Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Technical Aspects of Devotional Practices

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The meditative practices of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not primarily technical in focus, but rather thematic, scriptural and devotional. There are even voices in these traditions that see techniques as a threat to individual faith, personal devotion and divine grace. Still, Halvor Eifring argues that most of these practices make heavy use of technical elements. After making a rough classification into recitation, visualization and unmediated practices, he discusses the technical features involved in each. He also points out, however, that more purely technical practices, such as body and breath techniques, awareness practices and non-semantic or aniconic meditation objects are not part of Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions, possibly because they threaten each religion’s claim to exclusive possession of the truth.

In a modern, comparative context, meditation may be defined as a self-administered attention-based technique for inner transformation. The meditative focus of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, however, is not primarily technical, but rather thematic, scriptural and devotional. Within these traditions, there are even voices that have been explicitly critical of techniques, suggesting that they may lead the individual away from orthodox teachings, true devotion and divine grace.

In this chapter, I shall argue that most of these practices still have clear technical features. Their focus and religious justification may lie elsewhere – in their thematic content, scriptural foundation and devotional qualities – but they also make use of technical elements to achieve their goals. Often these elements are given symbolic and religious rather than technical interpretations, and they are always viewed from within doctrinal logic and cultural and religious fields of meaning. However, part of their impact on body and mind lies in general psychobiological working mechanisms that are not restricted to the meaning universe of each individual religion.

In this sense, therefore, I shall argue that many Judaic, Christian and Islamic practices fall within the definition of meditation cited above, in spite of their
thematic, scriptural and devotional focus. Our definition reflects the more technical orientation of modern popular notions of meditation, which are undoubtedly influenced both by the popularity of Asian meditative practices and by the growing body of scientific meditation research, both of which tend to have a technical focus. Still, this definition does not exclude content-oriented practices, whether under the name of meditation, prayer or contemplation, as long as they also involve technical features.

Technical controversies

The technical features of meditation have been, and sometimes still are, at the centre of controversy.

In 1989, for instance, the Vatican sent a letter to all Catholic bishops comparing ‘impersonal techniques’ like Zen, Transcendental Meditation and Yoga to the devotional and relational aspects of Christian prayer and meditation. The letter, which was signed by Cardinal and Prefect Joseph Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) and approved by Pope John Paul II, makes clear that ‘method[s] of getting closer to God’ cannot be ‘based on any “technique” in the strict sense of the word’, and that techniques ‘can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God’.

The letter also attacks the ‘experience’ orientation that comes with many technical practices, and makes clear that the fight against it is not something new. On the contrary, some ‘false fourth-century charismatics’ within the Church itself are said to have mistaken ‘the grace of the Holy Spirit with the psychological experience of his presence in the soul’, thus ‘bring[ing] down to the level of natural psychology what has been regarded as pure grace, considering it instead as . . . “experience”’.

The Vatican letter represents the culmination of reflections on an issue that had been around for some time. Many Catholic circles had embraced practices influenced by Japanese Zen and by Transcendental Meditation or other forms of Indian mantra meditation. Though popular, such practices were and still are deeply controversial and often attacked for their ‘technical’ approach to meditation, prayer and contemplation: ‘[God] is not one to be manipulated as one can manipulate a machine or appliance’. Protestant churches had also commented critically on new forms of meditation based on or inspired by ‘eastern’ techniques. In 1979 the bishops of the Norwegian State Church issued a statement called ‘Modern Meditation Movements and the Church’. The letter expressed fear that the new forms of meditation were not ‘neutral, purely technical methods to a renewal of one’s life’, but represented a ‘direct influence from foreign religions’. They attacked Transcendental Meditation for its initiation ritual, personality cult and Hindu-inspired rhetoric, and even the Norwegian organization Acem, which placed meditation in a secular psychological perspective, was, for unknown reasons, accused of eventually leading to ‘a pantheistic understanding of reality’.
In the Orthodox Church, the technical and experiential aspects of the Jesus Prayer had created controversies before the modern influx of Asian practices. The anonymous Russian author of The Way of a Pilgrim quotes a Polish steward who says:

