

Blind beholding

Schemas, metaphor, and blending in descriptions of seemingly opposing religious experiences

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This paper examines how contemporary Christian contemplative discourse integrates two apparently opposed construals of religious experience: relational intimacy with a divine entity and non-conceptual states of pure awareness. We argue that relational intimacy is conceptualized through warmth, connection, spatial proximity, shared will, and resonance, underpinned by a LINKED GOAL schematic structure. By contrast, non-conceptual awareness is conceptualized through release, falling, dropping out, darkness, and the cessation of attentional movement, while also exhibiting various degrees of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation. Despite their apparent incompatibility, this paper argues that conceptual blending allows these perceived experiences to be encapsulated within a single framework of belief and practice. Focusing on Cynthia Bourgeault's (2016) *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, we demonstrate how her use of the metaphor scenario of entering the cloud, drawn from the Christian mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, offers one such example. The analysis shows how metaphor and blending enable contemporary contemplative discourse to negotiate the social and theological boundary between Christian relational theism and nondual spirituality.

Keywords: religious experience, schemas, metaphor, blending

1. Introduction

There is now a growing interest in studying religion from an increasing range of applied linguistic perspectives (Pihlaja, 2021, 2023). One example is the use of cognitive linguistic approaches, which have focused on a wide range of religious texts, discourse types, and aspects of belief. Works adopting these approaches have examined how authors and communities conceptualize experiences and

beliefs through metaphor, metonymy, force-dynamic patterns, image schemas, and blending (Chilton & Kopytowska, 2018; Richardson et al., 2021). A growing body of work has also compared different construals of religious experience, including metaphor use and patterns of agency in human-divine relationship language, on the one hand, and descriptions of ego dissolution and pure consciousness, on the other (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2017; Mueller & Richardson, 2025; Richardson, 2023). The current paper extends this focus in two directions. The first is to examine both types of experience in terms of their relationship to the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema. The second is to argue that these apparently opposed types of experience are sometimes linked together through conceptual blending operations to form a single, paradoxical framework with emergent structure. The former teleologically oriented construal often involves relational or dualistic language, whereas the latter is often described as nondual, non-conceptual, or contentless. We examine this integration in Cynthia Bourgeault's (2016) account of Centering Prayer in her book *The Heart of Centering Prayer*.

1.1 The LINKED_GOAL Schema

The SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema has long been discussed within cognitive linguistics as a crucial pre-conceptual, highly schematic framework for structuring the way we think about our interaction with the environment (Gibbs, 2005; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Researchers have pointed out that even events involving inanimate entities are often conceptualized in goal-directed terms (Mandler, 2004). Studies have highlighted the important organizing role of this schema in religious thinking in particular, and how it underpins a range of metaphors related to purposeful movement (Richardson, 2012; Richardson et al., 2021). Studies focused on particular religious texts (Charteris-Black, 2004; Kövecses, 2011) have also demonstrated the central importance of figurative mappings related to movement, paths, and journeys.

Taves (2009) goes so far as to claim that a goal-based type of schematic structuring is the hallmark of religious practice. She views religious thinking as initially rooted in an event, entity, or experience that is regarded as special by an individual or community, such as the Buddha's enlightenment or Christ's presence. This then spawns a network of practices that have the goal of re-encountering that which has been marked out as special. At the macro level, Taves's definition suggests that all religious practice is, in some way, structured by paths and goals.

The assumption that shared goals constitute a fundamental feature of the human-divine relationship (as construed by believers) makes sense when we consider the crucial role of shared planning, intention, and agency in many forms of human social action (see Bratman, 2014). Indeed, Tomasello (2022) has per-

suasively argued that one of the key differences between humans and other primates is our notion of joint and collective intention. He maintains that humans “needed to be able to form with one another a joint goal superseding their individual goals, which required both cognitive and motivational adaptations” (p.94). If this argument is accepted, it seems reasonable to posit that our capacity for joint goal-formation would also be manifest cognitively in the combination of the LINK and GOAL schemas, a position that aligns with previous claims for a LINKED_PATH combination of image schemas (Hedblom, 2020; Mandler, 2004).

Within religious language, the joint goal that is viewed as formed by both the believer and the divine entity can be materially oriented, such as ensuring a good harvest or reaching the promised land. However, one of the most central conceptions of such a joint goal, especially in monotheistic religions, is a spiritual joining, whether it be in the form of unity of purpose and commitment or a more mystical form of oneness. In such cases, the schematic framework of a joint goal is often filled out with figurative expressions of spatial proximity, indwelling, physical intimacy, shared destination, warmth, floating within, envelopment, or the merging of essences (Chilton & Cram, 2018; Mueller & Richardson, 2025; Richardson, 2023; Shaver, 2022).

If joint intention is central to human social cognition, then its recurrence in religious discourse is unsurprising. Joint striving toward highly abstract goals is a characteristic feature of much religious discourse. Yet modern mystical discourse, especially in Buddhist and Christian contemplative contexts, also values states described as non-conceptual, nondual, or devoid of ordinary subject-object structuring. This creates an apparent tension between religious language organized around shared goals and religious language oriented toward the suspension of ordinary goal-directed cognition.

1.2 SOURCE-PATH-GOAL Attenuation

Armstrong (2017) describes experiences of Buddhist enlightenment as a gap in experience which is “ultimately indescribable” due to the fact that “no mental activity or perception takes place”. This entails that “it is impossible to store up an accurate description or image of that experience” (p.168). Even so, he suggests that it may be possible to attain a minimal phenomenological grasp of such a state when “sense consciousness is just returning after its absence”, at which point, “a sense of the unconditioned can come through in the aroma that lingers” (p.168).

