“The Watchful Mind” is the phrase used to translate the title of a nineteenth-century text by an anonymous monk of Mount Athos who gave early witness through his practice and writing to the importance of the Philokalia of the Sacred Watchful Fathers, published in 1782, sixty-nine years prior to the composition of his text.¹ The Greek title, Νεπτικὴ Θεορία, points to the practice of sobriety and wakefulness of the speculative or spectating capacity of the soul, that is, of the mind’s eye. To live a life of ceaseless prayer cultivates the visual and visionary receptivity of the eye of the mind. While the monastic practices and ways of life advocated by the book will be out of reach for most of us today at least as a directly imitable model (for instance, the emphasis on the extraordinary copiousness of tears of contrition is a spiritual extreme), there are, strikingly and tellingly, indications of a contemporary resonance to the concept of the watchful mind.

Although not developed through the direct influence of the Orthodox tradition, “Mindfulness” is one contemporary term and movement that gives evidence of such resonance. Jon Kabat-Zinn, as the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, has been an important advocate of bringing the practice of meditation into

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broader cultural acceptance, with important demonstrations of the effectiveness of the practice especially as a contribution to healing and as a means of reducing stress in the midst of business pursuits. Perhaps it is not as surprising as it might at first appear to be that meditative practice is finding a useful place in lives devoted to worldly activity. If the monastic life and the common contemporary life dominated by economic pressures and concerns stand as polarized opposites, it now becomes possible to provoke some awareness of the starvation of the watchful mind as a familiar though unnamed phenomenon, and through cultural complementarity we find our way toward what we most lack.

By beginning this reflection with a nod toward the tradition of the Orthodox Catholic Church I do not intend to claim that this tradition has been the most prominent source for the trickle of the spirituality of contemplation that continues to find a place in contemporary Western culture. Although Christian and Eastern forms of meditation differ significantly in a theological context, they do share a fundamental contemplative attitude toward the world. Hinduism through the widespread practice of yoga in the West provides many people with some contact with the spirit of meditative practice. Buddhism through its many ongoing encounters with the West, especially as mediated by the tireless efforts of the Dalai Lama, has brought the fruit of Buddhist practices and teachings to many people who might have been otherwise unprepared to receive spiritual instruction. I am thinking, for instance, of the testimony and development of knowledge exemplified by psychologist Paul Ekman in a book he coauthored with the Dalai Lama after extensive collaboration, Emotional Awareness: Overcoming the Obstacles to Psychological Balance and Compassion. Ekman makes it evident how the meditative practices of Buddhism empowered him both personally and professionally to achieve new insights into the emotional life and to enrich his repertoire of psychological knowledge. There is no doubt that most people who practice yoga or who practice mindfulness in the approach taught by Kabat-Zinn assimilate the practice without
disrupting the dominant economic values that shape so much of contemporary life. But the evidence of hunger for contemplative practices in contemporary culture bears significance, even though such hunger does not necessarily portend a readiness to explore and accept more broadly the teachings of Hindu and Buddhist traditions or the Christian revelation expressed in the theological teachings of the Christian tradition in its Eastern and Western forms.

The most penetrating analysis I know of the contemporary cultural condition likely to produce a kind of starvation for contemplative experience is Josef Pieper’s *Leisure: The Basis of Culture.* Pieper in the years immediately following the Second World War saw a parallel emphasis on different versions of the totalitarianism of the world of work in both Marxist and Capitalist cultures, and he saw that this emerging world view would lead to a kind of sclerosis of the capacity of the human person for contemplation and worship—the very heart of leisure, in Pieper’s understanding of the concept as rooted in both Greek philosophical and Judeo-Christian traditions. The 1952 English translation of *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* includes a second essay by Pieper, “The Philosophical Act,” which enables us to see all the more fully the relationship between leisure as the opportunity for the human person to develop faculties beyond those needed for work and leisure as the contemplative capacity to achieve a perspective that transcends the world formed and dominated by work. By pointing to the hostility of contemporary culture to the dimension of life brought to fulfillment in leisure, Pieper makes evident the deformation of the human person that will result from such hostility. That we have the ability to sense the deforming restrictions that tighten their hold upon us in a world that is hostile to the contemplative dimension of the human spirit provides, at least, a testimony to the innate desire to restore wholeness to our spiritual development.

