

The Love of The Religious Life  
By Florence Forbush, 2018

Throughout time, many saints and mystics urge a centering of the religious life. From Saint Antony's life spent in the desert, to the lifelong planting of hermits to the writings of Saint Teresa and Saint Bernard, we are urged and shown that the only way we can become saints, find the face of divinity and eradicate suffering is through centering the religious life. Most often this is done through religious monastic orders, groups of monks or nuns, who tend to remove themselves from the world, spending all their days centered around activities of labor, study and practice. In an American culture which assumes religion to be a personal matter separate and cut-off from the rest of life, the concept of centering your entire life, from dawn to dusk, around religious practice is sometimes viewed as extreme. To have religion enter one's entire life is as Thanissaro Bhikkhu—a Buddhist monk—puts it, a counter-culture value<sup>1</sup>. Yet just as the Buddha shrugged off criticism from his father at begging for alms, so too does Saint Bernard among others, urging us to ignore worldly criticism, to place first the practice of religion and to make all else come second.

The need to center the religious practice is illustrated in Saint Bernard's sermon *On Conversion* and *On Pride and Humility*, Simone Weil's essay *The Love of Religious Practices*, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and some of the chapters on prayer by Saint Teresa in *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*. Although it should be understood that many people advocate the centering of the religious life both in history and now, even the more modern account of *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* by Julia Foote, a 19th century black preacher, urges us to "vote as you pray"<sup>2</sup>, calling for a centering of all life's duties around religious practice no matter how secular they may seem. Now as ever we must place the importance of the religious practice and the religious life above

1 Bhikkhu, Thanissaro. "Counter-Culture Values". [https://www.dhammadata.org/Archive/y2011/111222\\_Counter-cultural\\_Values.mp3](https://www.dhammadata.org/Archive/y2011/111222_Counter-cultural_Values.mp3). Recorded 2011

2 Foote, Julia. "A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch". <https://archive.org/details/brandpluckedfrom00footrich/page/n5>. Published 1879. 23

all else if we desire any form of enlightenment or to know God, regardless of who we are as individuals.

Saint Bernard's sermon *On Conversion* is entirely geared toward extolling the importance of the religious life. It must be noted that at the time of the sermon that the word conversion had "the sense of "deciding to enter a religious order""<sup>3</sup>. Bernard starts his sermon by going through various biblical quotes explaining the biblical support of conversion and the particular importance to sinners, summarizing that "it seems...it is conversion that is required...[that] it is absolutely necessary for sinners"<sup>4</sup>. We might ask why it is necessary, for those of the Christian bent it is written that "unless you are converted...you will not enter the kingdom of heaven"<sup>5</sup>. Bernard goes on to conclude the first section of his sermon by urging us to "lift up the ears of your heart" such that we may hear the voice which brings forth truth and removes sloth from the soul<sup>6</sup>.

Bernard's urging is mirrored in the gospel of Matthew. When Jesus preaches that "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock"<sup>7</sup>. The rock here is understood to produce a foundation which is strong in the face of obstacles. Jesus draws a comparison to rain, rising waters and wind<sup>8</sup>. We can find parallels to these obstacles in any number of situations be they sickness, oppression or poverty. Yet that strength against suffering only arises when we actually practice, if we fail to live the religious life we become "like a foolish man who built his house on sand"<sup>9</sup>. When hardship arises, we do not fall over. We might see an example of this in the way one responds to the hardship of death. Some people when faced with death break apart, they turn to alcohol or another ineffective and unsustainable coping mechanism because the foundation

3 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux Selected Work*, trans. G. R. Evans (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987) 65

4 Ibid., 66

5 Ibid., 66

6 Ibid., 67

7 Matthew 7:24 NIV

8 Matthew 7:25 NIV

9 Matthew 7:26 NIV

of their life is built on shifting sands of material gain and impermanent power instead of the solid rock of the divine.

We might then feel that if we get baptized or affirm refuge in the Buddha or any number of other entry degrees of religiosity, we are saved. Yet Jesus tells us to go farther than this, explaining again in Matthew that “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”<sup>10</sup>. We cannot pay mere lip service and expect results. It is like doing a single pull up and expecting to then be able to lift a truck, when the real practice is the hundreds of days of lifting that lead to the moment of lifting the truck. Only if we actually carry out “the will of my Father who is in heaven” through religious practice can we attain to great heights<sup>11</sup>.

