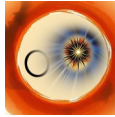


Series: From Ego to...?



Episode: 5

Objectless Awareness

From Ego to Consent in Centring Prayer

Tony Macelli

When people first hear the phrase "objectless awareness," it can sound strange, even suspicious. Isn't Christian prayer meant to be full of thoughts, images, feelings — praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition?

Yet there is a long stream of Christian teaching, from the anonymous Cloud of Unknowing in the 14th century through St John of the Cross to the 20th-century work of Fr Thomas Keating, that suggests something quite different: a prayer so simple it involves no object at all. Just a consenting presence. Is such wordless prayer really a prayer? If prayer is "the practice of the presence of God" then yes, of course.

Contentless prayer in Christian contexts is known as **apophatic** prayer. You may have heard of, or practised, *Lectio Divina*, a traditional form of Christian prayer for centuries; it consists of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*, to use

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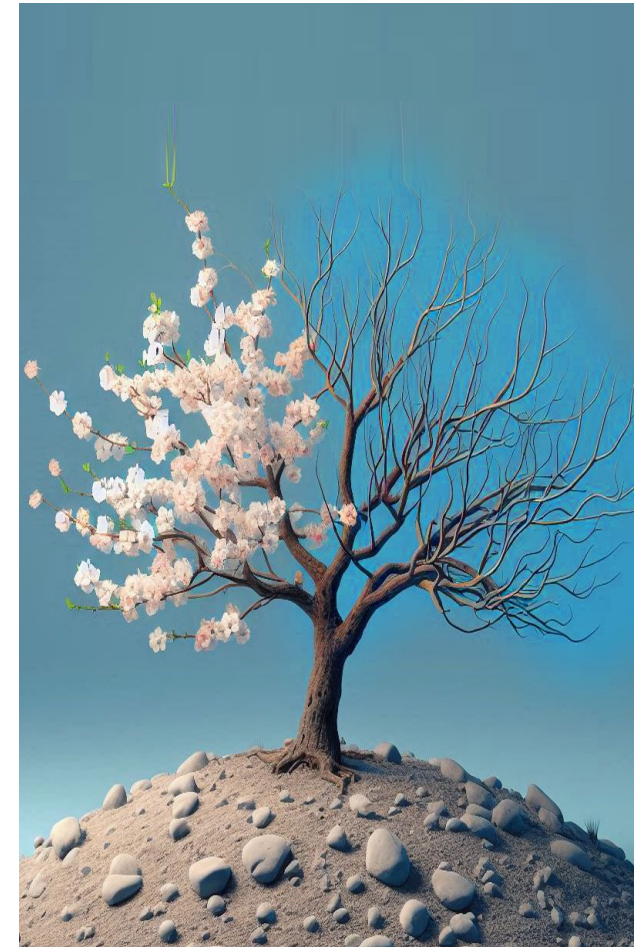
In Episode 1 "What is the Ego?" we saw how the false self is a survival structure—formed through adaptation and fear—that can obscure our true nature in God.

In Episode 2 "Ego and Transformation" we saw how contemplative teachers, through their own lived experience, guide us in loosening the ego's grip and cooperating with grace in times of disruption and change.

In Episode 3 "Preparing for Healing and Transformation" we saw how the healing of the ego takes root through daily practices of surrender and silence, making space for inner clarity, emotional release, and a more spacious identity to emerge.

In Episode 4 "The Inner Turning" we explored how grace often meets us in the subtle shift of an "inner turning," where our task is to notice and consent to what God is already beginning in us through seven time-tested "living orientations."

Today in Episode 5 "Objectless Awareness - From Ego to Consent: in Centring Prayer" we discover how the deepest prayer can involve no object at all—just one's consenting presence. Through the practice of Centring Prayer, we explore what it means to move beyond ego-driven prayer into the radical simplicity of "objectless awareness," where God's transforming presence works below the level of conscious thought in what Thomas Keating called "divine therapy"



the Latin names of the stages. The second stage, *meditatio*, is not apophatic because it involves content, namely a scripture passage or phrase from the *lectio* or reading stage, to be ruminated upon. The fourth stage, *contemplatio*, is an *apophatic* or contentless contemplative practice. You, or your group, might wish to do Lectio Divina with Centring Prayer as the fourth stage. [continued next page, col 1]

Incidentally, the meaning of the English words meditation and contemplation have nowadays become hopelessly entangled and ambiguous, even interchangeable, which is why sometimes we have to use the Latin names or the words with-content and contentless, just to avoid confusion.