This is a characteristic account of the notion of non-conceptuality and non-dualism that is often described in reported states of pure consciousness, often referred to as pure consciousness events or PCEs (Forman, 1990). Descriptions of such states are commonly encountered in works discussing meditative practices in

Buddhism, Advaita-Vedanta, and Patanjalian Yoga (Loy, 2019; Rose, 2016). Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2018), broadly following an initial taxonomy proposed by Stace (1960), draw on extensive survey results to argue that a worldwide common core of mystical experience includes a state of introverted mysticism, which they define as a state of pure consciousness or “unity devoid of content” (p.384). Cognitive scientists who have studied such states experienced during certain types of meditation have claimed that they correspond to unique neurophysiological states that may lead to long-term changes in the brain (for an overview of the relevant research, see Mueller & Richardson, 2025, Chapter 2). One of the most persuasive approaches to understanding the positive effects of PCEs is the argument that these events reset entrenched patterns (e.g., the hyperpriors referred to in predictive processing accounts) in the brain in ways conducive to human flourishing (Clark, 2016; Hohwy, 2013; Laukkonen et al., 2023).

From the perspective of the present cognitive linguistic framework, descriptions of PCEs can be analyzed as involving the attenuation of frame activation related to the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema. We can even speculate that this attenuation affects unconscious mental processes that rely on the schema. The term *attenuation* is used here in order to remain agnostic over whether complete non-conceptual states are possible. Setting aside that debate, many scholars would agree that meditation can bring about states in which normal conceptual structuring is suspended or circumvented in some way, leading to the attenuation of the subject-object distinction (for a discussion, see Coseru, 2022). An initial expectation here may be that such attenuation means an absence of figurative language, but studies have already demonstrated that this is not the case. Cognitive linguistic studies of Buddhist and Hindu language have shown that figurative construals such as releasing, letting go, falling, ceasing to move, ceasing to follow, unobstructed movement, and the disappearance of obstacles are common ways of figuratively conceptualizing the achievement of states of pure consciousness or enlightened reality (Richardson, 2023; Richardson & Mueller, 2019; Silvestre-López & Ferrando, 2017).

1.3 Integration and Conceptual Blending

Our purpose so far has been to recast experiences of human-divine relationship and states of pure consciousness in cognitive linguistic terms, and then to offer explanations for their pervasiveness and importance. However, if these experiences are both pervasive and important, why are they often treated as difficult to integrate within a single conceptual or theological framework? Many forms of relationship language presuppose some distinction between subject and object, lover and beloved, or practitioner and divine presence. By contrast, pure con-

consciousness is often described as nondual, contentless, or resistant to subject-object differentiation. This position appears in common-core arguments that treat references to a divine entity separate from the believer as residual forms of dualism, and therefore as not yet representing the highest level of pure consciousness (Loy, 2019; Rose, 2016). These two types of experience are therefore sometimes viewed as existing at different stages of attainment.

Another strategy is to acknowledge that they may appear together, but to downgrade human-divine relationship language to the level of institutional religious interpretation. This allows researchers to present a state of pure consciousness as a candidate for a universal common core of mystical experience while treating experiences of divine presence as secondary interpretive overlays rather than as phenomenologically significant data in their own right (Hood & Chen, 2013).

However, if we take the fundamental importance of these experiences seriously, we should expect them to occur together in at least some extended accounts of religious practice and experience. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, at different levels and in different ways, they sometimes co-exist; and that this bringing together of apparently incompatible experiences can be analyzed as conceptual blending with unique emergent structure.

Conceptual blending is the integration of two or more mental spaces (referred to as input spaces) into a blended space (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Mental spaces are considered to be less entrenched and detailed than domains and frames, although they are constantly drawing information from them. They are presumed to be continually constructed in working memory in response to specific situations (Kövecses, 2020). Fauconnier and Turner (2002) identified different types of blending operations; however, the focus of this article will be restricted to double-scope blends. These involve elements from two input spaces being integrated to create a blended space, as in Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) example of a computer's user interface being referred to as a desktop. This blend draws on frames from both working at a desk in an office, such as "file" and "folder", and traditional computer commands, such as "save" and "print" (2002, p.131). A key point about such blends is that when mental spaces are integrated, they do not simply produce a sum of the two input spaces but instead produce their own unique emergent structures that can be highly creative.

Conceptual blending has been used extensively in analyses of religious language to explore various aspects of human-divine relationship frameworks (see for example Howe & Green, 2014; Masson, 2014). Perhaps one of the richest areas of exploration has been in relation to Jesus's crucifixion and its connection to sacrifice and the Eucharist (Shaver, 2022; Sørensen, 2007). Outside of Christianity, the paradoxical relationship between Amida Buddha, living beings, and reality has

also been analyzed as a blend (Richardson & Nagashima, 2022). Another important related area of research was investigated by Mueller et al. (2024) in their analysis of a participant's expressions of social and religious identity during an interview. Their focus was not a single instance of conceptual blending, but the fluid shifts between various mental spaces. As we shall see in the analysis below, it is often possible to represent someone's description of specific religious experiences and practices as shifts between mental spaces, but at other times particular statements reveal a believer's attempt to view their experiences as an integrated whole, or from the perspective of a single metaphor scenario.

