



PROJECT MUSE®

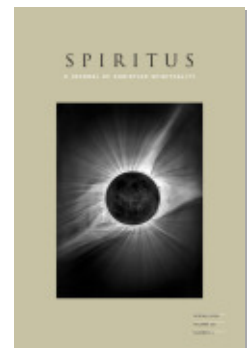
Introducing Contemplative Studies by Louis Komjathy, and:
*Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on
Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* ed. by Louis Komjathy
(review)

Margaret Benefiel, Jessie Smith

Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring
2018, pp. 120-123 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2018.0017>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/698259>

For the most part, Stewart-Sicking far surpasses his goals in *Spiritual Friendship After Religion*. He lucidly renders accessible recent scholarship on culture and spirituality in a way that will be exceptionally useful in the classroom. Seamlessly, he explains how the work of Albert Borgmann, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Bruno Latour, and Alexander Shaia (among others) might inform the neglected ministry of spiritual friendship. Provocatively, and courageously, he offers a manifesto on how Christians might relate to culture today. Will we be equally courageous and live up to this call to learn how to be good spiritual friends to one another in our world?

Given the title of the book, it is curious that Stewart-Sicking does not mention when and how religion died. Or whether it really is dead. Despite the latest PEW data, to which we should all have a more critical relationship, as Robert Wuthnow's *Inventing American Religion* asks of us, the fact remains that the majority of people in the world are religious now and are likely to remain so. The first chapter is tilted "Just as it Is." So, we should ask: for whom? Methodologically, this book soars too high above the trees. A deeper discussion of "culture," a term that is itself in disrepair among anthropologists, should take ethnographies that explore local and empirical questions about religion, spirituality, and friendship more seriously.

Stewart-Sicking aims to help us make room for the truly Other by promoting responsible interfaith dialogue. He cautions us against a superficial misappropriation of another spiritual tradition. This is very good. In the end, however, he fails to do so because he does not make room for the unapologetically *religious* Other. This is unfortunate. Lest we unintentionally bury the Other, we need to think more critically about whether we should continue shoveling dirt on an imagined grave marked "religion." Like the rest of our idols, change can become an idol unworthy of our faith too.

PAUL HOUSTON BLANKENSHIP
Graduate Theological Union

Introducing Contemplative Studies. By Louis Komjathy. Hoboken: Wiley, 2018. 410 pp. \$39.95

Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer. Edited by Louis Komjathy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. 831 pp. \$32.95

Both of Louis Komjathy's texts offer much to the field of Contemplative Studies in distinct and complementary ways. As Komjathy writes, the two texts are distinct in their scope and methodology. *Introducing Contemplative Studies* outlines the field of Contemplative Studies, carefully unpacking its basic tenets and offering challenges to the field. *Contemplative Literature* "utilizes a historical contextualist and textual methodology" (*Introducing*, 4) within religious studies, while *Introducing* reaches beyond the field of Religious Studies to consider the interdisciplinary

umbrella category of contemplative studies. Reading intertextually, the earlier published *Contemplative Literature* is a demonstration of what Komjathy envisions for the field in general: that is, as a field that includes critical inquiry of a variety of contemplative sources and traditions.

Introducing Contemplative Studies is broken into eight chapters, each with a particular focus. The introductory chapter is careful to situate Komjathy in his own pedigree, training, and social location. The first chapter lays out defining characteristics, a short history of the development of the field, and critical issues for the field. The second and third chapters focus on two fundamental aspects of Contemplative studies: contemplative practice and contemplative experience. The fourth and fifth chapters consider the relationship between contemplation and tradition and contemplative pedagogy, respectively. The sixth and seventh chapters consider methodological approaches for interpreting contemplative experiences as well as current trends in the field of contemplative studies, particularly the rise of contemplative science. Komjathy concludes with a more “visionary” chapter, proposing what he sees as new possibilities that might arise in the field.

Throughout the book, Komjathy challenges contemplative studies scholars to consider including a more diverse set of traditions and methodological approaches. Early in the book Komjathy names four biases in the field: “secularized Buddhism, hybrid spirituality, neuroscience, and clinical applications” (42). He argues that the rise and dominance of contemplative science has tended to privilege individual, largely secularized, and decontextualized techniques and technological mediation as its source of study while privileging medicalized approaches to the study. Taking up Harold Roth’s critiques, Komjathy is also concerned about “cognitive imperialism and spiritual colonialism,” along with the attending white privilege and middle-class escapism that at times, Komjathy observes, are present in more secularized forms of contemplative practice.

As an antidote to his critiques Komjathy proposes three defining characteristics of contemplative studies in chapter one: “practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development” (14–15). Valuing the study of practice over a long period of time, intentional self-critical examination of one’s own social location and experience, and a concern for the development of character through the study of contemplation itself are all proposed as vital and central principles of the field. If taken seriously, these characteristics can be a way of welcoming a wide variety of practices, traditions, and approaches to studying contemplation with the added benefit of guarding against the privileging of any one approach, such as a scientific technological investigation, or any one practice, such as therapeutic meditation. Komjathy, as he says, wants to put the contemplative back into contemplative studies itself, avoiding the narcissistic tendencies found in some forms of decontextualized meditative techniques, and the “samsaric” conditions that autodidacticism and decontextualized study can engender. He utilizes examples from his own teaching to propose a more embodied, intersubjective approach to contemplative studies.

