



Vision and Viewpoint

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Converted to what?

Metanoia, conversion, is an ancient concept that is deeply embedded in the monastic worldview. Early seekers went to the desert to escape the spiritual aridity of the cities, to concentrate on things of God. “Flight from the world”—separation from the systems and vitiated values that drove the world around them—became the mark of the true contemplative. To be a contemplative in a world bent on materialism and suffocated with itself, conversion was fundamental. But conversion to what?

The answer never changes. In every great religious tradition the concept is clear: To be a contemplative we must be converted to the consciousness that makes us one with the universe, in tune with the cosmic voice of God. We must become aware of the sacred in every single element of life. We must bring beauty to birth in a poor and plastic world. We must restore the human community. We must grow in concert with the God who is within. We must be healers in a harsh society. We must become all those things that are the ground of contemplation, the fruits of contemplation, the end of contemplation.

The contemplative life is about being in the world differently. What needs to be changed in us? Anything that makes us the sole center of ourselves. Anything that deludes us into thinking that we are not simply a work in progress, all of whose degrees, status, achievements, and power are no substitute for the wisdom that a world full of God everywhere, in everyone has to teach us. Anything that drowns out the voice of the Ultimate within must be damped.

To become a contemplative, a daily schedule of religious events and practices is not enough. We must begin to do life, to be with people, to accept circumstances, to bring good to evil in ways that speak of the presence of God in every moment.

—from [*Illuminated Life*](#) by Joan Chittister (Orbis)