Jesus urging us to higher devotion is emphasized again in Matthew with the parable of the sower. Jesus first paints an image of a farmer sowing seeds, some seeds fall on the path and are eaten by birds, some fall on rocks and the weak growing crops wither, some fall in thorns and are choked as they grow and some falls on good soil and produces a bountiful crop<sup>12</sup>. He goes on to explain what the various places of planting mean in relation to the religious life.<sup>13</sup> The seed on the path being a person who hears the call and doesn’t understand it<sup>14</sup>. The seed on the rocks being someone who converts or believes for a moment, yet falls away in hardship or persecution<sup>15</sup>. The seed on the thorns is most particular to us, for it concerns someone who hears the call and yet “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful”<sup>16</sup>. Plainly here Jesus is telling us that we cannot be in the world entirely nor can we engage fully in it through material gain, to do so brings us nothing. This is contrasted with the final explanation of seed falling on good soil, explaining that it

10 Matthew 7:21 NIV

11 Matthew 7:21 NIV

12 Matthew 13:3-8 NIV

13 Matthew 13:18 NIV

14 Matthew 13:19 NIV

15 Matthew 13:20-21 NIV

16 Matthew 13:22 NIV

“refers to someone who hears the word and understands it”<sup>17</sup>. Understands it in this context is taken to mean the full living of the religious life, not a passing conversion or lip service, yet full devotion.

Simone Weil, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer, agrees with Jesus that a life of practice and not a single day in church is absolutely necessary to enter heaven, in her essay *The Love of Religious Practices* she writes that “the attitude that brings about salvation is..attentive and faithful immobility that lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken”<sup>18</sup>. We can take this to mean a life of continuous and ardent practice which lasts our entire life, not a day or a month or a year. That we cannot have the practice be a section of life, we must instead “renounce all the rest” and through that renunciation of a partial or wholly secular life alone can we be saved<sup>19</sup>. This mirrors the biblical statement of Jesus in the Book of Luke, that “any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple”<sup>20</sup>. Stated more plainly two pages later, Simone affirms that “All human beings, whatever they are doing and whoever they are, should be able to have their eyes fixed, during the whole of each day, upon the serpent of bronze”<sup>21</sup>. The serpent of bronze understood here to be God, which we must have all actions directed towards in order to attain to heaven.

We can find a visual representation of the renunciation and devotion required for heaven in the image of a parent who attends to a crying child each night in spite of exhaustion. We may interpret the child here as the divine, or even as certain states of concentration such as the jhanas described in Buddhism. As God and so jhana, these do not arise in the absence of a suitable stage<sup>22</sup>. As the parents to the divine we must “be ready to die of hunger and exhaustion rather than change” as Simone says, be wholly willing to endure being called, talked to and hit, to feel that there is absolutely no hope of transcendence<sup>23</sup>. This sort of ardent striving is not something which can arise from a life which is not

17 Matthew 13:23 NIV

18 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951) 128

19 Ibid., 128

20 Luke 14:33 ESV

21 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951)130

22 Leigh Brasington, *Right Concentration* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2015)

23 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951) 128

centered around the practice, we must as the parent be totally unwilling to move from the goal no matter the impermanent suffering of the process. The dedication required to attain heaven is not something we can hold and maintain in the worldly life with all its suffering and change.