They tell me . . . that [the Philokalia] contains odd sorts of schemes and tricks for prayer written down by the Greek monks. It's like those fanatics in India and Bokhara [Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan] who sit down and blow themselves out trying to get a sort of tickling in their hearts, and in their stupidity take this bodily feeling for prayer, and look upon it as the gift of God. All that is necessary to fulfil one's duty to God is to pray simply, to stand and say the Our Father as Christ taught us. That puts you right for the whole day; but not to go on over and over again to the same tune. That, if I may say so, is enough to drive you mad. Besides, it's bad for your heart.  

The 'schemes and tricks' (strannye fokusy) to which the Polish steward refers are in effect the technical aspects of this form of prayer, and the repetition of the words 'over and over again to the same tune' (besprestanno ladit' odno i to zhe) is one of the technical features that he sees as causing both mental and physical illness. The 'tickling in their hearts' (shchekotanie v serdtse) and the 'bodily [lit. natural] feeling' (natural'noe chuvstvo) is the experience produced by this prayer technique and, according to the Polish steward, misinterpreted by practitioners as God's grace.

Christian scepticism towards technical approaches is also discussed in several contributions to this volume, most notably the East Syrian emphasis on developing a meditative attitude rather than providing clear-cut technical methods and Meister Eckhart's 'pathless path' and his statement that '[w]hoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God.'

Like many aspects of Islamic and, in particular, Sufi practice, the recitation of dhikr has been surrounded by intense controversy. On the one hand, there have been fierce debates concerning the specific technical features of dhikr, including the use versus non-use of chanting, music, drums and dancing, the question of silent versus vocal and individual versus communal practice, the uses of body and breath and the relation to a master (shaykh).

On the other hand, some general problems of technical practices have also been pointed out. Techniques may stimulate a certain mechanistic lack of attention, a 'blind repetition . . . without understanding its true meaning,' which is the opposite of the 'remembrance' that is the professed purpose of dhikr. Technical practice has also been criticized for stimulating a self-serving attitude seeking 'worldly aims' rather than religious salvation. Finally, and perhaps most seriously, techniques may undermine the authority of Islamic scripture and law by providing alternative sources of religious knowledge, in particular ecstatic rapture, revelations and mystical visions, as when one dhikr-practising Sufi master is said to have had 'certainty of faith' though he 'rarely recited the Qur'an,' or when it was claimed that contravention of Islamic law is permissible for adepts who have reached higher stages of mystical development. One critic admits that dhikr brings the soul 'closer to the gnosis of God,' but finds it
problematic that similar techniques produce more or less the same effects in Christian, Hindu and other non-Muslim ascetics.\textsuperscript{13}

In sum, both within Christianity and Islam (and possibly Judaism), some critics have expressed fear that technical practices may lead the individual believer away from orthodox teachings, true devotion and divine grace. As we shall see, however, this does not mean that Judaic, Christian and Islamic practices have been devoid of technical elements.

Varieties of devotional practice

Apart from Davanger’s contribution on the secular meditative culture associated with modern scientific research, this volume explores selected practices from the three big monotheistic and scripture-based ‘Abrahamic’ religions originating in the Middle East, as outlined in Table 1.1.

The following discussion is largely based on the chapters referred to in Table 1.1. The practices discussed may be roughly divided into three types: recitation, visualization and unmediated practices.

Recitation dominates the Early Hebrew practices as well as those of the Desert Fathers, East Syrian and Orthodox Christianity and Sufism. Such recitation may be vocal or silent, and its content may span from the repetition of a single word or phrase to the recitation of an entire book, most commonly including a prayer or a passage from a religious or philosophical text (in particular sacred scripture).

