

Contemplative Prayer and the Evangelical Church

by
Ray Yungen

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There is a practice that is becoming more and more popular within the evangelical church. It is called contemplative prayer or centering prayer. Youth organizations and seminaries are particularly drawn to this, thus impacting the Christian youth in this country. Furthermore, there is a snowballing effect wherein contemplative prayer is being accepted and endorsed by more and more evangelical leaders, often based not on their own experience and understanding but rather on the word of other respected leaders who in turn may not have fully researched this subject. I would like to address four points, each with quotes from various published works.

I. A Distinct Connection Between New Age, Eastern Religion, the Occult, and Contemplative Prayer

First of all, New Agers, occultists and those practicing Eastern religion regard contemplative prayer as part of their *own* movement. The following are examples from New Age, Eastern thought and occultic books and magazines:

Those who have practiced Transcendental Meditation may be surprised to learn that Christianity has its own time-honored form of mantra meditation. The technique, called Centering Prayer, draws on the spiritual exercises of the Desert Fathers, the English devotional classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the famous Jesus Prayer... Reliance on a mantric centering device has a long history in the mystical canon of Christianity.¹

Contemplative Living by Joan Duncan Oliver, an Omega Institute Mind, Body, Spirit book endorsing several contemplative authors: Father Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. Omega Institute is the nation's largest holistic, New Age learning center.²

The meditation of advanced occultists is identical with the prayer of advanced mystics: it is no accident that both traditions use the same word for the highest reaches of their respective activities ... occultism is defined as the science of mystical evolution; it is the employment of the hidden (i.e. occult) mystical faculties of man to discern the hidden reality of nature, i.e. to see God as the all in all.³

Kundalini has long been known in Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist spirituality.... Since this energy [Kundalini energy] is also at work today in numerous persons who are devoting themselves to contemplative prayer, this book is an important contribution to the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition.⁴

II. Main Proponents of This Movement Have Been Aligned With Eastern Religion

Major proponents of the contemplative prayer movement have been or are aligned with Eastern religion. Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton, considered by many to have been devout Christians, have intermingled their form of Christianity with Zen, Buddhism and Sufism. In Henri Nouwen's own book, *Pray to Live* (p.19-28) he describes Merton as being heavily influenced by Hindu monks.

[Thomas] Merton had encountered Zen Buddhism, Sufism, Taoism and Vedanta many years prior to his Asian journey. Merton was able to uncover the stream where the wisdom of East and West merge and flow together, beyond dogma, in the depths of inner experience... Merton embraced the spiritual philosophies of the East and integrated this wisdom into (his) own life through direct practice.⁵

[T]he author shows a wonderful openness to the gifts of Buddhism, Hinduism and Moslem religion. He discovers their great wisdom for the spiritual life of the Christian and does not hesitate to bring that wisdom home.⁶

This mystical stream [contemplative prayer] is the Western bridge to Far Eastern spirituality... It is no accident that the most active frontier between Christian and Eastern religions today is between contemplative Christian monks and their Eastern equivalents. Some forms of Eastern meditation informally have been incorporated or adapted into the practice of many Christian monks, and increasingly by other Christians.⁷

III. Methods in Contemplative Prayer Are Same As In Eastern Religion

The methods of contemplative prayer are the same as those used in Eastern religion. According to *The New Age Movement and The Biblical Worldview*, meditation, chanting mantras, body disciplines, guided imagery, religious mysticism, self-realization and at-one-ment are all part of New Age and Eastern practices.

The techniques Benson teaches — silence, appropriate body posture and above all, emptying the mind through repetition of prayer—have been the practices of mystics in all the great world religions. And they form the basis on which most modern spiritual directors guide those who want to draw closer to God... Silence is the language God speaks ... says Thomas Keating who taught “centering prayer” to more than 31,000 people last year. Keating suggests that those who pray repeat some “sacred word,” like God or Jesus.⁸

The twentieth century, which has seen so many revolutions, is now witnessing the rise of a new mysticism within Christianity. ... For the new mysticism has learned much from the great religions of Asia. It has felt the impact of yoga and Zen and the monasticism of Tibet. It pays attention to posture and breathing; it knows about the music of the mantra and the silence of samadhi... Now what I say of Zen is true also of Christian mysticism. It also leads to an altered state of consciousness where all is one in God.⁹

