

Richard Foster
Promoting Eastern Mysticism By Proxy
by Ray Yungen

I want to assure you, for what it's worth, that I bear Richard Foster no personal animosity. My reason for writing this testimony is that with the rising tide of critical input my book may bring I want to clarify why I am doing this type of activity.

It has come to my attention that some view the current controversy regarding Richard Foster as stemming from a misunderstanding of his statement “we of the new age” in the first edition of *Celebration of Discipline*. This is not the case. The real issue lies in his statement where he encourages, “we should all, without shame, enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer,” and also in his statement that “Christianity is not complete without the contemplative dimension.” It is from these comments and this viewpoint that opposition to Foster flows. If he were to understand why this is so, his sense of having his reputation falsely impaired would be greatly tempered.

In Portland, Oregon there is a large New Age bookstore. It is entirely devoted to New Age spirituality. Every Eastern mystical and metaphysical topic under the sun is found there. Interestingly enough, there is quite a sizable section devoted to contemplative prayer with Thomas Merton having a whole shelf devoted just to him. Why would a bookstore of this nature devote valuable space to a topic that purports to be Christian? That is, from my perspective, a legitimate question.

May I suggest the reason is that the Christian *mystical* tradition shares a sense of profound kinship with the Eastern mystical tradition. I believe there is ample evidence to back this claim up. Look at the following quotes from leading contemplative figures; the answer is inescapable.

1. Thomas Merton: “I think I couldn’t understand Christian teaching the way I do if it were not in the light of Buddhism.”²¹
2. Henri Nouwen: Nouwen wrote that his solitude and the solitude of his Buddhist friends, would “greet each other and support each other.”²²

3. Basil Pennington: “We should not hesitate to take the fruit of the age old wisdom of the East and ‘capture’ it for Christ. Indeed, those of us who are in ministry should make the necessary effort to acquaint ourselves with as many of these Eastern techniques as possible ...”³
4. Morton Kelsey: “You can find most of the New Age practices in the depth of Christianity [Christian church tradition].”⁴
5. Tilden Edwards: “This mystical stream [contemplative prayer] is the Western bridge to Far Eastern spirituality.”⁵
6. Alice Bailey: “None other than Alice Bailey, the famous occult prophetess who coined the term New Age, made this startling pronouncement: ‘It is, of course, easy to find many passages which link the way of the Christian Knower [mystic] with that of his brother in the East. They bear witness to the same efficacy of method.’”⁶
7. In *The Lay Contemplative* fourteen centers listed in the back of the book openly proclaim their Hindu-Buddhist connections, including Shalem Prayer Institute.

I could easily provide page after page of similar quotes from numerous contemplative sources. *That* is why New Renaissance Books features a section on contemplative prayer. *That* is why opposition from others and myself has come forth. There is no misconstruing of realities here. Tilden Edwards knew what he was saying when he said that contemplative prayer is the Western bridge to Far Eastern spirituality.

To put it in a nutshell, I believe **Richard Foster advocates a prayer movement that indeed can be proven to have strong links to Eastern mysticism.** And incidentally, this prayer method does not have its origins with the Desert Fathers, as some believe, but rather dates back much further, probably as far back as the early days of mankind.

To proclaim to be evangelical in every aspect but to say, “Thomas Merton tried to awaken God’s people” as Foster said personally to

me at a conference in November of 1994 is a contradiction of major proportions. It is an oxymoron to try to lump Biblical evangelicalism and Thomas Merton together.

To list in the back of *Celebration of Discipline* Tilden Edward's book, *Spiritual Friend*, as an "excellent book on spirituality" is unthinkable.⁷ Tilden Edwards sees no problem mixing Christianity and Buddhism. Yet the Apostle Paul says you can't sit at both tables. It cannot be done. To do that is to abandon Jesus Christ. So someone who understands the preaching of the Cross would *never* be comfortable promoting someone who believes as Tilden Edwards does, especially in print. If one really does believe in a Biblical evangelical statement of faith, [such as Foster's] then wouldn't that person be repelled by such compromise? And to say the least, wouldn't it certainly draw a lot of confusion to those that recognize this? If someone with a public profile ardently promotes another person, such as when Foster says Thomas Merton has "priceless wisdom"⁸ for the spiritual life of the Christian, won't those listening think he approves of or at the very least overlooks Merton's serious heretical stands and perhaps then desire to follow Merton, thus possibly falling into Merton's spiritual errors?

If Foster could put himself in the shoes of we who are confused by his position, surely he can understand why we see such a contradiction. I once heard a pastor quote Woody Allen saying that he (Woody) wasn't afraid to die; he just didn't want to be there when it happened. For someone to make an issue with this pastor, because he used a quote from Woody Allen, would be ludicrous because that is simply guilt by *association*. But if the same pastor, in a serious tone, said that Woody Allen had great spiritual understanding and everyone should listen to him to gain insight, that no longer is benign, and it now becomes guilt by *promotion*—two different terms with two significantly different principles. Guilt by association is weak; guilt by promotion is strong.

May I briefly address just three more points? The comment made that Lighthouse Trails Publishing erroneously labeled Foster a disciple of

Thomas Merton because he never met him personally is not accurate, and here is why. In checking with two prominent dictionaries, the word disciple does mean anyone who is an adherent of someone's teachings or school of religion. (American Heritage Dictionary and Webster's) According to both of these reliable resources, personal contact is not a stipulation. The fact that Foster quotes Merton 13 times in the latest edition of *Celebration of Discipline* is just further proof that he does indeed adhere to Merton's teachings. And we could list a number of other references to back up that assertion.

I would like to also make an observation about the view that the New Age movement is only a few decades old. The term itself may indeed be fairly recent but the actual practices and beliefs involved are thousands of years old. For instance, the slave girl mentioned in Acts 16 was in effect a *New Ager*. The term itself was taken from astrology making reference to the *Aquarian age* in which humanity is supposedly going to realize its inner divinity. Hence, anyone who engages in these mystical practices is associated with this view, even though they may have lived centuries ago. It's not the term; it's the practices that are at issue here. Since Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen mystically perceived the *divine* in everyone this in effect made them New Agers.

Frankly, but respectfully, we see Foster as someone who is promoting Eastern mysticism by way of proxy⁹ and he is apparently afraid to come out of the mystical closet. His affinity with those who clearly stand for heretical and non-biblical approaches to God, however, are opening that closet door.

In Christ,
Ray Yungen, Author of *A Time of Departing*
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(Footnotes)

¹ Frank X. Tuoti,

The Dawn of the Mystical Age, Crossroad Publishing Co. New York, NY 1997 p. 127

² Henry Nouwen,

Sabbatical Journey, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY 1998 p. 20

³ M. Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating, Thomas E. Clarke, *Finding Grace at the Center*, St. Bede's Pub. Petersham, MA 1978, pp5-6

⁴ "In the Spirit of Early Christians," Common Boundary magazine, Jan./Feb. 1992. P. 19

⁵ Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*, Paulist Press, New York, 1980, p. 18

⁶ Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*, Lighthouse Trails Publishing 2002, p. 34 quoting Alice Bailey , *From Intellect to Intuition*, Lucis Publishing Co., New York, NY 1987, 13th printing, p. 193

⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, A Brief Bibliography of Recent Works, back of book

⁸ Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, *Devotional Classics*, Harper San Francisco, 1993, p. 61

⁹ By Proxy: To represent another