

Catholic Mysticism and the Emerging Church

by Richard Bennett

First we must define just what the term “mysticism” means. Mysticism is an attempt to gain ultimate knowledge of God by a direct experience that bypasses the mind. As practiced by those who claim to be Christian, mysticism not only bypasses the mind, but it circumvents Christ Jesus as mediator. For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has assimilated into herself the mystery elements of pagan religions; however, in 1965, at the time of Vatican Council II, Papal Rome officially joined itself with pagan religions and their practice of seeking to know God by direct experience. Some of the exact words of approval for these practices are still in the Vatican Council II documents. For example, Papal Rome states,

“...In Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love. Buddhism in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which man can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help... The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.”¹

Thus, Papal Rome officially accepts in Hinduism, that with confidence and love, one may seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices and profound meditation. Similarly, in Buddhism, one may “attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination, either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help.” Such an authorized approval of pagan practices has now become quite apparent in modern day Catholicism. Two months after the Vatican’s monumental acceptance of pagan mysticism, another well-known papal document revealed the heart of Roman Catholic policy. The basis for the recognition of pagan practices was proclaimed to be a “divine element” in mankind. This divine element in mankind makes it possible for the Catholic to have some sense of brotherhood with other religions. The exact words of another Vatican Council II document are,

“It [Vatican Council II] longs to set forth the way it understands the presence and function of the [Roman Catholic] Church in the world of today. Therefore, the world which the Council has in mind is the whole human family seen in the context of everything which envelops it... This is the reason why this sacred Synod, in proclaiming the noble destiny of man and affirming an element of the divine in him, offers to co-operate unreservedly with mankind in fostering a sense of brotherhood to correspond to this destiny of theirs.”²

The Jesuit mystical priest, William Johnston, explains what had happened as the Papal Church recognized pagan religions as valid ways to reach God.

“Then came the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Overnight the Catholic Church which had been a Western institution exporting its wares to the East became a world community. Asian and African bishops and theologians assembled in Rome and, with their European and American confreres, acknowledged that the Spirit of God is at work in all peoples and in all religions. Since then, most theologians recognize non-Christian religions as ‘valid ways’.”³

Out of this mingling of Papal traditions with Paganism the same William Johnston teaches disastrously deceitful ways to directly experience God. He writes, “Self-realization lies at the very heart of Buddhism... In self-realization I become one with God just as the object is one with the mirror

and just as Jesus is one with his Father.”⁴ Thus, it is that present day Catholicism stands hand-in-hand with Buddhism and Hinduism.

Emerging Church Movement

Since the late twentieth century the Emerging Church Movement has become quite influential in the USA and across the world. Much of what the movement teaches is quite similar to Catholic mystical practices; sometimes it actually uses traditional Catholic techniques and methods. Until recently, while the alignment of Roman Catholicism with the “Emerging Church Movement” was evident, there was no formal recognition of the matter. However, it was announced in early 2008 that leading Catholic and Emerging Church personages are to speak at what is called “The Emerging Church Conference,” which took place on March 20-22, 2009 in Albuquerque, NM. The website proclaiming this event stated the following, “Come to the first large gathering of Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, and other Christians seeking to explore this emergence and convergence together. You’ll be inspired by provocative speakers and spiritual leaders and engage in in-depth conversation about our shared quests for: A fresh understanding of Jesus, Spirituality that links contemplation and action, Social justice and holistic mission, Authentic community. Join Fr. Richard Rohr, Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, Shane Claiborne, Alexie Torres-Fleming.”⁵ (Richard Rohr is a Franciscan monk and Catholic priest, the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation.)

The Roman Catholic Church was very wise in its choice of Emergent Church leaders.⁶ Besides Brian McLaren, who has always been the main leader and so-called guide of the movement, they chose Phyllis Tickle. In point of fact, the movement to some extent centers on Phyllis Tickle and her book, “The Great Emergence.”⁷ Phyllis Tickle has likened the Emergent Church leader, Brian McLaren, to Martin Luther.⁸ In the book, she emphatically denies the Bible alone (*Sola Scriptura*) as being the sole standard of truth. In “The Great Emergence” she writes,