The anonymous medieval author that wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* affirms the necessity of centering the practice and detaching oneself from worldly affairs. In chapter three the author affirms that the practice is what “pleases God most” and that likewise “to forget all of God’s creations and all their actions” that we must devote ourselves entirely to the practice and “pay no heed” to the things of the world<sup>24</sup>. Let us be sure to note that the author clarifies that this work is that which “all the saints and angels rejoice in”, something we see backed up in the intense asceticism of St Antony, the father of Christian monasticism<sup>25</sup><sup>26</sup>. The practice is not something to be put aside for a specific time or day, it is not a Sunday morning affair. The author affirms the importance of a devoted practice in chapter seventeen when they relay the story of Mary and Martha. If you don’t know it, Mary is tending to Jesus in the living room of a house, listening to him speak while Martha is busy in the kitchen cleaning dishes. Martha complains that Mary should help her with the work and Jesus rebukes Martha, telling her not to disturb Mary in her listening. The author of *The Cloud* notes Mary as the ideal and that “she would not be diverted by anything...but sat with her body quite still”<sup>27</sup>. The author contrasts Mary with Martha, who stands in for all worldly people, which is to say all those whose lives do not revolve around the practice, extolling instead Mary who stands for “all contemplatives, or those whose lives center around the practice”<sup>28</sup>. The author notes clearly that if we are to be contemplatives, fully devoted towards attaining heaven, we “should model [our] way of life on hers” regardless of “whatever criticism” may be levied against doing such<sup>29</sup>.

24 *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearing (New York: The Penguin Group, 2001) 21-22

25 *Ibid.*, 22

26 *The Life of Saint Antony*

27 *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearing (New York: The Penguin Group, 2001) 41

28 *Ibid.*, 41-42

29 *Ibid.*, 42

That same medieval author indicates much earlier the reward present in a life directed towards religious practice, writing in the opening chapter that through a life of practice you can learn how to "step towards [the perfection of earthly life]"<sup>30</sup>. This perfect state of life is characterized by "unending bliss" which is contrasted by a life which is not centered around the religious practice which is characterized by "unending pain"<sup>31</sup>. The urgency of the pain felt in this life is something we all experience, seen even in the urgency to scratch an itch, feed ourselves or satisfy a sexual urge. Likewise the need for ardent striving towards God is understood as the alleviation of this pain. The author explains in the context of urgent pain and similarly urgent need for alleviation that "nothing is more precious than time"<sup>32</sup>. That if we fail to attend to the practice, in an instant "heaven may be won and lost"<sup>33</sup>. The only course then, for the work which through doing we rise "nearer and nearer to God" and further from sin, is to center it<sup>34</sup>.

The counter-culture value of centering religious practice throughout one's life indicated in *The Cloud of Unknowing* is mirrored in Simone's criticism of social imitation, the "trap of traps"<sup>35</sup>. In *The Love of Religious Practices* she explains that engaging in the social form of religion is a "perfectly deceptive" "imitation of faith"<sup>36</sup>. This imitation puts the soul at peace, yet temporary peace is not truly desirable "except in error"<sup>37</sup>. This is the error which is borne out in the argument for religion as community, Simone understands that the end point of religion and in particular religious practice, is not temporary communal peace, explaining that it is "a question of life or death for faith that...social imitation should be [seen as an obstacle, not a goal]"<sup>38</sup>. When she uses the word faith here, it can be read that it is indicating not the social concept of religion as a sector of society or lived experience, yet

30 Ibid., 20

31 *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearing (New York: The Penguin Group, 2001) 23

32 Ibid., 24

33 Ibid., 24

34 Ibid., 24

35 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951) 129

36 Ibid., 129.

37 Ibid., 129

38 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951) 129

the transcendent goal of religion: salvation. Attending to the goal of salvation is something which social imitating for the sake of cultural peace or community blocks, we must instead strive past fitting in toward heaven.

Yet for those of us not seeking an eternal heaven, Saint Teresa of Avila, not Calcutta, articulates in more general language that “if we gradually increase our [practice], we shall reach...that height which many saints have attained to”, here we can interpret saints generally, even as enlightened beings of Buddhism<sup>39</sup>. However, she is careful to note that “if they had never resolutely desired this, and gradually put their desires into effect, they would never have come to their high state”<sup>40</sup>. Meaning, if we do not diligently strive to practice, we never reach sainthood. How this lack of diligent striving hamstrings us is noted when Teresa writes that no “cowardly soul...makes as much progress in as many years as the courageous make in a few”<sup>41</sup>. Taken in the context of Teresa’s life as a nun, this tells us that the lay practice of church on Sunday and a once a day prayer is not nearly enough for sainthood, that instead we must courageously and diligently seat the practice at the center of our lives. Every moment, every breath.