For Christian practitioners and scholars, Komjathy—a Daoist practitioner-scholar and ordained Daoist priest—repeatedly names the anti-religion and even more pointedly anti-Christian bias of contemplative studies. Christianity—along with Sikh, Jain, Jewish, and Muslim traditions—is under-utilized as a critical site for inquiry in the field of contemplative studies. Komjathy is consistently concerned about the relative marginalization of religiously committed contemplatives and

contemplative communities as both subjects of study and as experts who might contribute to the field, particularly as it relates to acknowledging radical difference in theological and soteriological systems.

As the author suggests in *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, the *Contemplative Literature* book can function as a “companion” text to the former. In *Introducing*’s chapter discussing contemplative pedagogy, Komjathy notes that *Contemplative Literature* was born out of a course he developed entitled “Contemplative Traditions,” an upper level undergraduate course taught through the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. The sourcebook reflects Komjathy’s commitment to challenging the field of contemplative studies to expand its methodological approaches and sources. In addition to two introductory chapters on contemplative practice and contemplative traditions, the book includes source texts from Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Daoist, Jewish and Muslim traditions. They reflect diversity in both their soteriological and theological concerns. Diversity *within* Christian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions is also reflected in the selections. More secular contemplative traditions including therapeutic meditation are also included. An expert in each particular tradition contextualizes and introduces each selection.

BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS/SCHOLARS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Introducing Contemplative Studies is an excellent text for familiarizing students of Christian Spirituality with the new field of Contemplative Studies, delineating for them its aims and its scope. It also helps students see the lacunae in this new field, especially with regard to Christian sources and scholarship. Since Komjathy points to the need for Christian spirituality scholars’ contributions and to the importance of including Christian contemplative texts, the book sounds a cry for scholars of Christian Spirituality to enter the field. Furthermore, Komjathy’s highlighting the importance of including “critical first-person” perspectives in the field offers a breath of fresh air for Christian Spirituality scholars who have been articulating this need in the academy for nearly two decades. *Introducing* could be used on its own in a course on Christian spirituality. *Contemplative Literature* is an excellent companion text for further reading. It offers students of Christian Spirituality a closer look at three Christian contemplative texts and situates those texts in the wider field of Contemplative Studies, inviting students to compare Christian contemplation with the contemplative strand in other traditions. Komjathy takes seriously tradition-based contemplative practice and contemplative experience, thus deepening the field of contemplative studies. In so doing, he offers the Christian tradition a place in the conversation and helps students of Christian spirituality understand the place of Christian texts in the larger discussion.

CHALLENGES

These books challenge scholars of Christian Spirituality in at least three ways. First, in *Introducing*, when Komjathy proposes “practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development” as defining characteristics of Contemplative Studies, it is not clear to what degree these are defining characteristics he observes in the emerging field and to what degree they are his own. In either case, further

articulation is needed regarding why Komjathy considers these three as necessary defining characteristics. Defining characteristics are important in this formative stage as this new field articulates its foundation, and Komjathy would do scholars a great service by spelling out his argument here in more detail. Second, as the book *Contemplative Literature* grew out of Komjathy's USD course on comparative traditions, it would be helpful to know what it is that he seeks to compare. Is it practice? Is it theology? Is it the relationship between practice and theology? Is it something else? Third, as Komjathy himself admits, any source book of traditions faces the challenge of criteria of selection for the texts included. In order to compare apples to apples Komjathy chose texts similar in structure. All the texts are how-to guides for contemplative practice in their traditions. In addition, to the question of how many and which sources should be selected from the Christian tradition (why, for example, was a Carmelite source not chosen, since Carmelites have been foundational in articulating the Christian contemplative tradition?), the question of whether the genre of how-to guides best represents the Christian contemplative tradition arises. The inclusion of an autobiographical work, like Teresa of Avila's *Life*, for example, might help better represent the range of genres within the Christian contemplative tradition.

A WELCOME CONTRIBUTION

Overall, these two texts both define and challenge the field of contemplative studies. They map the field of contemplative studies through an impressive array of the dimensions of the field. They accurately trace a brief history of the emergence of contemplatives studies while also creating an impressive taxonomy for understanding the wide variety of practices and experiences that relate to this interdisciplinary field. Additionally, Komjathy's texts challenge the field of contemplative studies to take seriously a wide range of traditions and religiously committed experts as a way of more deeply engaging the phenomena of contemplation. For Christian contemplatives, as well as other tradition-based contemplative communities, Komjathy's leadership and contributions are a welcome addition and he is a great advocate for greater inclusion of more approaches and sources for the field of study.

MARGARET BENEFIEL

Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation

JESSIE SMITH,

Washington, D.C.

Meister Eckhart als Denker. Vol. 4, Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch Beihefte. Wolfgang Erb and Norbert Fischer, Editors. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 2017. xiii, 618 pp., \$63.00

Some books are monumental for their sheer size, and this is one of them. Among these, a few are devoted to single figures whose importance overshadows their age—and those that followed—and thus bears the rigorous demands of such an