The Lord's Prayer, for example, is cataphatic, *meditatio*, with-content, not apophatic, as it involves various concepts and thoughtful actions: praise, commitment to the kingdom of heaven, obedience to God's will, contrition, self-examination, petition, hope, trust, and so on. These are of course part of Christian life and prayer. *Cataphatic*, or with-content, prayer or *meditatio*, approaches God through words, images, and created forms — Scripture, liturgy, imagination, or spoken petitions. It affirms that God is revealed in creation and language, and that such expressions can mediate divine presence

Meanwhile, what Jesus is referring to in Matthew 6:6 ("When you pray, go into your inner room...") appears to be apophatic, at least as this passage is widely interpreted. The words "close the door behind you" and "in secret" appear to avoid recommending words or other content. *Apophatic* or contentless prayer, *contemplatio*, approaches God by releasing or surrendering words, images, and concepts, resting instead in silence and unknowing. Rooted in writers such as Pseudo-Dionysius and The Cloud of Unknowing, it emphasises God's mystery beyond all thought and human grasp.

These two modes are not opposed but complementary. Cataphatic forms ground us in the richness of revelation and give the heart language for its devotion, while apophatic prayer leads beyond language into direct surrender. Mature Christian prayer often involves a rhythm between both: speech and silence, image and unknowing, expression and consent.

In this post, I want to explore a bit more what it means to be aware but not to be aware of any particular thing. What is it to be "aware without object," a state that may happen and deepen in the practice of Centring Prayer, a practice that notices and gently surrenders thoughts. We'll place this state alongside other traditions and even recent science, but with a clear eye on its Christian heart: a loving openness to God who cannot be grasped or pictured.

From Ego-Driven Prayer to Pure Consent

Most of us begin prayer with our ego firmly in charge. We have agendas: problems to solve, feelings to express, spiritual experiences to achieve. Even in holy activities like praise or intercession, the ego maintains its familiar role as the one who "does" prayer. Ego is the one who manages our relationship with God, who evaluates whether our prayer time was "successful."

This ego-driven approach, while natural and often necessary, can become a subtle barrier. It keeps us in the driver's seat, relat-



ing to God as an object of our attention rather than opening to God as the ground of our very being. Centring Prayer invites a radical reversal: instead of offering something to God, we offer nothing — or rather, we offer our willingness to let go of everything, including our need to be the one doing the praying.

A Silence That Is Not Blank

The Cloud of Unknowing makes an audacious claim: God cannot be reached by thought, only by love. The author urges us to set aside every image, every idea, even holy thoughts about God, and to "rest in the cloud of unknowing." Here, prayer is stripped down to naked attentiveness — a bare, unadorned willingness simply to be present to God without any object filling the mind.

Fr Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk



and abbot, and his Benedictine monastic colleagues, took this insight and gave it a practical shape. His method of Centring Prayer is not complicated: sit in silence, let go of thoughts as they arise, and use a sacred word only as a gentle tether back to consent. The aim is not to "say" the word continuously, but to release every attachment and return to stillness.

For Keating, this is not about creating emptiness for its own sake. It is about consenting to God's presence, which is already here. He once wrote: "Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation."

The Paradox of Awareness Without Object

Here's where the phrase "objectless awareness" comes in. Normally, we are conscious of something — a sound, a thought, a feeling. But in Centring Prayer, when the mind falls quiet, there may be a sense of simply being aware without any object at all. Not even "I am praying" remains as a clear thought. You can see what this means by being attentively present to your thoughts, then also to the gap between your thoughts. Unless you have some kind of practice, though, the gap may be only a fraction of a second.

Eastern traditions describe this as the ground of consciousness. Neuroscientists, studying meditation and various mental states, call it "minimal consciousness." For Keating, and for the Christian tradition he carried, it is

not the ground of being, nor blankness — it is rather the opening into God. The absence of objects is precisely what *makes room for the presence* that cannot be objectified.

Cynthia Bourgeault, one of Keating's close students and collaborators, who has written books about Centring Prayer, often describes this shift as a movement from the egoic mind to the heart. In her words, Centring Prayer "rewires our seat of awareness" so that we live less from self-reference and more from a spacious, *kenotic* or self-emptying consciousness — a consciousness patterned after Christ's self-emptying love, where our usual self-protective boundaries dissolve into compassionate availability.

Why It Matters: Active Consent, Not Passive Quietism

At this point, readers sometimes ask: "But isn't this just Eastern meditation with a Christian label? And doesn't this sound dangerously passive?" Here is where the differences become crucial. In Buddhism or Hindu Vedanta, objectless awareness is often seen as the ultimate reality itself. In science, it is merely a describable mental state. In Centring Prayer, the silence is not impersonal but deeply relational. It is an active consent to God's presence and action — a yes deeper than words.

This consent is not constantly renewed with the *thought* of consent. But, far from being passive, the consent requires constant vigilance. Every time a thought arises, every

time the ego reasserts its agenda, the practitioner must actively choose to let go and return to open availability. This is not the passivity of daydreaming but the active receptivity of love.

This process has consequences. Keating insisted that the true measure of Centring Prayer is not the experiences one has in the silence but the transformation that unfolds in daily life. Over time, the false self — built on compulsions, anxieties, and egoic control — loosens. In its place grows patience, compassion, and a freedom to love. Keating called this process "divine therapy," where God's healing presence works below the level of our conscious awareness to untangle the knots of our wounded psychology.

Learning to Trust the 'Nothing'

If you try Centring Prayer, you may quickly find that the silence feels like "nothing happening." Thoughts intrude constantly, your mind wanders, and you may feel like you're failing. That's not only normal — it's the very substance of the practice.