Visualization is also widespread, in particular in the Judaic and Catholic traditions, but also in the practices of the Desert Fathers and East Syrian Christianity, as well as Sufi methods for creating a spiritual bond with a master or shaykh. The visualized object may be static (such as a cross) or dynamic (such as events of religious significance), concrete or abstract (the latter including the ten sefirot ‘emanations’ of Kabbalah), religious or more generally existential (as in some meditations on death). In many cases, methods of visualization involve a wider form of imagination, including but not restricted to the sense of vision.

Table 1.1 Meditative traditions covered in this volume

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Contributing author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>Early Hebrew (pre-Judaic)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Merkavah</td>
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<td>Kabbalah</td>
<td>Brill; Fine</td>
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<td>Hasidism</td>
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<td>Christianity</td>
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<td>East Syrian</td>
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<td>Orthodox</td>
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<td>Islam</td>
<td>Sufism</td>
<td>Elias; Bashir; Boivin</td>
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Unmediated practices include, in the present context, attempts to reach towards God without employing tools such as recitation or visualization. God is beyond language and images, which need to be left behind. This approach is found in many mystical traditions – in our volume most prominently in the discussions of East Syrian Christianity, Meister Eckhart and the higher forms of prayer of Teresa of Avila. In Orthodox Christianity and Sufism, the preference for recitative practices rather than visualization is also motivated by a wish to avoid tainting the Godhead with products of our own imagination, much like the unmediated practices.

This distinction into three main forms of meditative practice is, of course, a gross simplification. In some cases, it is difficult to know how to categorize a given practice, as in Merkavah mysticism, which may look like a form of visualization or imagination, but which may not have understood itself in those terms. In other cases, we have mixed types, as when recitation and visualization are combined in Kabbalistic practice, or when recitation is conceived as leading to unmediated contact with God in Orthodox Christianity and Sufism. It may also be possible to single out a fourth type of affective practice. This category might include the contemplative focus on spiritual friendship in Kabbalah and Hasidism, the affective prayer of Teresa of Avila, in which she focuses on the feelings evoked by the presence of Christ or God, and (in a move away from the personal emotions of the practitioner) the mystical orientation towards God’s love in several traditions.

Worth noting are the types of practice that are not represented in this volume, or perhaps in these traditions at all. Most obviously, although both body and breath are highly present in many of the practices discussed, they are not the main focus of attention. In several recitative practices, such as Sufi dhikr and the Jesus Prayer of the Desert Fathers and Orthodox Christianity, the breath is often used as a vehicle through which the words are enunciated, but the focus is on the words, not on the breath. Likewise, in Sufi dhikr both the physical body and the ‘subtle’ or ‘mystical’ body provide a space within which recitation takes place, by directing different syllables to specific body parts, but again the words and not the body are the main focus. The same applies to the guiding of the Jesus Prayer into the ‘heart’ (which is both a physical body part and a spiritual space) and the use of bodily movements (stretched hands, beating of breast, raised eyes, deep sighs, repeated prostrations, crossed arms above the head, moving of head back and forth, etc.) as aids for prayer. To my knowledge, Judaic, Christian and Islamic practices do not include body and breath practices similar to the ones found in Indian hatha yoga and prāṇāyāma and in Chinese tài jí and qi gōng.

Less surprisingly, perhaps, there are also no awareness practices of the type often associated with Buddhist meditation (but also found in other Indian traditions), such as the directing of the attention towards spontaneous thoughts or sensations, or towards the whole field of perception. In Jesuit visualization practices, there is a strong focus on developing a ‘gazing’ awareness towards inner images, but eventually the focus lies on the meaning and message of the images rather than on the awareness as such.