One final key piece that cognitive linguistic analyses of religious language have contributed is the exploration of the relationship between blending, metaphor, and paradox. Shaver (2022), building on the work of Masson (2014), has argued that logic-transcending paradox can be a key feature used in understanding many central religious beliefs. For example, in his analysis of the blend underpinning the Trinity, he argues that Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit can be all identified as God, but that paradoxically each person of the Trinity cannot be identified as another person in the Trinity (i.e. Jesus cannot be identified as the Father, but Jesus and the Father can be identified as God). Shaver's (2022) argument is that there is a genuine paradox here that transcends formal logic, but the idea is still comprehensible and acceptable to many Christian believers. The point is that religious beliefs often include blends that create paradoxical elements which need to be represented in any analysis.

In order to identify cases where metaphorical language does more than provide isolated mappings, we also draw on Musolff's concept of *metaphor scenarios*. Musolff (2004) defines metaphor scenarios as clusters of related metaphorical entailments that form "little scenes or story-lines" (p.17). This concept is particularly useful for the present analysis because Bourgeault's use of the cloud does not function as a single metaphorical expression but as a scenario that structures a sequence of related conceptual operations: obscured perception, separation, enclosure, sheltering, intimacy, and eventual resonance with divine presence.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, we identify passages in which Bourgeault describes Centering Prayer as the suspension, release, or darkening of ordinary conceptual-perceptual activity, which we interpret as instances of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation. Second, we examine passages in which the same practice is described through relational language of intimacy, resonance, will, and divine presence, which we interpret as evidence of LINKED_GOAL structuring. Third, we show how Bourgeault's use of the cloud metaphor functions as a metaphor scenario that integrates these two patterns into a single paradoxical but coherent conceptual blend. The purpose of the analysis is therefore not to provide an exhaustive literary interpretation of Bourgeault's book, but to examine a set of

theoretically significant passages that illustrate how apparently incompatible construals of religious experience can be integrated within one contemplative framework.

2. Methods

2.1 Data: Bourgeault's *The Heart of Centering Prayer*

The data for this study consist of selected passages from Cynthia Bourgeault's *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (2016). Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest who has been widely recognized as a key contemporary figure within the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition and modern Christian mysticism. Her knowledge and practice of Christian forms of contemplation, especially Centering Prayer under Thomas Keating, together with her engagement with Eastern forms of meditation, allow her to interpret Christian contemplative practice against the background of multiple religious traditions. One example of this engagement is her foreword to Adyashanti's (2016) book examining the life of Jesus from a Buddhist perspective. Her books also explicitly engage with nonduality and its connection to the Christian contemplative tradition, as can be seen in *The Corner of Fourth and Nondual* (2022), which links Thomas Merton's experience with a nondual approach to contemplation.

Bourgeault's *The Heart of Centering Prayer* was chosen for two principal reasons. First, the book focuses repeatedly on the practice and experience of Centering Prayer rather than only on theological discussion. Second, the book explicitly attempts to interpret a Christian practice of prayer through the language of nonduality, objectless awareness, and contemplative transformation. It therefore provides a concentrated site for examining how contemporary Christian discourse negotiates the relationship between relational theism and nondual contemplative experience. Bourgeault's work is especially relevant because it builds bridges between contemporary Christian mysticism, Eastern meditative practices, and classic works of apophatic mysticism, especially *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Johnston, 2014).

2.2 The Cloud of Unknowing and Centering Prayer

The Cloud of Unknowing is significant for the present study because it is one of the central medieval English texts associated with apophatic Christian mysticism. Its central image of the cloud provides Bourgeault with a historically Christian metaphor for articulating the limits of discursive knowledge while also preserving the

possibility of divine intimacy. Because Bourgeault repeatedly returns to this text when describing Centering Prayer, it functions not merely as a historical reference but as a metaphorical and theological resource for the conceptual blend analyzed below.

Given its central importance to this article, it is also necessary to briefly introduce Centering Prayer. Thomas Keating, one of the founders of the Centering Prayer movement, defined it as follows:

Centering Prayer is consenting and surrendering to God ... It is a question of allowing our ordinary thoughts to recede into the background and to float along the river of consciousness without our noticing them, while we direct our attention to the river on which they are floating ... The method consists of letting go of every kind of thought during the time of prayer, even the most devout thoughts.
(Keating, 1986, pp. 20–21)

One of the tools of Centering Prayer is the sacred word. This is not intended as a mantra, but as a word used by practitioners to return to the present moment after noticing that they have begun to follow a thought or feeling. A distinctive feature of the practice is that it is non-discursive, although Centering Prayer is meant to augment rather than replace discursive prayer or other traditional Christian practices.

2.3 Identification and Selection of Passages

The authors first read through Bourgeault's book independently and marked passages relevant to SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation and the LINKED_GOAL schema. Passages relevant to states of schema attenuation were defined as those containing language that described an attempt to avoid following thoughts, disengage from ordinary attention, suspend subject-object perception, or move beyond conceptualization. For example, Bourgeault's statement, "If it captures your attention, it's a thought, and the basic instruction is simply to let it go, gently releasing it from the grip of your attention" (p.14), was included because it describes attention as gripping an object and contemplative practice as releasing that object.