Do not reflect on the meaning of the word; thinking and reflecting must cease, as *all* mystical writers insist.¹⁰

The repetition [of a word or phrase] can in fact be soothing and very freeing, helping us, as Nouwen says, “to empty out our crowded interior life and create the quiet space where we can dwell with God.”¹¹

IV. Authors in the Evangelical Church Have Latched Onto Contemplative Prayer

Some very popular authors in the evangelical church have latched on to contemplative prayer as a way to go deeper with God. Richard Foster and Brennan Manning hold workshops and speak in churches, seminaries and youth gatherings all across the country:

Christians ... have developed two fundamental expressions of Unceasing Prayer. The first ... is usually called aspiratory prayer or breath prayer. The most famous of the breath prayers is the Jesus Prayer. It is also possible to discover your own individual breath prayer.... Begin praying your breath prayer as often as possible.¹²

In *Celebration Of Discipline* by Richard Foster 1998, Foster makes several recommendations of books that are “helpful” to read. He heartily endorses Tilden Edward’s book, *Spiritual Friend*. Here are some quotes from that book, page 18 and 19—“This mystical stream [contemplative prayer and other monastic

traditions] is the Western bridge to Far Eastern spirituality (and to that of Sufis Moslems); this exchange, together with the more popular Eastern impact in the West through transcendental meditation, Hatha Yoga, the martial arts, and through many available courses on Eastern religions in universities, has aided a recent rediscovery of Christian apophatic mystical tradition.... Thomas Merton in many ways helped pave the way for recent serious Christian investigation of these potential Eastern contributions.” Page 72—“The new ecumenism involved here is not between Christian and Christian but between Christians and the grace of other intuitively deep religious traditions.”

A simple method of contemplative prayer (often called centering prayer ...) has four steps ... choose a single sacred word ... repeat the sacred word inwardly, slowly, often.... During a conference on contemplative prayer, the question was put to Thomas Merton: “How can we best help people (*not just Christians*) to attain union with God?” His answer was very clear: “We must tell them that they are already united with God. Contemplative prayer is nothing other than coming into consciousness of what is already there.”¹³

In *Discipleship Journal* Issue 100, 1997, page 78, in an interview, Brennan Manning recommends William O’ Shannon’s book, *Silence on Fire* and Thomas Keating’s book on centering prayer, *Open Mind, Open Heart*. In *Silence on Fire*, O’ Shannon blasts the Christian, biblical God. Page 109, 110—“This is a typical patriarchal notion of God. He is the God of Noah who sees people deep in sin, repents that He made them and resolves to destroy them. He is the God of the desert who sends snakes to bite His people because they murmured against Him. He is the God of David who practically decimates a people.... He is the God who exacts the last drop of blood from His Son, so that His just anger, evoked by sin, may be appeased. This God whose moods alternate between graciousness and fierce anger. This God does not exist.”

It is important to note here that the purpose of contemplative prayer is to enter an altered state of consciousness in order to find one’s true self, thus finding God. This true self relates to the belief that man is basically good. Christian proponents of contemplative prayer teach *that all human beings have a divine center* and that all, not just born again believers, should practice contemplative prayer.

[T]he God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is the same as the one who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being.¹⁴

Deep within us **all** there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy *place, a Divine Center*.¹⁵

[Even people] who have yet to turn their lives over to Jesus Christ—can and should practice them. [spiritual disciplines].¹⁶

[I]f I find Christ, I will find my true self and if I find my true self, I will find Christ.¹⁷

Matthew 15: 18,19 “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart: and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies.

Mark 7: 21,22 “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man..”

The Bible also clearly warns against repetitive prayer and also tells us we cannot find God unmediated.

Matthew 6:7 “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.”

I Timothy 2:5 “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.”

The following are the titles of several popular books and a list of people the authors make reference and recommendation to in those books:

Ragamuffin Gospel by Brennan Manning: Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Paul Tillich, Teilhard de Chardin, Carl Jung, M. Basil Pennington, Anthony De Mello.