Even within the fields of recitation and visualization, there are no practices in which the focus of attention does not dwell on semantic, thematic or symbolic meaning. While Indian mantras are often seen as influencing body and mind by virtue of their form rather than content, this is not the case with the formulas repeated in the recitative
practices of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And while the geometrical figures known in Indian traditions as yantras are usually rich in symbolic meaning, more advanced stages of meditation are often seen as relating directly to their aniconic form rather than their metaphorical content, in contrast to the mostly concrete objects of visualization in Judaic and Christian practices. Even the highly abstract visual representation of the ten sefirot within Kabbalah depends on a symbolic (and thus meaning-based) interpretation for its effect.

The thematic, scriptural and devotional focus of most meditative practices in Judaism, Christianity and Islam has made methods that work purely by virtue of technical form rather than semantic or symbolic content seem less relevant. Within these traditions, body and breath techniques, awareness practices and non-semantic objects of recitation or visualization would make little religious sense, in contrast to meaning-based recitation and visualization, as well as unmediated practices.

Technical aspects of devotional practices

In spite of their thematic, scriptural and devotional focus, I shall argue in the following sections that even Judaic, Christian and Islamic meditative traditions employ a variety of technical elements to support and accentuate the devotional content of their practices.

Technical features

In the terminology used here, the following elements typically characterize a technique:

1. It is a deliberately undertaken practice aiming to produce certain effects.
2. Its procedures are specified with some degree of clarity.
3. It is clearly set aside from other activities in time.
4. It is continuous – repetitive or durative – rather than sequential.
5. Some or all of its effects are based on general psychobiological working mechanisms.

The first point is unproblematic. All the practices discussed in this volume are deliberately undertaken, unlike many of the everyday social practices typically studied by sociologists or anthropologists. Furthermore, they all aim at producing some kind of immediate, short-term or long-term effect. The effects most frequently described are immediate or short-term, but long-term effects are also mostly understood to follow, as presupposed by the term ‘inner transformation’ in the definition of meditation cited at the beginning of this chapter. This definition also requires the practice to be self-administered, the practitioner him- or herself being the one who feels its effects. In this volume, the only exceptions are the Sufi music and dance performances known as samā‘ and dhama‘, where the performers aim to draw the audience towards contemplation of God.
The second point applies in varying degrees to the practices discussed in this volume. This is not only because our written sources are often less than clear about the procedures for meditative practice. Traditions also vary in the degree to which they find clearly specified procedures helpful, as reflected in Meister Eckhart's statement that '[w]hoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God' and in the East Syrian mystic Isaac of Nineveh's criticism of an attentiveness to details that leaves no room for divine activity. In most cases, however, the basic outlines of the meditation methods described are reasonably clear, even if they allow for spontaneous and creative elements.

The third point also applies in varying degrees. In early Christianity and Islam, recitative practices sometimes aim at 'unceasing prayer' in a literal sense, in which case they may accompany daily activities, often though not always as a silent, mental practice. Thus, one of the Desert Fathers recites aloud a biblical verse and meditates on it while weaving ropes; another does so silently while walking to church. More often, however, both recitative and other meditative activities take place in time slots specifically set aside for meditation or prayer.

The fourth point applies to most of the practices described in this volume, but not all. In this context, the term 'continuous' refers to the same activity being performed over a certain time-span, as opposed to sequential practices, where different activities follow each other in a given sequence, as in many rituals and prayers. Continuous practices also allow for change, as when a phrase recited or an image visualized becomes more blurred and/or more intense as the practice proceeds, or when the practice is interrupted by spontaneous thoughts. The basic volitional activity, however, remains the same.

When recitative practices are continuous, they are repetitive, the words or phrases being repeated, vocally or mentally, again and again, as in the Jesus Prayer and in dhikr. For this to work, the text recited cannot be too long, and East Syrian cases in which the entire Book of Psalms is recited in a single session can hardly be considered continuous in this sense. The same may be true of some Early Hebrew practices, though there we have less information to go by.