The practice asks us to trust the 'nothing', to recognize that the absence of thoughts and images is not a failure but the very point. Each time you notice you've gotten caught in a thought and gently return to your sacred word, you're practicing the fundamental movement of the spiritual life: *letting go of ego and consenting to God*. Even the act of noticing a thought is itself a moment of awareness — a small awakening that participates in the larger awakening that is God's gift.



Here, "objectless awareness" reveals its fruitfulness. The cloud of unknowing is diffused with divine mercy. The consent we offer is not to our own mastery but to God's transforming love, working in ways too subtle for our conscious mind to grasp.

Living the Transformation

The fruits of this practice extend far beyond prayer periods. As Bourgeault observes, regular Centring Prayer gradually shifts our default mode of being. Instead of approaching life from the anxious control of the ego, we begin to operate from what she calls "unitive consciousness" — a way of being that naturally sees connection rather than separation, responds from compassion rather than fear, and acts from abundance rather than scarcity.

This doesn't happen overnight, and it's not about achieving some permanent mystical state. It's about allowing God's presence to gradually restructure our inner landscape, creating space for divine love to flow more freely through us into a world that desperately needs it.

Conclusion

Objectless awareness, far from being alien to Christian life, is at the heart of its contemplative stream. It is the silence in which God prays in us, the hidden spring of transformation. It represents not the absence of relationship with God, but relationship so intimate that the usual subject-object distinction dissolves into pure communion.

In the end, the Christian doesn't cling to awareness itself, nor to emptiness, nor even to mystical states. We cling — or better, we trustingly consent — to God, who meets us in the silence beyond all knowing and loves us into the fullness of who we are called to become.

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"Enter your inner room.. (Mark 6:6)

GLOSSARY

These references represent the core accessible texts for the concepts discussed. If you are interested in following up this subject in an academically deeper way, you could add sources on contemplative neuroscience and comparative mysticism.

Apophatic (contentless) prayer and **cataphatic** (with-content) prayer: Two complementary ways of prayer. Apophatic practice lets go of words and images, resting in silence before God's mystery. Cataphatic practice engages words, Scripture, and symbols, affirming God's self-revelation through creation and language. Together they balance silence and expression in Christian prayer.

Centring Prayer – or Centering Prayer in American spelling. A contemporary form of contemplative prayer developed by Thomas Keating and others. For guidance, see the world network Contemplative Outreach, at contemplativeoutreach.org. In Malta, phone (+356) 7932 6725.

Cloud of Unknowing - Anonymous 14th-century contemplative and mystical text on contemplative prayer

Contemplative prayer - Forms of prayer focused on interior silence and presence rather than words or images

Divine therapy - Keating's term for God's healing work below conscious awareness



Putting thoughts, memories, and everything about daily life, into a cloud of forgetting, I humbly and trustingly surrender to God, who lies in the cloud of unknowing.

Ego/Egoic mind - Ego/Egoic mind - In contemplative psychology, the ego refers to the part of our consciousness that creates and maintains our sense of separate identity. It operates through constant self-reference ("What does this mean for me?"), comparison with others, and attempts to control circumstances to protect and enhance our self-image. The egoic mind is characterized by its need to be right, to be in charge, and to defend its constructed identity through roles, achievements, and external validation.

While the ego serves necessary functions for psychological development and daily functioning, it becomes problematic when it dominates our inner life, creating anxiety, defensiveness, and separation from God and others. In Centering Prayer, practitioners learn to recognize egoic patterns and gently release attachment to them, allowing space for a deeper, more authentic self rooted in divine love rather than self-protection.

False self - The identity built on external validation, roles, and psychological defences

Kenosis/Kenotic consciousness - Self-emptying love modelled after Christ's incarnation

Naked attentiveness - Pure awareness without mental content or objects

Objectless awareness - Consciousness without a specific object of attention

Sacred word - A chosen word preferably having only 1 or 2 syllables, optionally ha-

bitually used in Centring Prayer to gently return attention to the silence each time a thought or sensation arises and is noticed. Keating calls it 'sacred' because it helps us to return to God. It is not used as a subject to be meditated upon.

It should not be used as a bulldozer to preemptively scrape away all thought; rather one waits until a thought arises, then the attention shifts to the sacred word, and the thought is surrendered – it slips away. The sacred word should not be used as a mantra, with endless automatic repetition.

The sacred word is optional – though most beginners probably use it; instead if one might use simply an inner glance, a sort of pulse of awareness. Or one can use the breath as a brief temporary focus. Examples of the sacred word in Centring Prayer might be: yes, now, still, wisdom, trust, let go, love, God, Christ, Jesus

Unitive consciousness - Awareness that naturally perceives unity rather than separation

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Guidance on Centring Prayer (Centering Prayer in American spelling) may be obtained from the worldwide network: Contemplative Outreach. See www.contemplativeoutreach.org. For Android devices, in Google Play there is a free app called Centering Prayer, with timers, prayers, and quotes.