In another way of seeing the rewards of practice, Simone explains how “each minute” of attending to that which is pure “destroys a part of the evil”<sup>42</sup>. Simone suggests a practice here, specifically that “when the soul is invaded by evil” we should turn our attention “toward a thing of perfect purity” which absorbs and destroys the evil<sup>43</sup>. We might interpret here that the total end of evil is an end to unbearable suffering, true contentment regardless of circumstance<sup>44</sup>. Simone also explains the connection between unbearable suffering and bearable pain, that “contact with perfect purity separates the [unbearable] suffering and [bearable pain] which had been mixed together”<sup>45</sup>. What she’s

39 Teresa of Avila *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by herself*, trans J.M. Cohen (New York: The Penguin Group, 1957) 88

40 Ibid., 88

41 Ibid., 88

42 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951)124

43 Ibid., 124

44 Ibid., 68

45 Ibid., 124

saying here is that when we experience pain, mental or physical, as ordinary people we feel suffering along with it, unless we come into contact with perfect purity through religious practice. As exemplified by Christ “when all the evil...throughout the Roman Empire was concentrated [on him]...it became only [bearable pain]”<sup>46</sup>. Simone proposes here that the reward of practice is that all suffering is transformed into an ordinary kind of bearable pain.

This reward Simone speaks of and the relationship between suffering and pain is mirrored in the Sallatha Sutta, a piece of Buddhist scripture. It says that when a normal person experiences pain “one senses it as though joined with it”, transforming it into suffering<sup>47</sup>. This is contrasted with an enlightened being who “when touched with a feeling of pain, does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught”<sup>48</sup>. In this way there is no suffering, only the pain itself. As in Buddhism, Simone affirms the reality of joining suffering to pain by affirming the necessary existence of perfect purity, a state free of suffering which we can all touch, that without it “we could never be saved” either from sin, suffering, hell or rebirth<sup>49</sup>. There exists then a motivation for practice not only within Christian doctrine for the removal of sin, yet within Buddhist doctrine to likewise remove the perpetuating factor of suffering.

The Buddhist doctrine of Dukkha often translated as suffering, stress, or discontent is mirrored in the words of Saint Bernard as he describes the soul which is not directed at God, which “has eviscerated itself in its wretched pursuit” here the wretched pursuit being the things of the world<sup>50</sup>. As Bernard says and the Buddha affirms, to engage regularly in matters which can be called sin, from intentional lying to helping to perpetuate a distant sweat-shop or factory farm through what you buy or refusal to denounce the capitalist system which creates them, we wound ourselves “not in a spirit of

46 Ibid., 124

47 Bhikkhu, Thanissaro. “The Arrow: Sallatha Sutta (SN 36:6)”. [https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN36\\_6.html](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN36_6.html)

48 Ibid.,

49 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951) 124

50 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux Selected Work*, trans. G. R. Evans (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987) 70

enmity, but in a stupor of inner insensibility”<sup>51</sup>. It is not malice, rather ignorance of the harm of our action, and failure to realize this ignorance only perpetuates our suffering. As Bernard explains that the consequence of this sin “will be found when he leaves this life”, which is to say we suffer the consequences now or in the next life, yet there is no escape from this causation<sup>52</sup>.

Much justification for the religious life is summarized in the Buddhist Kalama Sutta, where the Buddha discusses four assurances of the spiritual life well lived. Explaining that if we believe “there is a world after death...I will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world”<sup>53</sup>. If however we believe “there is no world after death” then through religious practice we are able to “in this world, here and now, [become] free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy”<sup>54</sup>. If we believe “evil is done through acting” then “having done no evil action, from where will suffering touch me?”<sup>55</sup>. Finally, even if we “suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case”<sup>56</sup>. We may consider purified in this respect to be someone who commits no unethical action and prompts no shame or guilt through their own behavior, free from blame. Regardless of whether we believe in heaven, hell, karma, freedom from suffering or self-improvement, there is merit to the religious life in all cases.