When visualization practices are continuous, they are durative, the image produced being held continually in mind, as when a Sufi focuses on the image of his master or shaykh, or when an East Syrian mystic keeps his mind on the image of the cross. This is most obvious in cases where the object of visualization is static; dynamic images of, say, events from religious narratives may be less obviously durative. There are also in-between cases, particularly when the image as such is stable, but the attention of the practitioner moves from one part of the image to another, or from one perspective to another, as in the ekphrastic exercises practised by Jesuits. The visualization of the ten sefirot in Kabbalah is even more complex, not only implying the movement of attention from one sefirah to another but also involving the manipulation of the image itself, raising one of the sefirot up to the position of another and making the entire system fall in on itself like the folding of a telescope.

Unmediated practices are also durative by nature, since they consist in continually directing one's attention towards God.
The fifth point is most complex, and brings us partly beyond the limits of cultural history in a narrow sense. We can envisage at least three types of explanations for the effects of meditative practice:

1. General psychobiological working mechanisms.
2. Suggestive impact of meaning elements in or surrounding the practice.
3. Supernatural factors, such as divine intervention or magic transformation.

An example of the first type is Herbert Benson’s relaxation response, which he claims is automatically triggered by the gentle repetition of a word or a non-semantic mantra. An example of the second type is Livia Kohn’s explanation of visions of specific deities as resulting from the suggestive impact of visualization techniques, in a kind of autohypnosis. Many meditative cultures are more likely to use the third type of explanation, referring to supernatural factors such as God’s grace or, in some cases, magic. Even within the traditions, however, the effects of meditative practice are sometimes discussed in more naturalistic terms, either referring to general mechanisms or to the impact of semantic meaning. In the following, we shall look away from supernatural factors and consider the first two points above.

**Technique versus meaning**

The main difference between the two types of working mechanism lies in the role of semantic meaning. Suggestive aspects of meditation use semantic elements to direct body and mind towards given goals, while aspects of meditation that build on general psychobiological working mechanisms do not depend on semantic meaning for their effects. The borderline is not absolute, since the two are often combined, and since even suggestion presupposes certain psychobiological mechanisms for its effect, but the main outline of the distinction is clear.

While most meditative practices in Judaism, Christianity and Islam are suggestive in the sense that they focus on semantic, symbolic, thematic or affective content, they also usually involve technical features that build on general psychobiological working mechanisms.

Consider the use of repetition in recitative practices. Although the words or phrases recited almost always have semantic content, the act of repeating does not, or at least not always. It is a technical element, which has an influence on body and mind beyond the meaning of the words or phrases recited. To the extent that the effect of repetition is a topic at all, various meditative cultures may focus on different aspects of it, such as its positive impact on quietude and concentration and its ability to bring recitation from an act of will to an almost internalized and near-spontaneous, ever-present impulse. At times, it may also be given near-semantic interpretations, as an expression of the urgency, persistence and determination of prayer, or as a help to ‘ruminate’ on its content. Repetition may involve a mixture of technical and non-technical elements.

Next, consider the effect of sound in recitative practices. While this volume contains no clear examples of non-semantic recitation, several traditions emphasize the effect
of hearing the words recited, not just seeing them written or thinking about their meaning. The fixedness of a given phrase is also a technical feature, which in the case of the Jesus Prayer emerges gradually over the centuries. Sufi dhikr goes one step further in fixedness, not allowing translation of the phrases recited (as in the case of Sanskrit mantras). In some cases, the understanding of the meaning is not even seen as necessary, as when a Desert brother complains that he does not understand the words of the prayer he is reciting, but is told to keep on, since ‘the demons listen in fear and flee’ (they presumably understand). In Sufi dhikr, semantic speech is sometimes reduced to what sounds like meaningless sounds or syllables, such as an exhaled ‘grunt’ standing for Hu, meaning ‘He’ (referring to God). Even strongly meaning-based recitative practices, therefore, sometimes come close to ribbing their words of semantic (and at times even phonetic) content.