Passages relevant to LINKED_GOAL structuring were defined as descriptions that presupposed or explicitly stated a subject-object relationship between the believer and a divine entity together with inferred or explicit descriptions of shared planning, intention, will, agency, or alignment. For example, Bourgeault's description of "a blind beholding of the naked being of God himself" characterized by "oneness" and an "accordance" of wills (p.172) was included because it construes contemplative experience through shared will and relational alignment. Passages were not selected merely because they mentioned prayer, God, contem-

plation, spiritual growth, or Christian doctrine. They were included only when they contained language relevant to one of the two target patterns: either attenuation of ordinary conceptual-perceptual structuring or relational construals of divine-human intimacy, will, agency, or presence.

As a worked example, Bourgeault's instruction to "let go" of a thought was first marked as relevant because it describes the intentional interruption of ordinary attentional movement toward a cognitive object. At the level of metaphor identification, the lexical unit "go" was treated as metaphorically used because its contextual meaning concerns the relinquishing of attention, whereas its more basic meaning concerns physical movement or removal from contact. This expression was then grouped with related expressions such as "release," "drop," "unclench," and "withdraw attention" under the source domain of object manipulation or release. Because this language describes the interruption of movement toward an attentional object, it was coded as relevant to SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation. By contrast, passages were not included in this category merely because they referred generally to prayer, contemplation, or spiritual growth; they had to contain language that described the suspension, release, obstruction, or attenuation of ordinary conceptual-perceptual activity.

2.4 Metaphor Identification, Source-Domain Analysis, and Validation

The marked passages were then examined using the *Metaphor Identification Procedure* (MIP; Pragglejaz Group, 2007). MIP was used to identify metaphorically used lexical units by comparing each unit's contextual meaning with a more basic meaning and determining whether the contextual meaning could be understood in contrast with, but in relation to, that basic meaning. After metaphorically used lexical units had been identified, we grouped them into broader source-domain patterns, such as release, containment, movement, occluded vision, depth, warmth, and resonance. This second stage was not part of MIP narrowly understood, but a subsequent interpretive stage designed to determine how clusters of metaphorical expressions contributed to the construal of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation, LINKED_GOAL structuring, or their integration.

Both authors first read the book independently and noted passages that appeared relevant to the two target patterns. The authors then compared their selections and discussed cases of overlap, divergence, and ambiguity. Passages were retained for analysis only when both authors agreed that they contained language relevant to SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation, LINKED_GOAL structuring, or the integration of both. No statistical inter-rater reliability score was calculated, because the study is qualitative and exploratory rather than corpus-based; however, difficult cases were resolved through authorial consensus, with attention to

whether the interpretation could be supported by repeated patterns elsewhere in the book.

Finally, the authors returned to the marked passages in order to identify those that either juxtaposed both processes or showed some form of integration. These passages were then examined to determine whether they fit the criteria for a possible conceptual blend with emergent structure. The criteria consisted of being able to answer the following questions positively. First, does the statement or description require the practitioner of contemplative prayer to let go of all thoughts and concepts, suggesting SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation? Second, does the passage also contain language that is indicative of intending to enter into a close relationship with the divine, suggesting LINKED_GOAL schematic structuring? Third, does the author appear to link the passage with any of the passages identified above in the first stage of analysis?

3. Analysis

Bourgeault (2016) argues that medieval Christian mystics are often mischaracterized as operating on a lower, more emotional form of experience that is “still characterized by personal desire” (pp.3–4). What medieval mystics were in fact trying to do, according to her, was make use of particular metaphors in order to describe “a kind of transformation that does not ultimately occur on the cognitive line at all, but in the cave of the heart, intuitively grasped as a whole new system of perceptivity” (p.4). The analysis is organized around three linked claims. First, Bourgeault’s account of Centering Prayer repeatedly uses metaphors of release, dropping, darkness, and non-attainment to construe contemplative practice as the attenuation of ordinary conceptual-perceptual movement. Second, she reintroduces relationality through metaphors of depth, resonance, warmth, intimacy, and accorded will. Third, the cloud metaphor scenario integrates these two patterns by making obscured perception the condition for a different form of divine-human connection.

3.1 SOURCE-PATH-GOAL Attenuation during Centering Prayer

At the center of Bourgeault’s description of how to move beyond the normal mode of perception is the practice of Centering Prayer. As noted above in Keating’s quote, this practice is designed to encourage practitioners to disengage from their discursive thought processes so that they ultimately enter a state of thoughtlessness and non-conceptuality. The passages analyzed in this subsection were selected because they construe contemplative practice as the interruption of ordi-

nary attentional movement toward thoughts, perceptions, or spiritual objects. According to Bourgeault (2016), in moments without thoughts, practitioners enter a state that cannot be conceived or described using conventional concepts, and may not even be clearly remembered. As she says, “the moment you start thinking about them, they’re gone” (p.26), which means these should not be regarded as states or mystical experiences that are achieved, “You can’t attain it” (p.136). By foregrounding nonconceptuality and avoiding all talk of attainment, her language exemplifies the notion of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL attenuation.

For Bourgeault, this attenuation is linked to the sacred word that practitioners repeat in Centering Prayer when disengaging themselves from following their thoughts. She advises readers, following Thomas Keating’s approach, to avoid words that encapsulate cognitive or emotional intent. She encourages practitioners to view the sacred word as something that increasingly develops into simply “a placeholder for your intention,” helping the practitioner break free from the cognitive and affective aspects of regular perception (p.161). However, Taves (2009) has argued that even experiences of pure consciousness are still in some sense experiences of something and can usually be talked about in some way. Bourgeault achieves this by drawing on a set of recurring metaphorical patterns organized around release, dropping, resting, emptying, and occluded vision, as discussed below.