Bernard similarly gives time to the effects resulting from the irreligious life. When we engage in “vain spectacles [and delights]” the rewards are empty and impermanent<sup>57</sup>. The “delights” are understood here to be pleasures of the world such as drugs, mindless entertainment and many others from sweet perfumes to fine clothes. When we engage in worldly pleasures we suffer “the stiff-necked fury of animosity, the anxious labor of suspicion, the cruel torment of frustration, and the wretchedness

51 Ibid., 70

52 Ibid., 71

53 Kalama Sutta AN 3:66 [https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3\\_66.html](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3_66.html)

54 Thera. Soma. “Kalama Sutta: The Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry”. Translated 1994. <https://accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>

55 Bhikkhu, Thanissaro. “To the Kalamas. Kalama Sutta (AN 3:66)”. [https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3\\_66.html](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3_66.html)

56 Thera. Soma. “Kalama Sutta: The Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry”. Translated 1994. <https://accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>

57 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux Selected Work*, trans. G. R. Evans (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987)77

of envy”<sup>58</sup>. We need then to pursue the divine with all our hearts both to avoid the suffering created by a worldly life and to gain the joys of divinity. As the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* counsels us, “love may reach God in this life, but knowledge may not”<sup>59</sup>. Which is to say that we cannot avoid the suffering of the worldly life by only learning about the religious life, we must instead put it into practice.

In my own life, when I first became religious it was through practice. I converted from atheism not on any basis of belief, yet because I was told I could do and practice in the absence of belief. From some unknown desire that prompted initially the wearing of a cloak and later some improvised prayer, which led to the formalized ritual practices of Wicca. From the interest in the outer forms with candles, incense and swords I found a depth I could not have anticipated. If our souls cry out even a little and approach with genuine openness, we can be shown the face of the divine and thereby step past all qualm with implementing some degree of practice in our lives. We may not become monastics or clergy, yet there can be born inside something which does not shake with doubt or time: the thing itself can be felt. Along with that experience of truth is so often the desire to pursue it, even if the only shape that takes is the thirty minutes you pray.

Given the reward of heaven, freedom from affliction and suffering, sainthood and peace, I do not mean to say that this is not a monumental task. Bernard tells us that “those in the middle of the climb...are weary and constrained, now struck by fear of the pain of hell, now held back by the force of old habits”<sup>60</sup>. Likewise Teresa explains how the devil tells us that “we poor sinners may admire but must not imitate the deeds of saints” yet contrasts that devilish thought with the claim that with the aid of God we can live the life of the mystic, the monastic, the one whose life is centered on the practice<sup>61</sup>. Yet it was in Teresa’s time as it is today that “we imagine the earth would slide from beneath our feet if

58 Ibid., 77

59 *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearing (New York: The Penguin Group, 2001) 32

60 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux Selected Work*, trans. G. R. Evans (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987) 139

61 Teresa of Avila *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by herself*, trans J.M. Cohen (New York: The Penguin Group, 1957) 89

for one moment we were slightly to turn our attention from the body and give it to the spirit”<sup>62</sup>. There is great fear of living a life “[controlling]...one’s interests” which may push naturally towards ineffective behavior and directing ourselves instead toward the practice<sup>63</sup>. Given that fear of going forth, if we genuinely desire enlightenment, apotheosis, heaven or the like we must as St Peter did, cast ourselves into the sea in the face of our fear and trust that we will not sink<sup>64</sup>.

To that end of unification with God, enlightenment, the truest experience of the divine, we must center the religious life. As Bernard, Teresa, Buddha, Simone, Julia and an uncountable number of individuals through history have centered the religious life. If we wish to attain even the barest semblance of sainthood, of purity, joy and ease we must center the religious life. Failing to do so, we perpetuate our suffering, stay trapped on the many rungs of pride and humility, walk in circles without ever piercing that cloud which obscures the divine. Worldly life and secular pleasures are ever attractive, if you’ve ever done drugs that much is true and likewise, the joys found therein run their course and we are left sitting in a parched riverbed The deepest well of peace cannot be found in this world and I beg you to consider deeply if you will walk around on that dry river bed, or drink deep from this well of peace.

62 Ibid., 89

63 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux Selected Work*, trans. G. R. Evans (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987)100

64 Teresa of Avila *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by herself*, trans J.M. Cohen (New York: The Penguin Group, 1957) 89

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The Bible, New International Version

The Bible, English Standard Version