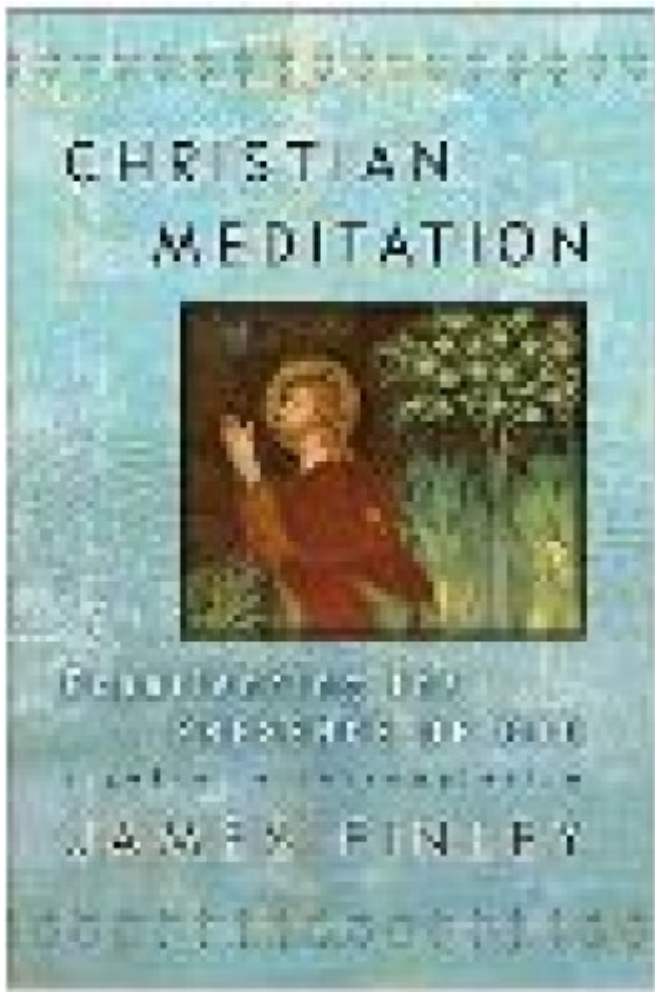


Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God

reviewed by [Edwin E. Beers](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God

James Finley

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In 1961, weeks after graduating from high school, James Finley rose one morning before dawn and left a note. In defiance of his father, who had refused to allow him to leave, he boarded a bus for the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. There he attended mass, fearful every moment that his father would burst in and thwart his plan.

Over the years Finley's mother and grandmother had guided him in traditional Catholic piety, and by ninth grade he had discovered the writings of Thomas Merton and had begun secretly forging a life plan. Providentially, Merton, who had been at the Kentucky monastery for 20 years and was director of novices, became Finley's spiritual guide. For two and a half years they met for biweekly conferences. Though Finley thrived on the contemplative tradition and eagerly absorbed readings that Merton recommended, the wordless voice within his heart evoked the uncomfortable awareness that his pious practice was also a defense against painful memories. So almost six years after entering Gethsemani, Finley returned home to Akron, Ohio; married; earned a degree in English; and began teaching religion and English in a Catholic high school.

The monastic milieu, the rhythm of liturgy and silence, and his relationship with Merton had so shaped Finley that he continued his practice of rising early, praying and writing. On weekends he offered contemplative retreats.

Then a second providential event nudged Finley in a new direction. Following publication of his first book, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God Through Awareness of the True Self* (1978), a generous advocate of his work provided the means for Finley to complete a doctorate in clinical psychology. His own therapy and his work with trauma survivors finally enabled him to accept the painful memories of his childhood and to rebuild his life around the insight that "grace uses faltering beginnings to achieve its own unforeseeable ends." That mantra is one to absorb while reading *Christian Meditation*.

Reading Finley's book is like entering a river and being carried by the current. It's also possible to dip in at any point and draw out illuminating treasures. Finley offers a definition of *meditation* that simplifies navigation of this literary river: "a transformative process of shifting from surface, matter-of-fact levels of consciousness to more interior, meditative levels of awareness of the spiritual dimensions of our lives." The day-to-day consciousness in which we go about our

daily affairs “isn’t generous enough or sufficiently expansive to fulfill our lives”—our hearts were created in such a way that only God can do that.

Finley offers no specific method for meditation, a fact that may be disconcerting for some—mystics, he reminds us, don’t try to explain or define their practices—but he does offer instruction for “contemplative sitting,” telling us how we might respond to wayward thoughts, feelings and desires that hinder openness to holy Presence, and he does suggest that readers use breathing and mantras to dissolve inevitable distractions.

Mystics speak of an “overflowing fullness of divine Presence” that is not realized by thinking, willing, feeling, remembering or any other aspect of our ego-consciousness. If we consent to the insatiable hunger of our hearts to awaken to divine Presence, we will notice the underlying thread that wends through this provocative book: “We sit in meditation so that the last traces of our tendency to identify with our ego consciousness might finally dissolve as our habitual base of operations.”

As Finley monitored his own self-transforming journey, he realized that his practice was a response to Paul’s invitation to enter the mind of Christ. To describe this experience he uses the phrase *non-dual consciousness*: our perceived otherness from God is lifted and we discover that we are nothing without God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

Though this concept is supported by the imagery of mutual abiding in John’s Gospel, Finley’s phrase may stir resistance in readers inclined to defend the wholly other nature of the divine Presence. Undaunted by this paradox, Finley contends that we remain finite creatures, infinitely less than God, “yet enter one enjoyment and one beatitude with God without difference.” Here a mysterious irony awaits us. Through contemplation we move beyond ego-based modes of social awareness to see human unity and perceive all that we hold in common with others and the entire creation. This practice also deepens awareness of our own sin, which negates the complete likeness between ourselves and Christ, who nevertheless is always “heading toward the most sinful and shame-based place in us . . . to break our hearts wide open by revealing to us the mystery of the cross.” This discovery deepens our inclination to disclaim any higher ground from which to judge others.

Finley reminds us that “our very being and the very being of everyone and every thing around us is the generosity of God,” who is loving us into being so that our

existence in the present moment is the manifested presence of God. We meditate that we might awaken to this unitive mystery, not just while we are meditating but in every moment of our lives.

Even if Finley's description of the fruits of meditation doesn't resonate fully with our own experience, his words can encourage us and reassure us that we are on the right path. His account of his own surprising immersion into God's fullness at a time when his experience of God had disappeared is worth the price of the book.