slices may have been transformed, while others may still be awaiting transformation.

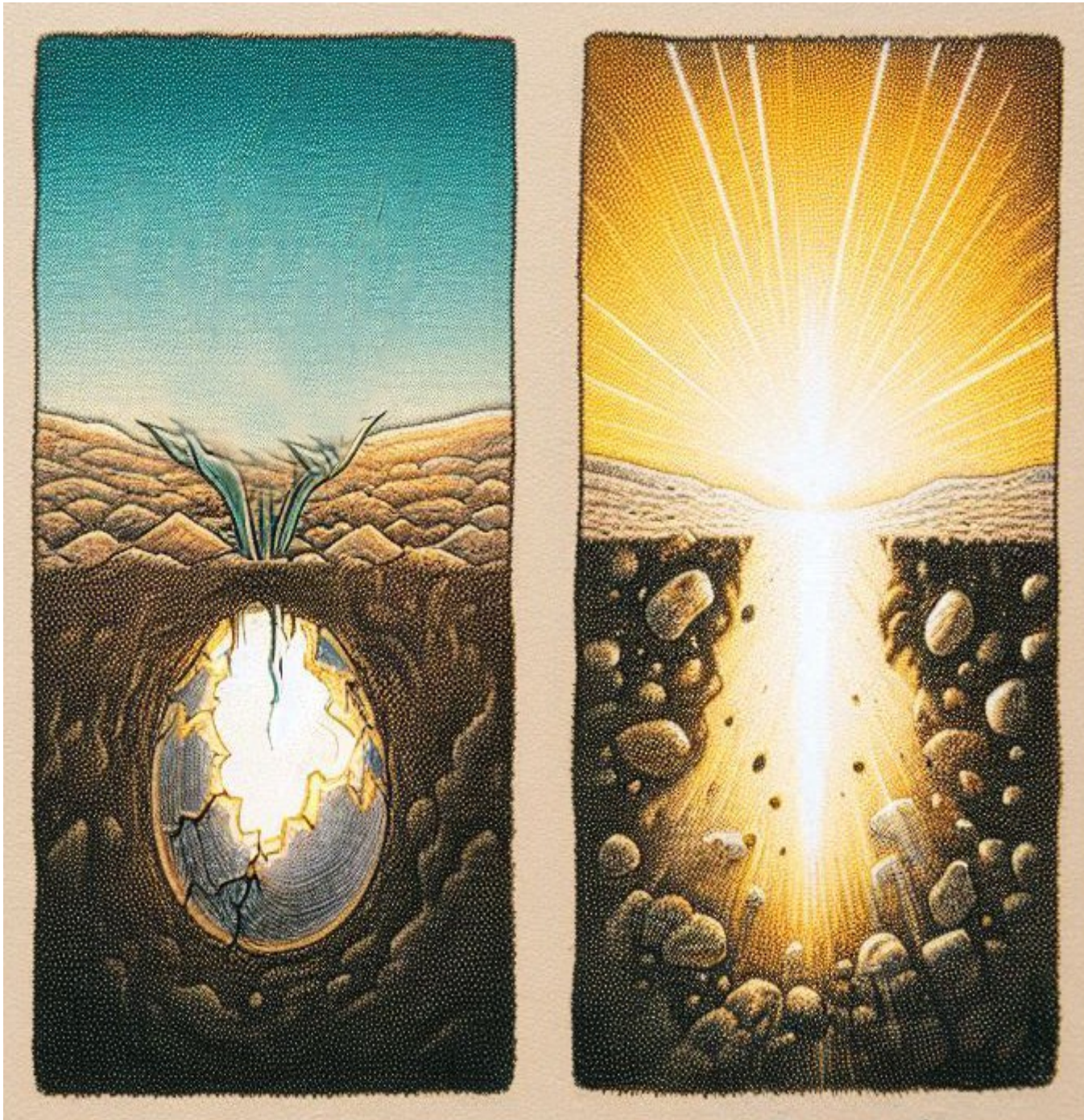
ed to serve Spirit rather than be eliminated (*McColman, 2010*).

Barbara Brown Taylor, Parker Palmer, and Carl McColman similarly draw on regular contemplative practices and moments of embodied presence, often described as epiphanies within ordinary life—not just formal mystical visions (*Taylor, 2009; Palmer, 2000; McColman, 2010*).

Together, these voices illuminate a shared truth: the ego is a kind of conditioned identity that both shelters and obscures our true divine nature. But is it a single entity or a group of things?

According to leading Christian contemplative writers such as Thomas Merton, Thomas





Keating, and Richard Rohr, the ego is not a single, static entity but is best understood as a spectrum—a dynamic array of patterns, roles, defences, and identities that we construct in response to the challenges and pressures of life (*Merton, 1961; Keating, 2016; Rohr, 2013*) At one end, the ego consists of protective behaviours and adaptive strategies that may be reasonably benign or even necessary for psychological survival; at the other, it extends into deeply entrenched illusions and postures of separateness that obscure our true self, which is grounded in God (*Keating, 2016; Rohr, 2013; Eckhart, n.d.*).