The first mapping, TRANSCENDING REGULAR PERCEPTION IS LETTING GO OF AN OBJECT, is a recurring pattern in Bourgeault’s (2016) advocacy of Centering Prayer as a means of moving beyond our normal way of viewing the world. She advises, “let go of what you’re clinging to so that your attention relaxes from its default subject/object trajectory” (p.27). Usually, the object is a particular thought or emotion, “If it captures your attention, it’s a thought, and the basic instruction is simply to let it go, gently releasing it from the grip of your attention” (p.14). The Centering Prayer formula of not resisting, retaining, or reacting to passing thoughts or emotions is designed to help practitioners “release ... thoughts more promptly and gently” (p.32). Bourgeault even categorizes fleeting distractions as thoughts that need to be released:

It can also, equally well, be an itch on the nose or the buzz of that damned fluorescent light overhead. If it draws your attention to the degree that you start engaging with it, it’s a thought. And in Centering Prayer the marching orders are to let all thoughts go. (p.127)

Bourgeault (2016) also employs a similar metaphorical mapping TRANSCENDING REGULAR PERCEPTION IS RESTING/RELEASING. She characterizes Centering Prayer as “times of deep resting at your depths” (p.26) and advises us to “unclench” (p.34). This metaphorical mapping also runs alongside a physically embodied

dimension of kenosis (self-emptying). She insists that it is “not just an attitude,” and that something actually “drops and releases” from the “solar plexus region” of our “body, a subtle but distinct form of internal relaxation” (pp.35–36). Bourgeault later returns to this embodied notion of kenosis after introducing the notion of heart cognition, describing it as “an overall spiritual intention of nonattachment combined with a physiological descent and gathering of energy in the region of the heart and solar plexus” (pp.207–208). By combining this physical metaphor with the orientational metaphor of descent, she reverses the more familiar association between spiritual progress and ascent, a pattern Richardson and Mueller (2019) describe as “source domain reversal.” In this pattern, downward movement does not mark decline or failure; instead, it marks a movement away from discursive cognition and toward the heart as a site of contemplative perception.

The notion of letting go is also further specified as an act of self-emptying or kenosis. Bourgeault (2016) expresses this through the metaphorical mapping *TRANSCENDING REGULAR PERCEPTIONS IS EMPTYING A CONTAINER*. As she puts it, “the theological basis for Centering Prayer lies in the principle of kenosis, Jesus’s self-emptying love that forms the core of his own self-understanding and life practice” (p.33). Jesus is said to model this “complete, free giving of oneself,” a radical renunciation that may include “a willing divestment of all possessions even up to and including personal consciousness” (p.35). Bourgeault boldly states that there is no longer a “you” that can be used as a subject when talking about the effects of nondual consciousness. As she puts it, “You can’t come back from it transformed because there is no ‘you’ left to be transformed” (p.136). She also figuratively represents the state of perceived nonduality as the subject and object falling from a container. As she says, once you “drop out,” God “drops out” and “there is only Oneness” (p.166).

In positing a unity of entities that ultimately precludes our false sense of duality, Bourgeault suggests a suprarational state beyond our typical understanding. This notion is further reinforced with the metaphor *TRANSCENDING REGULAR PERCEPTION IS AN INABILITY TO SEE* where clear line of sight is blocked by the cloud or occluded by darkness. She comments, “No matter what you do, this cloud and this darkness are between you and your God and block you, so that you may not see him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason” (p.144). When our normal faculties are thus blocked, “our former mode of perception goes dark” (p.146). This new mode of perception is said to darken “the cataphatic faculties” (p.173). These patterns support the claim that Bourgeault construes Centering Prayer as a practice of *SOURCE-PATH-GOAL* attenuation in the form of an ongoing suspension of ordinary dualistic perception.

3.2 LINKED_GOAL Structuring: Intimacy, Resonance, and Accordance of Wills

We outlined above Bourgeault's explanation that periods of nondual consciousness cannot be recalled because such periods are beyond regular conceptualization. However, she goes on to note that those moments are not completely undetectable because "you'll retain some residual memory of them" occasionally with a "vivid sense of having been tugged down deep into your own heart, or having sat at the edge of an incredible intimacy and tenderness" (p.27). This is then further described through a water metaphor which subtly shifts the location from sitting at the edge of a location to being positioned within it, in the form of "resting in the river of "pure awareness" (p.27). This juxtaposition of "incredible intimacy" and a state of "pure awareness" telegraphs Bourgeault's intention to paradoxically bring together language associated with a close relationship *and* non-conceptualization.

