

Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities

By Mary Keator

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Reviewed by Brian Welter



Readers of *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy* get a clear picture of the significant contrast between destructive and beneficial learning habits. Basing her observations on her years as a university educator, author Mary Keator argues that contemplative reading can undo much of the psychological and intellectual damage resulting from students' over-reliance on digital devices. She bases contemplative reading on the medieval monastic practice of *lectio divina*. *Lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* comprise the four stages of *lectio divina*, with the author devoting a chapter to each of these. She expands *lectio divina* beyond being simply monastic reading, though she does detail the method's ancient Greek and medieval Christian roots. The author takes up the Benedictine view that deeply engaging with a text leads to deeply engaging with one's inner spiritual terrain. The process of *lectio divina*, which the author argues requires patient, step-by-step training, therefore results in much more than merely understanding a given book.

The author outlines technology's negative spiritual influence on students. She takes a philosophical approach through Heidegger: "The problem with modern technology ... is that it relies on calculative thinking. It calculates, computes and plans. But human beings ... are meditative beings" (200-201). Digital devices disempower students by training them to rely on their smartphones and tablets to remember things, conduct research, and organize their lives. Such individuals lack freedom. Their smartphones invade every corner of their lives, including the classroom as uninvited guest when a text message beeps. In addition to technology, the author also critiques contemporary views of education, including portraying the learner as "a vessel to be filled or a person to be trained" (7). Religiously-serious individuals will come away not only feeling vindicated but also armed with key vocabulary to describe current inadequacies in education along with the *lectio divina* technique itself.

Keator argues for the ancient Greek idea of *paideia*, which "recognized the primary purpose of education as the transformation of the whole student ...; it was a way of life to search for the ultimate meaning and purpose of one's life" (13). This clearly opposes the contemporary assumption that an education serves as the foundation for career-building. *Paideia* supports the medieval notion that reading is "a moral act" (68). This includes the movement from the literal, which included understanding grammar and diction, to the allegorical and tropological. The tropological level gave the reader the sense of "a new way of living" (69). This comes from a world that prioritized religion and spiritual growth over career. Such a gap from today can be jarring for readers, making *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy* a memorable read.

The author defines relevant terms by referring to their ancient Greek beginnings and subsequent Christian adoption and practice. For the Benedictines, *lectio* begins by listening to a text read by a monk. This establishes a relationship between listener and text: "A text is not something to be strictly analyzed, it is a subject to be known, to be felt and experienced" (109). This implies re-reading and re-listening to the point where the text becomes an old friend, someone the individual can quote extensively. In the next step, *meditatio* includes rumination, memorization, and analysis. The author cites Hugh of St. Victor's vision of *meditatio* as "deliberate and sustained thought along planned lines"

(118). *Meditatio* slows the reading down and lets the text work on the reader rather than the inverse. Such a revolutionary attitude for today's world requires a letting go. The term "rumination" reflects the tendency of medievals to compare *meditatio* to getting nutrition: "As the monks ate the words, they tasted them, digested them and assimilated them" (120). Added to this, unlike today, medieval monks valued a trained memory, and therefore employed mnemonic devices. Thus, *meditatio* assumes discipline more than passivity.

Heart- rather than head-focused, *oratio* opens the individual to a more subjective experience. Unlike the first two steps, it lacks a method, requiring only "an openness to the spirit contained in the text" (157). The author warns of the difficulty in bringing this about in a classroom, further noting that "*Oratio* can only happen when the students' attention has shifted from searching the text for deeper truth to experiencing this deeper truth on a subjective level within their own minds and hearts" (167). These stages stimulate and build on the student's transformed inner world. The author connects *contemplatio* to *theoria*, the latter of which she defines as "looking with wonder" (176). The author emphasizes the need for leisure, because contemplation requires what German Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper called "a disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion—in the real" (177). The reference to Pieper, the famous Thomistic philosopher, demonstrates how much of *lectio divina* is imbued with a Catholic hue, even with the author's openness to other religions.

Though the author tries to broaden the scope beyond Christianity, she does spend considerable time discussing Origen's teaching method. This gives readers a sense of the underlying religious and philosophical attitudes to contemplative reading. A Church Father and student of another well-known pedagogue, Clement of Alexandria, Origen adopted a rather modern-sounding approach that valued the student's perspective and development instead of simply imparting information from master to disciple. He followed Plato in encouraging independent thinkers. The fact that these ancient methods seem so ultra-modern reflect their staying power. Origen's dialectical, student-centered method led "from the literal/historical sense to the spiritual/allegorical sense" (47). Throughout the book Keator accentuates creativity and individualism, which amounts to the valuing and development of personhood. Much

of her own teaching draws on this ancient method: "Origen recognized the act of reading as an inspired act that led students through steps to discover the hidden spiritual meaning of a text" (48), something she describes as doing in her own lessons.

Keator describes clearly the break that took place in medieval Western education when the Scholastics became more concerned with the active life and textual analysis. This lessened the contemplative approach throughout the West. The Scholastic-Cistercian quarrel personifies this: "Where the Scholastic teachers focused on the development of rational critical thinking the Cistercians monks' [sic] focused on the development of the imagination" (63). This accent on the imagination leads Keator to tie *lectio divina* to the study of the humanities. In fact, she sees contemplative reading as vital to the renewal of the humanities: "The experience of *contemplatio* is the whole purpose of education, since its goal is the growth and transformation of the students" (203). Readers will come away from this book with a much keener insight into how contemplative reading spurs deep psychological and spiritual regeneration, and why, therefore, it is so important at this time in our history.