The spectrum metaphor helps illuminate this nuance: following Keating, some elements of ego can be recognized, transformed, and integrated into a more awakened self, whereas others—particularly those described by Merton or Meister Eckhart—embody false or illusory structures that stand as barriers to deeper union with the divine. (*Merton, 1961; Keating, 2016; Eckhart, n.d.*) This nuanced view resists a simplistic condemnation of the ego, instead inviting discerning attention to both its constructive and obstructive aspects within the journey of spiritual transformation. These teachings invite us beyond condemnation toward compassionate discernment.

Ego, Grace, and Transformation: A Christian View

If the ego or false self is a mask worn out of survival, how do we move toward the

true self hidden in God? This transformation is no mere act of willpower or disciplined striving. Christian contemplatives remind us that spiritual awakening happens not by conquering the ego through strength but by receiving transformation through grace (*Keating, 2016; Rohr, 2013; Nouwen, 1981; Burrows, 2006*).

You may have reflected, as I have, with some bewilderment, about the saying of Jesus typically paraphrased as “the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” (*Matthew 11:12, also Luke 16:16*) While the saying about “taking the Kingdom by force” could be misconstrued as recommending wilful self-exertion, Christian contemplative writers including Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr, and Ruth Burrows generally reinterpret it to affirm the kind of inner passion and desire that leads to surrender, not conquest. (*Rohr, 2011; Keating, 2016; Burrows, 2006*). The transformation they describe happens when the ego’s striving yields to a receptive, graced openness - a “holy boldness”, a radical wholeheartedness that means letting go, even of one’s own will. The process is always through surrender, not domination

Thomas Keating teaches, “Ego gives way when God takes over all our faculties” (*Keating, 2016*), suggesting that true change occurs when divine presence gradually permeates our being, even the smallest habits and thoughts. This is not surrender to passivity but to an active Divine presence working within.

Henri Nouwen articulates that transformation is embedded within the rhythm of daily life. It is the spiritual life itself, lived moment by moment, where “the spiritual life can only be real... as it takes root and grows in the ordinary places” (*Nouwen, 1981*). There is no shortcut beyond the daily encounter with pain, love, and grace.

Richard Rohr reminds us that the true self is “received, not earned,” a profound gift we “can only fall into” (*Rohr, 2013*). The journey is paradoxically about surrender and discovery, letting go of striving to muster the self already gifted in God’s image.

Ruth Burrows captures the essence of this

surrender as “faith is spiritual helplessness... consent to be little, unimportant, and poor before God” (*Burrows, 2006*). This consent breaks the power of the ego’s false autonomy and opens the door to divine union.

Parker Palmer portrays the soul’s emergence as a quiet, watchful process: “Move quietly, watchfully, and wait with patient love” (*Palmer, 2000*). Transformation is gradual, tender, and patient work of undressing the layers of ego masks.

Barbara Brown Taylor emphasizes embodied presence as foundational: “The



first challenge is simply to be present in your own skin” (*Taylor, 2009*). Awakening begins not in distant transcendence but in deep, attentive engagement with the ordinary self and body.

The collective wisdom of these teachers points beyond self-improvement toward a mystical undoing of the false self and the gradual revealing of the true self within. This is the work of grace. It is less a linear conquest than a metamorphosis, a loving deconstruction and reconstruction by the Divine (*Rohr, 2013; Keating, 2016; Nouwen, 1981*).

Engaging with these contemplative voices, we glimpse how the ego is not an enemy to vanquish but a complex personal and cultural construct to be known, healed, and transformed. The path from ego to true self is walked not by sheer effort but by consenting to grace, by falling into the Divine’s embrace and letting the false self gently dissolve (*Keating, 2016; Rohr, 2013; Nouwen, 1981*).

As Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic, taught, “The ego is the illusion of self that stands apart from the divine reality” (*Eckhart, n.d.*). To transcend ego is to

awaken to the mystery where self and God are no longer two but One. This is the invitation of Christian contemplation—not the annihilation of self but the birth of a luminous self, radiant in divine love.

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How is the ego-transformation process regarded in other major faiths?

Before looking at some useful insights on ego and transformation from other faiths, it is important to reaffirm that exploring spiritual wisdom beyond our own tradition is not an act of syncretism or dilution of faith. Rather, the Church, especially since the Second Vatican Council, encourages Christians to “recognise, preserve and promote the good and holy things” found in other religions (*Vatican II, Nostra Aetate, 1965*).