Now consider the contrast between vocal/audible and mental/silent recitation. Both often co-occur in the same traditions. Mental recitation is seen as more advanced than vocal recitation both in the melētē of the Desert Fathers and the dhikr of the Sufis, and such mentalization may be seen as another technical feature. Some Sufi masters see silent dhikr as helping the practitioner to reach the inner heart, to develop the inner senses, to obtain inner light and to open the door to the unseen, eventually reaching God, whereas vocal and audible dhikr comes in the way of these effects. In other cases, however, silent recitation is preferred for moral rather than technical reasons, since vocal recitation may stimulate ostentation, showmanship and vainglory and is therefore seen as unlawful by some Sufi schools.

Finally, consider the length of the text recited. The idea of monologistos (one-phrased) prayer lies behind the development of the Jesus Prayer. Brevity facilitates repetition, which again helps to keep the mind focused. The fourteenth-century English work The Cloud of Unknowing goes one step further and suggests that prayer should consist of ‘a short word, preferably of one syllable’, ‘a word like “god” or “love” (or, on the negative side, “sin”). This is partly to express, in a near-semantic way, the urgency of the prayer, like a person threatened by fire calling out ‘Fire!’ or ‘Help!’ But it is also in order to internalize the prayer and make it ever-present: ‘... fix this word fast to your heart, so that it is always there come what may.’ And again, the brevity of the prayer will make it suitable to counter distraction and keep the mind focused: ‘[w]ith this word you will suppress all thought under the cloud of forgetting,’ and ‘it is prayed with a full heart, in the height and depth and length and breadth of the spirit of him that prays it.’ Such a prayer ‘pierces the ears of Almighty God more quickly than any long psalm churned out unthinkingly’.

Similar considerations apply to visualization. In Jesuit ekphrasis, for instance, visualization is used suggestively to increase the sense of identification with scenes from Christian scripture or history. However, there is also a specific interest in the technique of mental ‘gazing’ and the instrumentalization of mental processes. Similarly, the Sufi visualization of a master or shaykh is used suggestively to create a spiritual bond to him, but would hardly have had this power if it were not for a more general impact such visualization has in leaving behind mental traces in the mind. This mechanism is at work even in practices focusing on non-semantic visual impressions, such as certain forms of Indian trāṭaka.
I have mentioned the supportive role of breath and body above, and these may have both technical and symbolic (and hence semantic) functions. In early Christianity, as in Late Antique medicine, the breath is seen as a technical element providing a link to the physical (and thereby presumably also the spiritual) heart. At the same time, the breath is also used metaphorically to denote anything that we cannot live without. Most of the body movements accompanying meditative prayer in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, including stretched hands (sometimes crossed above the head), beating of breast, raised eyes, repeated prostrations, swaying back and forth, stamping of feet, dancing and whirling, etc., have symbolic meaning. But when a *dhikr* practitioner is said to move his head back and forth only because his master has told him to, without understanding why, we are closer to a technical element. And when the phrase recited in *dhikr* is moved from above the navel to the right side of the breast and then over to the left side and to the physical heart, this is understood as a technique for directing the energy of the word *Allāh* to the physical heart in order to burn all its desires and enter the spiritual heart and its light of faith. Though couched in culture-specific terms, this may also be seen as a technical effect resulting from the movement of the meditation object between different body parts. The pressing of the tongue up against the palate is also primarily a technical element.

Unmediated practices may be understood either as suggestive ways of entering into the very core of the meaning universe of each individual religion, or as non-suggestive ways of reaching beyond all linguistic and symbolic meaning, towards an ineffable divine reality that happens to be referred to as ‘God’ (with all the cultural implications of that term) in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but which may have different designations (with different implications) in other contexts. In the latter case, we possibly have to do with techniques, though unmediated practices are often surrounded by a strong scepticism towards techniques, as in the case of Meister Eckhart.