In order to make sense of this notion of intimacy within pure awareness, we need to explore Bourgeault's (2016) introduction of a new, non-dualistic mode of perception that "allows you to see by not staring directly at the object ahead", or, to put it another way, "objectless awareness" (p.146). In terms of LINKED_GOAL structuring, the notion of shared will and intention is at the center of this notion of heart cognition, although she argues that when the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* talks about will and love, he is not referring to a selfish, individual notion of emotional desire or wanting something. Instead, he is purportedly referring to a deeper, non-dualistic sense of will that is intimately connected with not just acting, but being acted upon:

And then our author layers on yet another paradox: although it takes a strong desire to do this contemplative "work," you must work until you feel the desire! Clearly the chief operative here cannot possibly be *emotional desire* ... No, it is, as he says, simply a "naked intent" carried at some deeper level of your being ... but we must be careful not to equate it with the *faculty* of will as in classic scholastic theology — and even less with willpower. It is rather some capacity of knowingness and willingness emanating from a place far deeper within us and won't let us *not* do the work, whether we like it or not. This "love" our author has in mind is of a different order altogether. (p.145)

This passage relies on the mapping BEING CLOSER TO DIVINE BEING IS GOING DEEPER WITHIN ONESELF. In many ordinary interpersonal contexts, turning inward could be construed as withdrawal from the other. In Bourgeault's account, however, inward movement becomes a way of approaching divine presence because divine being is construed as accessible at the depth of the self. The paradoxical non-dualistic aspect of this is then reinforced by the figurative conception

of the suffusion of light. This non-dualistic state is therefore “not a state of undifferentiated emptiness, but rather a state of profound, luminous awareness in which the individual components are suffused and drawn together by a single radiant Oneness, like light pouring through a stained-glass window” (p.167). The underpinning LINKED_GOAL schema is then made explicit in the statement that this leads to a level of perception “characterized by ‘oneness’ – a full alignment of spirit and will” (p.172). Bourgeault goes on to note that in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the relationship between the human and divine will is specified as an “accordance” of wills (p.172).

In order to further describe this new mode of perception, Bourgeault (2016) switches from conceptualizing perception through the source domain of sight to conceptualizing perception as achieved through “resonance.” For Bourgeault, this is how the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* understands the meaning of love, in the sense of perceiving “holographically (through electromagnetic resonance) rather than through the subject/object differentiation fundamental to brain-centered cognition” (p.153). It is this perception through resonance that provides the “prerequisite for the emergence of a stable nondual consciousness” (p.153) because there is no subject seeing an object, only shared vibration within the same energy field (p.83). This framework helps account for Bourgeault’s references to the “vibrational signature” of the heart and “pure intimacy ... intimacy without something or someone attached to that intimacy” (p.59). It also explains her insistence that a practitioner’s attention within the cloud is not *on* a divine entity marked out as a specific object but rather directly reflects being itself (crucially articulated in the Bible’s expression for divine being as a simple *I am*). Bourgeault extends this resonance-based construal in a passage that explicitly contrasts attention as subject-object projection with attention as an internally held field:

attention is not only a carbon arc shooting from subject to object. It is also an energy field in its own right ... it can also be held inwardly and experienced as a vibrational field in its own right ... In this configuration, it does not “reflect on being,” but rather, directly reflects it: mirrors it like a still pond, shimmering with the same vibrant “I am” presence. (p.83)

This departure from a dualistic form of attention does not result in emptiness (as those familiar with Zen discussions of non-duality might expect) but rather leads to intimacy. As Bourgeault (2016) insists, “this Oneness is experienced as intimate and personal because it is indeed being perceived through the heart (purified and activated as an ‘organ of spiritual perception’), and intimacy is the heart’s native language” (pp.166–167). The notion of love is key here, although she redefines it in the context of heart cognition, as perceiving “through sympathetic resonance”

in which “you simultaneously grasp both the whole and the part” (p.182). This comes back to the notion of objectless awareness introduced above, or, to put it another way, “a diffuse awareness, in which one does not ‘see’ anything in particular, but comes into full resonance with the infinite source of love” (pp.187–188).

Reconciling these points near the end of her book, Bourgeault defines the “intimate, relational understanding of the highest states of consciousness attainment” of the Western tradition of mysticism as “not cool but *warm* ... not impersonal or even transpersonal, but astonishingly *hyperpersonal*” (Bourgeault, 2016, p.206).

In this second part of the analysis, we have outlined a set of relational conceptualizations organized around warmth, intimacy, love, resonance, and accordance of wills. These expressions are most coherently analyzed as drawing on LINKED_GOAL schematic structure, because they construe contemplative practice as movement toward shared will, resonance, and intimate alignment with divine being.

The preceding subsections therefore identify two recurrent but apparently divergent patterns in Bourgeault’s account: attenuation of ordinary subject-object cognition and reconfigured relational intimacy with divine being. She sometimes presents these as a temporal sequence: a relinquishing of dualistic subject-object distinctions *followed by* the opening up of a new non-dualistic mode of perception accompanied by a redefined form of warmth, love, hyper-personal intimacy, and accordance of wills. In other passages, depending on the immediate topic of her discussion, she fluidly moves back and forth between mental spaces that draw from both strands. Section 3.3 argues that the cloud metaphor scenario integrates these patterns by making obscured perception and intimate connection simultaneous rather than sequential.

3.3 Integrating SOURCE-PATH-GOAL Attenuation and the LINKED_GOAL Schema

As noted above, Musolff’s concept of metaphor scenarios is useful here because Bourgeault’s cloud language activates a structured sequence of related entailments rather than a single isolated mapping. Bourgeault’s cloud scenario revolves around two key entailments of the figurative mapping PRACTICING CENTERING PRAYER IS BEING IN A CLOUD:

Our author is suggesting that when we move into this new “work,” our former mode of perception goes dark. It’s not that God is absent or you are absent; it’s merely that the cloud is *between* you and God (which, as Ira Progoff insightfully notes, is a term that implies connection as well as separation). The cloud — fuzzy,

diffuse, sheltering, enveloping — will be the new *modus operandi* in which you will come to apprehend the divine presence. (p.146)

The first entailment concerns occlusion: INABILITY TO CONCEPTUALIZE OR KNOW GOD IS BEING IN A CLOUD. In a thick fog or cloud, vision is obscured, and this maps onto the inability to perceive, know, and conceptualize God through normal cognitive processes. As we have seen, the darkening of conventional perception, conceptualization, and knowledge, in conjunction with the collapse in the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, is here equated with a dissipation of dualistic thinking and therefore with the attenuation of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema.