Approaching the spiritual insights of other faiths with humility and respect can deepen Christians’ understanding of both other traditions and one’s own, fostering a profound appreciation for the workings of grace throughout humanity (*Nostra Aetate, 1965*). You cannot just “cut-and-paste” between traditions, of course. For example, Buddhism has deep insights into human psychology, but their doctrine of anatta (no self) holds that there is no permanent self (*Rahula, 1974*). Is this, or is this not, like Jesus’ seed that must fall into the soil and die? Diversity can, however, stimulate learning and profound reflection, as well as respect and fellowship.

This journey does not compromise our iden-





tity as Christians; instead, it opens our hearts to the fullness of truth, always anchored in Christ, who is a universal reality as we see from the opening verses of John's Gospel (*Bible, John 1:1-5*). Our journey continues with honouring the genuine search for holiness and awakening that God stirs in every human soul.

Across the world's wisdom traditions, the concept of ego occupies a paradoxical and crucial space: it is at once the architect of our everyday identity and the primary obstacle to the full realization of the divine or ultimate reality (*Rohr, 2013; Keating, 2016*).

Most faiths frame the ego—as self-centeredness, illusion, or limited identity—as that which keeps us separated from the deeper truth we seek (*Merton, 1961; Burrows, 2006*). This recognition is foundational: spiritual awakening, in its richest sense, means moving beyond this restricted self, awakening to a truer, more spacious identity that transcends mere individualism and touches unity, love, or God (*Finley, 2003; Rohr, 2013*).

Each tradition offers its own language and imagery for this transformation. In Christianity, the ego is described as the “false self” or “old man,” a mask created in response to

fear and control, distinct from the “true self” discovered in union with Christ (*Merton, 1961; Rohr, 2013*). Spiritual awakening is likened to being “born again” or undergoing “metanoia”—a radical change of heart and mind (*Nouwen, 1981*). Buddhism teaches anatta, the absence of a fixed ego; realizing this emptiness is the doorway to enlightenment and freedom from suffering (*Rahula, 1974*). Hinduism speaks of ahamkara, the false identification with body and mind, which must fade for the realization that Atman, our true self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute (*Easwaran, 2007*). In Sufi Islam, the ego (nafs) is described as a veil or impurity that is refined by love, devotion, and longing for the Beloved, until selfhood dissolves in Divine union (*Schimmel, 2011*). Contemporary interspiritual voices describe awakening as entering unity consciousness or non-dual awareness—a felt sense of participating in a greater whole (*McColman, 2010*).

Yet this journey is rarely linear or simple. Awakening unfolds as an ongoing interior dialogue—sometimes a struggle, sometimes a dance—between the ego's need for security and the spirit's urging toward surrender (*Rohr, 2013; Palmer, 2000*). In Christianity, the metaphor of the seed falling into the earth to die (“unless a grain of wheat falls...”) expresses this pattern of ego's dissolution as the precondition for true life (*Bible, John 12:24*). Similar motifs appear in other traditions: the Buddhist image of dropping all clinging (*Rahula, 1974*), or the Sufi dissolution of self in love (*Schimmel, 2011*). The ego's undoing is thus gently inscribed into the very process of transformation; control gives way, not by force, but through trust in mystery.

Spiritual practices—meditation, prayer, silent contemplation—serve as universal tools for this journey. They expose the tight grip of ego, making its patterns visible, and create the receptive stillness where grace, insight, or awakening can emerge (*Keating, 2016; Taylor, 2009; McColman, 2010*). These disciplines are not about wilful effort or self-conquest; rather, they are expressions of humility and surrender, echoing the advice of saints and sages across traditions: awakening happens through letting go, openness to grace, and willingness to be transformed (*Burrows, 2006; Palmer, 2000; Schimmel, 2011*).

Quotations from the masters bridge these traditions and illumine their common heart: “The ego is the illusion of self that stands apart from the divine reality” (*Eckhart, n.d.; see also Merton, 1961*), “All suffering is born from clinging to the illusion of self” (*Rahula, 1974*), “Lose yourself to find yourself” (*Rumi, cited in Schimmel, 2011*). These voices all point toward a luminous paradox: in relinquishing the smaller self, something greater—truer, more compassionate, more real—arises.

Rather than a final conquest or erasure of the ego, spiritual awakening is revealed as a process of integration, transformation, and homecoming (*Rohr, 2013; Keating, 2016*). The journey from ego to true self is never the exclusive privilege of one faith; it is a universal call echoing in every tradition and every heart. When we frame our exploration of “ego” using the

idea of “homeomorphic equivalents”—recognizing parallel concepts across traditions, such as the false self, nafs, ahankara, and anatta—we foster respect for difference while savouring the deeper unity that inspires and unites us all (*McColman, 2010*). Spiritual awakening thus becomes not an escape from humanity, but its fulfilment: a passage from separation to unity, from illusion to truth, from fear to love.

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Note:

Where direct page numbers are needed, consult the cited editions. For scriptural references, the New Revised Standard Version Bible is recommended for consistency, but any standard translation can be used. For the quotations attributed to Buddhist and Sufi teachings, academic summary sources are referenced.

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