Abba's Child by Brennan Manning: Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Morton Kelsey, Rainer Maria Rilke, Blaise Pascal, Simon Tugwell, David Seamands, John Bradshaw, Meister Eckhart, Leo Tolstoy, Anthony De Mello, Scott Peck.

Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home by Richard Foster: Thomas Merton, Madam Guyon, Catherine de Haecck Doherty (*Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man*), Sue Monk Kidd.

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster: Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Leo Tolstoy, mystic Richard Rolle, Thomas Kelly, Morton Kelsey, Evelyn Underhill, Meister Eckhart, Blaise Pascal, Lao –tse of China, Tilden Edwards.

The Way of the Heart by Henri Nouwen: Thomas Merton, Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, Teilhard de Chardin, Willigis Jager.

Conclusion:

It is ironic that in this century more Christians have died for their faith *in other countries* than have died in past centuries combined. Many of these Christians have departed from Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism to meet their executioners. What would these martyrs of the faith say to us if they could speak of our current Western practice of intermingling Christianity with Eastern religion and the occult? The Bible warns against such mixture:

I Corinthians 10: 21, 22 “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils; you cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and of the table of devils.”

Jesus never taught his disciples techniques to attain oneness with God but rather spoke of Himself as the Way. In fact, the entire New Testament was written to dispute the idea that people can reach God through religious efforts and reveal that Jesus Christ is the only answer. In conclusion, the contemplative movement is founded on the following *false premises:

The heart of man is basically good and (it has a divine center). Vs. The heart of man is wicked.—A DENIAL OF THE SIN NATURE

Man can find God through his own efforts regardless of what religion he has embraced. Vs. Jesus referred to Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.—A DENIAL OF THE ATONEMENT

God is delighted by chanting and similar methods of meditative prayer. Vs. Jesus said that He isn't.—A DENIAL OF GOD'S PERSONAL NATURE

With false premises as these, the conclusions can only be erroneous. The Bible creates the proper understanding and balance of 1) man as sinful, 2) needing a redeemer, 3) with whom he can have an abundant life.

** In philosophy, every "argument" must have a premise and a conclusion, but if your premises are false, it will inevitably lead you to a false conclusion.*

Endnotes

1. *As Above So Below: Paths to Spiritual Renewal in Daily Life* by Ronald S. Miller and the Editors of New Age Journal, 1992, pp. 52-53.
2. *Contemplative Living* by Joan Duncan Oliver, 2000, p. 113.
3. *The Mission of Mysticism* by Richard Kirby, 1979, p. 7.
4. *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality: A Pathway to Growth and Healing* by Philip St. Romain. 1995. This excerpt is in the Foreword by Thomas Keating, p. 7.
5. *Yoga Journal* magazine, January/February by Michael Torris, 1999.
6. *Disciplines For Christian Living* by Thomas Ryan 1993. This excerpt written in the Foreword by Henri Nouwen, p. 2.
7. *Spiritual Friend* by Tilden Edwards, pp. 18-19.
8. *Newsweek*, January 6, 1992, article called, "Talking to God," p. 44.
9. *The Mystical Way: Silent Music and the Wounded Stag* by William Johnston, 1993, Foreword, p. 336.
10. *Contemplation: A Christian Path* by Willigis Jager, 1994, p. 31.
11. *When The Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer* by Jan Johnson, p. 93.
12. *Prayer: Finding The Heart's True Home* by Richard Foster, p. 122. On pages 156-159 Foster discusses contemplative prayer in depth.
13. *Signature of Jesus* by Brennan Manning, p. 218, 211.
14. *Here and Now* by Henri Nouwen, p. 22.
15. *Streams of Living Water* by Richard Foster, 1998, beginning of chapter two—a quote by Thomas Kelly.
16. *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, p. 2.
17. *Abba's Child* by Brennan Manning, p.125.

For a more in depth look at the contemplative prayer movement, read Ray Yungen's A Time of Departing, which can be purchased through Lighthouse Trails Publishing at www.lighthouse Trails.com or call toll free 866/876-3910.