In addition to recitative, visual and ‘unmediated’ meditation objects, technical elements also include mental attitudes and concentrative versus more free-floating uses of attention. Some traditions, like East Syrian Christianity, emphasize this aspect of meditative practice more strongly than other details of technique.

The transition from early Greco-Roman practices to the prayers and meditations of the Desert Fathers may illustrate the contrast between the technical form and devotional content of meditative practices. To a large extent, the Desert Fathers inherited the form of the Greco-Roman practices, but filled it with the content of their Christian religion.

**Conclusion**

In sum, most Judaic, Christian and Islamic forms of meditation have a thematic, scriptural or devotional focus, but still make use of technical elements. It might be tempting to link this fact to some of the features shared by the so-called Abrahamic religions. Thematic and scriptural meditation might be linked to the
revelatory status of sacred scripture, while devotional meditation might be linked to a strict and exclusive monotheism.

However, a comparison with the two other main areas that have given birth to large meditative traditions, South and East Asia, shows that thematic and scriptural practices are not restricted to religions with revelatory sacred scripture, and that devotional practices are also common in non-theistic and polytheistic contexts. For instance, Buddhism (which is largely non-theistic) has its thematic contemplation of dead bodies, scriptural recitation of sūtras and devotional invocation of Amitābha Buddha; Hinduism (which has non-theistic, monotheistic and polytheistic variants) has an equally broad range of practices; and Sikhism (which is monotheistic) shows a strong devotional and recitative focus in its remembrance of the divine name (nām simran).

The most striking fact about meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam may not be the strong presence of thematic, scriptural and devotional practices, but the virtual absence of more purely technical practices. In contrast, South and East Asian religions include a number of practices that are more clearly technical in orientation, such as body and breath techniques, awareness exercises, as well as non-semantic mantras and aniconic yantras. As we have seen, so-called impersonal technical practices have been met with scepticism within Christianity and Islam, possibly also Judaism. As alternative sources of insight and knowledge they may be perceived as threats to doctrinal orthodoxy; by building on technical and impersonal working mechanisms they may be seen as coming in the way of personal devotion; and their focus on self-effort is sometimes conceived as coming in conflict with the concern with divine grace. In the end, meditation techniques that are not unequivocally framed within the meaning universe of Judaism, Christianity or Islam may be experienced as threatening its claim to exclusive possession of ultimate truth, a claim less often encountered in the religions of South and East Asia.
Notes

Chapter 1

1 See Eifring, MS a. Thanks are due to Shahzad Bashir, Augustine Casiday and Ole Gjems-Onstad for comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.
4 The Benedictine monk John Main (1926–82) advocated meditation on the Aramaic prayer maranatha (which he called a mantra), and the Trappist monks William Meninger, Basil Pennington (1931–2005) and Thomas Keating (1923–) developed Centering Prayer, partly inspired by Transcendental Meditation.
6 Bispemøtet, 1979.
7 Acem protested that the Church had lost out on modern psychology, and devoted a whole issue of its periodical Dyade to a discussion of the relation between religion and psychology, see Grøndahl, 1980.
8 French, 1965, p. 60.
9 de Jong, 1999, p. 313.
10 Bowen, 1993, p. 42.
11 Madelung, 1999, p. 133.
12 Homerin, 1999, p. 236.
13 See Khanna, MS.
14 Ambiguous attitudes towards techniques are also widespread in Asian meditative traditions, as in Tibetan Rdzogs chen and Chinese Zen.
15 Similar ideals are found in Zen meditation, see Schlütter, MS.
17 Kohn, 2008.
18 See Eifring, MS b.
20 In Asian traditions, the breath is understood as an expression of the transience of existence in certain Buddhist contexts, or as a link to cosmic energy in Daoist and Yogic contexts.

Chapter 2

1 Assuming that most readers of this volume would not be specializing in Hebrew studies, it was decided to use simple, non-technical transliteration of Hebrew terms.
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