The second entailment concerns enclosure and connection: AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BEING IN A CLOUD. This is consolidated through references to experiencing God's presence as sheltered and enveloped, which fits with the intimacy and warmth highlighted above. This sense of connection unrelated to sight connects this entailment to the resonance and accordance-of-wills language examined in Section 3.2.

These two entailments set up a paradoxical tension: the cloud as a barrier that blocks the seeker's perception of God and the cloud as a facilitator of an intimate connection with God. The key to integrating these two entailments is the figurative notion of resonance (as opposed to seeing or dualistic knowing) linking the practitioner of centering prayer with the divine. This is achieved through the practitioner's intention to practice letting go of one's thoughts:

... in order to enter this new perceptual terrain, it is necessary first to withdraw our attention from all "creatures" — that is, all specific objects of attention ... It corresponds to that slight movement of the will ... that occurs when we recognize that we're engaged with a thought and promptly let it go ... Even though our subjective experience of this fuzzy, diffuse awareness may feel like a long, long ways from God ... we are actually a lot closer to our destination when we are hunkered down within the cloud than when our attention is constantly being pulled outward toward specific focal points, no matter how worthy. (pp.148–149)

The passage makes it clear that the practitioner enters the state of "unknowing" as they cease to follow their thoughts and abandon a dualistic goal or object-based way of conceptualizing the divine. Bourgeault makes the point that what naturally follows from this attenuation is the sense that God has disappeared.

However, it is at this point that Bourgeault explains how integration is possible. According to Bourgeault, while the practitioner is intentionally suspending ordinary goal-directed attention, the same process is construed as movement toward a shared relational goal. The project of bringing about an intimate human-divine relationship through an entirely new "*modus operandi*" is explicitly

expressed through the JOURNEY metaphor, which in turn activates the structuring role of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema. In the passage, the aim of an intimate relationship with the divine is referred to as a “destination,” while the goal of greater intimacy is represented through spatial proximity through the INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS metaphor. The sense of joint intention, and therefore LINKED_GOAL schematic structuring, is then made explicit through the relationship resonance metaphor discussed above:

For the work lies precisely in learning how to withdraw our attention from objects so that it can be gathered and magnetized at a far deeper level of spiritual attentiveness. From these depths of recollection, we can begin to come into resonance with God’s “naked being,” as the author expresses it, and “to love and praise Him for Himself.” (p.151)

The phrase “come into resonance with,” as discussed in the previous section, is a figurative expression that links divine-human relation to shared vibration, alignment, and non-objectifying attention. In addition, the use of “come into” in conjunction with the use of “destination” in the previous quotation evokes the underpinning PATH-GOAL structuring.

The blend is therefore made possible by integrating within a single framework of belief two input spaces. The first space is the practitioner’s reported phenomenology of release, darkness, and the loss of ordinary conceptual objects. The second space is Bourgeault’s theological-contemplative construal of the same practice as movement into divine intimacy, resonance, and accordance of wills. The blended space integrates these inputs by presenting the loss of ordinary perception not as absence from God but as the condition for a different form of divine-human connection. One of the key emergent structures in the blended space is the inclusion of a perceived experience of the second input space in the form of a “residual memory” (p.26). The notion of residual memory was briefly discussed above, but it is worth providing a more complete quotation here:

Subjectively, the only parts you’ll directly remember are the times of wrestling with your thoughts. But in point of fact, these relatively more agitated, “surface of yourself” times have been counterbalanced by times of deep resting at your depths. You won’t be able to perceive these directly of course; the moment you start thinking about them, they’re gone. But you’ll retain some residual memory of them in an inexplicable sense of refreshment, and sometimes a vivid sense of having been tugged down deep into your own heart, or having sat at the edge of an incredible intimacy and tenderness. Both of which are true incidentally. During those nanosecond gaps in the stream of consciousness, you have been resting in the river of “pure awareness,” and it floods through your being like autumn rains after a long drought. (pp.26–27)

This “residual memory” appears to consist of two distinct elements: pure awareness completely free from thoughts and concepts (“the moment you start thinking about them, they’re gone”) and a “vivid sense of ... having sat at the edge of an incredible intimacy and tenderness.” This passage was therefore included in the integrative category because it contains both attenuation language and relational-intimacy language within a single account of contemplative practice. The phrase “vivid sense of” marks the passage as phenomenological in orientation rather than merely doctrinal in form. On the one hand, Bourgeault uses descriptions that are as free of affective content as possible, such as “pure awareness”; on the other, she uses intensely affective figurative descriptions, such as “floods through your being like autumn rains after a long drought.”

Figure 1 summarizes this integration by distinguishing the two input spaces, identifying the shared elements projected into the blend, and specifying the emergent structure: obscured ordinary perception becomes the means of intimate divine-human resonance.