We continue to find helpful explorations of the cultural problem caused by hostility toward leisure and ignorance of the true nature and purpose of leisure. Catholic philosopher Hayden Ramsay, currently senior deputy vice chancellor of the University of Notre
Dame, Australia, has explored the broader cultural conditions in which we face the need to restore opportunities for spiritual development in his 2005 book titled *Reclaiming Leisure: Art, Sport, and Philosophy.* Following the lead of Pieper’s insights, Ramsay speaks of “contemplative leisure” (43), understood as activities that provide opportunities for play and reflection. More recently Paul Heintzman calls our attention to the area of reflection called “Christian leisure theory” in *Leisure and Spirituality: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives.* Heintzman ends his book with an epilogue titled “A Concise and Illustrated Theology of Leisure,” in which he recognizes that leisure enables us to rejoice in the wholeness of God’s creation and to recognize creation as a gift, the beauty and goodness of which comes to blossom for us in the spiritual awareness and activity of contemplative leisure.

It seems evident that the leading cultural bodies that support the cultivation of the contemplative dimension of leisure would be religious, academic, and artistic institutions. But the same widespread cultural difficulty that obstructs the recognition of the contemplative dimension of human life also causes confusion concerning the primary cultural importance of these institutions. Some classical music is promoted as “relaxing,” a concept that no doubt carries the thread of meaning that if properly developed would lead us back to the contemplative dimension of the arts, but the marketing force of the term exhausts itself in the deficient concept of promoting readiness for a return to the world of work. Religious institutions offer community, solace, and moral guidance, but only those who devote themselves to religious practice begin to discover that here, too, remnants of the concepts of leisure and contemplation are to be found. Academic institutions promote themselves through an emphasis on their contributions to readiness for work and for innovation in work, but those academics who continue to cultivate the contemplative dimension inherent in all knowledge must contend with the frustration of being imperfectly and incorrectly understood by the broader culture.
This problem with respect to the universities has been acutely observed recently by Andew Louth in a short essay titled “Theology, Contemplation and the University.” This inaugural lecture as professor of Patristic and Byzantine Theology at the University of Durham argues that we will better understand the nature of our universities by recognizing the contribution to the development of the medieval university made by the Greek East and the Greek Fathers. As cathedral schools and eventually the medieval university emerged from the context of the monastery, an understanding of the distinction between the active life and the contemplative life formed a keystone of the university, and the fundamental importance of contemplation manifested itself in the life of the university: “The book of nature and the book of creation were understood to be complementary, both capable of being understood in the light of the Incarnation of the Word of God through whom creation came to be, a light of which human beings began to be aware as they sought through loving detachment in the following of the Crucified and Risen Christ” (68). Louth provides a powerful concluding reflection through his observation that the line of Psalm 46 (in the Hebrew numbering) usually translated as “Be still and know that I am God” uses the Greek word “scholasate,” “be at leisure” in the Greek translation of the original Hebrew. This Greek word for leisure is of course the root of our word for school. Being at leisure, living in the spirit of contemplation, is how we turn back to God and know ourselves in relation to God. The watchful mind is our receptivity and responsiveness to God as the creator in whose image we are made.

“Contemplation,” as it happens, appears in the title of three of the eight articles in this issue of Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture, and the concept no doubt plays a role in the other articles as well. Bennett Zon in “Anthropology, Theology, and the Simplicity of Benedict XVI’s Chant” disentangles the various meanings of the term “simplicity” as applied to chant in an effort to reestablish an understanding of the sacred character of Gregorian chant with its simplicity understood as a kind of “divine simplicity.” Zon argues
that when an anthropological understanding of simplicity is used to characterize chant, it is reduced to being merely an early stage of development in music without the rich complexity that eventually evolved: “Gregorian chant—arguably the most historically artful of all sacred music—began its descent down the slow, slippery slope of ideological disrepair.” The article establishes a comprehensive context for understanding Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s 1974 essay, “The Theological Basis for Church Music,” with an account of the ways in which chant was conceptualized prior to and after the Second Vatican Council and then takes up the challenges posed by changes in the understanding of simplicity as applied to chant. “For Benedict . . . in its theological incarnation chant represents the epitome of divine simplicity—the perfect hypostatic union of words and music, music and man, man and God.”

In “Criticism and Contemplation: Steps toward an Agapeic Criticism,” Michael Martin turns to poetry as the literary form in which to pursue an understanding of criticism grounded in contemplation. Speaking as both a literary scholar and a poet, Martin seeks to foster a loving receptivity and responsiveness to poetry in which we allow it to unfold itself: “The dwelling with the artifact; our presence to it; our acceptance of it, as it is, in itself: this is contemplation.” From this perspective, Martin considers the especial importance of several phenomenological approaches to literature and art, and by that route arrives, as he says, at “the question of God.” Martin’s rich and insightful article provides a fresh understanding of what it means to read literature as a kind of spiritual exercise.