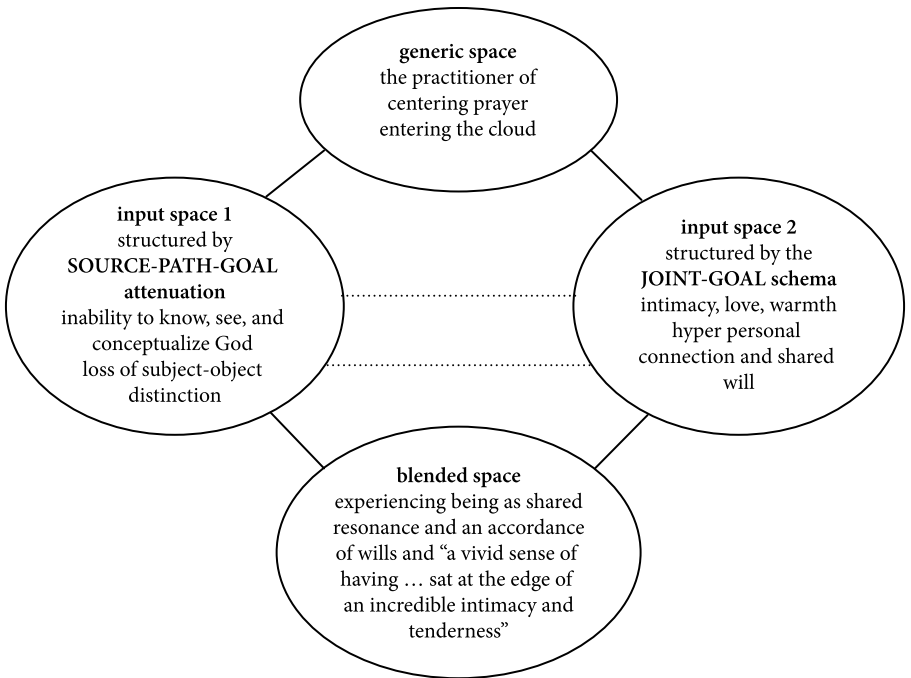


Figure 1. The cloud of unknowing and nondual intimacy blend

The blend allows Bourgeault to construe the loss of ordinary conceptual perception not as a failure of religious relation but rather as the condition for a non-objectifying form of intimacy with divine being. Thus, when Bourgeault refers to

complex concepts such as resonance, she is not referring simply to conventional understandings of these terms. Her argument can be summarized in two moves. The first is that she uses language to point to a practice designed to detach from language and its underlying conceptual and pre-conceptual structures. The second is that this practice does not lead to conceptual emptiness but rather to a form of content presented as beyond the grasp of ordinary patterns of thought. Whether this is humanly possible is outside the purview of this analysis. The point is that this is how Bourgeault conceptualizes and presents her framework, and it is significant that this framework draws on a paradoxical integration of two key religious experiences that would appear, at first sight, to be distinct and incompatible.

4. Discussion

The analysis has identified three main findings. First, Bourgeault's account of Centering Prayer repeatedly attenuates SOURCE-PATH-GOAL structuring through metaphors of release, dropping, darkness, emptying, and non-attainment. Second, she reintroduces relationality through metaphors of depth, warmth, resonance, intimacy, and accordance of wills, which are best understood as drawing on LINKED_GOAL structuring. Third, the cloud metaphor scenario integrates these patterns by presenting the obstruction of ordinary perception as the means through which a different form of divine-human intimacy becomes possible.

These findings have implications beyond the interpretation of a single contemplative text. Bourgeault's discourse participates in a wider social negotiation within contemporary Western spirituality: the attempt to hold together inherited Christian language of God, love, will, and divine presence with contemplative ideals often associated with nondual awareness, meditation, and the suspension of ordinary cognition. The blend analyzed here helps make that negotiation conceptually possible. It allows Centering Prayer to be presented as both continuous with Christian apophatic tradition and intelligible within a broader transreligious contemplative culture.

The analysis also shows how metaphor and blending can contribute to religious authority. By grounding nondual contemplative language in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Bourgeault does not present nonduality as an external import into Christianity. Instead, she frames it as recoverable from within the Christian mystical tradition itself. The cloud scenario therefore performs legitimating work: it authorizes a contemporary contemplative practice by linking it to a recognized medieval Christian source while also allowing it to resonate with modern discourses of meditation and nondual awareness.

For metaphor studies, the case demonstrates how metaphor scenarios and conceptual blends can organize not only individual expressions but also socially consequential forms of religious identity. The cloud scenario does not merely decorate Bourgeault's prose; it structures a way of inhabiting a contested religious position, one that is at once Christian, contemplative, apophatic, and nondual. In this sense, the analysis contributes to the study of metaphor in the social world by showing how figurative patterns mediate between textual tradition, embodied practice, and contemporary religious self-understanding.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how two recurrent construals of religious experience — non-conceptual awareness and intimate divine-human relation — are integrated in Bourgeault's account of Centering Prayer. We have argued for the importance of these construals while highlighting the clear distinction between them. Given their importance and significance, we have proposed that they can coexist in accounts of religious experience in the form of conceptual blends exhibiting paradoxical features. This coexistence and integration have been analyzed in selected passages from Cynthia Bourgeault's guide to the theory and practice of Centering Prayer. This article raises the issue of how common these forms of integration are in accounts of religious practice and experience. Further research could examine whether similar blends occur in other Christian contemplative texts, in Buddhist-Christian comparative discourse, and in contemporary spiritual writing that seeks to reconcile relational theism with nondual awareness.

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Publication history

Date received: 22 December 2025

Date accepted: 23 June 2026

Published online: 14 July 2026