It is highly plausible that a culture that places great importance on its impressive technological achievements would be at risk for forgetting the contemplative dimension of human life, and Aaron K. Kerr in Borgmann on Merton: Exploring the Possibility of Contemplation in a Technological Age explores this predicament. The article turns to the thought of social thinker Albert Borgmann and his deep understanding of the ways in which technological paradigms
have framed much of modern experience and to Thomas Merton as an exemplar of the practice of contemplation in the modern world. Kerr develops an understanding of Borgmann as a philosopher with an “intrepid openness to truth” and of Merton as a prophet who calls upon us to live with spiritual openness. In the conjunction of these two figures Kerr provides a demonstration of the compatibility and complementarity of “the way of faith and reason.”

Andrei Gotia in “Blessed Vladimir Ghika: Prince, Priest, and Martyr,” introduces us to the remarkable figure of Vladimir Ghika, a Romanian who was born in Constantinople in 1873 and who converted to the Catholic Church in 1902. Gotia shares with us the spiritual journey of Fr. Ghika and his importance as a spiritual exemplar in Romania and a missionary of the Church in many parts of the world. The article includes illuminating observations on Vladimir Ghika and St. Thérèse, each born in 1873, and concludes with an account of the martyrdom of Bl. Ghika after his arrest by the Communist regime and eventual imprisonment, where he died in 1954.

Ken Colston in “Sacramental Usury in the Merchant of Venice,” provides a powerful reading of Shakespeare’s play that is informed by an awareness of the Catholic vision at work in much of Shakespeare and in this play especially in Shakespeare’s “traditional Catholic understanding of economic order in Merchant of Venice, proceeding from sacramental union rather than from capitalistic contract.” Moreover, while showing that Shakespeare in this play is responding to the emerging Protestant understanding of the economic order, Colston also suggests that these insights turn out to be relevant in a contemporary setting in which we find ourselves in various ways sometimes troubled by the excesses of capitalism. Colston delineates a precise critique of economic practices clearly implied by the play, in contrast to which “Shakespeare follows more traditional Catholic thinking that commerce must be oriented toward the public good and that the state or Crown must intervene in the economy to maintain order and render justice.”

In “Eros and Contemplation: The Catholic Vision of Terrence
Malick’s *To the Wonder,*” Kathleen E. Urda considers the challenges that have impeded the popular reception of many of Malick’s films and of his 2010 film, *To the Wonder,* but argues that in this film “Malick uses his form to create a deeply Catholic vision of marriage and vocation that at its best becomes and inspires an act of contemplation amidst our contemporary crisis.” Urda considers the film in the context of Malick’s previous works and offers an especially intriguing account of the thematic resonance she finds between this film and Karol Wojtyła’s *The Jeweler’s Shop.* The article demonstrates that love in the film is shown as being oriented toward and leading toward ultimate love, and the film achieves its contemplative dimension by providing a glimpse of the ultimate.

František Burda, in “The Fundamental Starting Point of Transcultural Communication,” examines the contemporary phenomenon of globalization, a condition in which we see the widespread dispersion of cultural elements throughout the world and that poses with special urgency the need to understand how cultures that increasingly engage one another can achieve understanding across cultural lines. Burda examines the opportunities for exploring the nature of the human person in this light and demonstrates that globalization presses upon us with new urgency the philosophical question of the human person. This examination provides a basis for considering in a fresh perspective the concept of the dignity of the human person and the nature of the person as a foundation for transcultural communication. This leads to the importance of a trinitarian understanding of the human person.

In “The Formal and Moral Challenges of T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral,*” James Matthew Wilson provides a comprehensive account of the play in the context of its creation and first performances to develop “the stark moral, or religious, gauntlets Eliot throws down in each of its two parts.” The first part of the play, in Wilson’s account, “considers the ethical dimensions of man’s nature as a ‘religious animal,’ as a human being who acts and makes decisions in a moral condition that is not of his own making but
God’s, and whose persistent temptation is to convince himself otherwise,” and the second part considers the implications of human nature so understood for the political realm. In Wilson’s account, “Murder in the Cathedral leads us through [our shared] culture back to the roots of drama in socio-religious rite. Religion recalls us to the first principles of our being, to the permanent truths that govern our existence, the providential order that gives all things their place and meaning, and it commands us to order our morality, our conception of what is good, accordingly.” Wilson shows that Eliot recognized how the play conflicts with dominant modern cultural assumptions but understood the importance of highlighting such conflicts even if doing so would limit the popularity of the play.

Notes

7. Andrew Louth, “Theology, Contemplation and the University,” Studia theological 1, 2/2003, 64–73.