“The Reformation... was to answer the question... *Sola scriptura, scriptura sola*... While we may laugh and say the divisiveness was Protestantism’s greatest gift to Christianity, ours is a somber joke. Denominationalism is a disunity in the Body of Christ and, ironically, one that has a bloody history... Now, some five hundred years later, even many of the most die-hard Protestants among us have grown suspicious of ‘Scripture and Scripture only.’ We question what the words mean – literally? Metaphorically? Actually? We even question which words do and do not belong in Scripture and the purity of the editorial line of descent of those that do. We begin to refer to Luther’s principle of ‘*sola scriptura, scriptura sola*’ as having been little more than the creation of a paper pope in place of a flesh and blood one. And even as we speak, the authority that has been in place for five hundred years withers away in our hands.”⁹

In her book Tickle also writes,

“The next assault in this progression of assaults [upon *Sola Scriptura*] was the ordination of women to the Protestant clergy... The ordination of women was followed, of course, by their elevation to the episcopacy in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Clearly the battle of ‘Scripture only’ was being lost.... Enter ‘the gay issue.’ To approach any of the arguments and questions surrounding homosexuality in the closing years of the twentieth century and the opening ones of the twenty-first is to approach a battle to the death. When it is resolved – and it most surely will be – the Reformation’s understanding of Scripture as it had been taught by Protestantism for almost five centuries will be dead.”¹⁰

Tickle not only repudiates *Sola Scriptura* (Bible alone) as being the sole standard of truth, in her acceptance of the Roman Catholic Church, as a viable expression of Christianity, she has denied the essential of biblical faith. This is seen in her writings and in the address she gave at St. Peter’s Catholic Church, Memphis, Tennessee in 2002.¹¹ She definitely identifies herself as being “Post-Christendom” and “Post-Protestant.”

“I’m Phyllis Tickle and I’m here talking with Pete Rollins and what we’re talking about is

Emerging or Emergent Christianity... we may not have the word we're happy with, but we know we're Post-Christendom, we're Post-Denominational, we're Post-Protestant..."¹²

Phyllis Tickle now joins Brian McLaren as a formidable leader of Emergent Christianity. Together, with thousands of devoted followers across the world, they amount to one of the most serious menaces to true Christian faith. True believers are those who adhere to God only and His Written Word ("Sola Scriptura"), as did the Lord and the Apostles after Him. They believe we are saved before the all-Holy God by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone; and, all glory and praise is to God alone. It is these very principles that are now being ruthlessly attacked by Phyllis Tickle and other Emerging Church leaders. Because of this, it is of vital importance that genuine believers defend true biblical faith.

The Origin of Roman Catholic Mysticism

In the 12th and 13th centuries, going back to the Eastern mystics, there was great interest in mysticism. From this interest, some mystical elements were found among new orders of monks being formed, such as the Franciscans of Saint Francis and the Dominicans of Saint Dominic. It was not, however, until the 16th century that mystics such as Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross developed a systematized mysticism in their writings. These well-known instigators of mysticism laid out steps by which a person was to achieve personal union with the divine. The modern arousal of interest in Catholic mysticism can be traced in the 20th century to Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani of Kentucky USA. He wrote many books and essays. For example, Merton taught that there exists a divine core to the human person that the person discovers through mysticism. Thus Merton stated,

"...now I realize what we all are. And if only everyone could realize this!... I suddenly saw all the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other."¹³

The Catholic priest, William Shannon, is a devotee of Merton. He often cites his mentor, as he does with the following quote that endorses an idolatrous self-identification with God. Shannon writes,

"A person of true faith travels, not without difficulty, towards the heart of mystery. Such a person, as Merton puts it, works 'his way through the darkness of his own mystery until he discovers that his own mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality, which is the only reality.' DQ 180:¹⁴

These quotations from Merton and Shannon are standard descriptions of the pantheistic myth of modern Catholicism that identifies Being or Nature with God with human nature or essence. These blasphemous lies are merely further expansion of the basic teaching of Vatican Council II that stated that there is an element of the divine in mankind. Thus, Merton and Shannon, in their pantheistic identification of God, have attempted to destroy God's self-sufficiency as Creator and as the Lord God Almighty. They have endeavored to clone God into the image of humans. According to Romans 1:25, they have attempted to, "changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever." In the place of the true worship of God, they have set about to establish pantheistic idolatry.

Evangelical Endorsement of Catholic Mysticism

Many see the so-called Evangelical, Richard Foster, as the person who preceded the Emerging Church leaders in seeking for pantheistic identification with God. Foster stated, "Contemplative Prayer immerses us into the silence of God. How desperately we in the modern world need this wordless baptism!... Progress in intimacy with God means progress toward silence."¹⁵ Foster asks rhetorically,

“What is the goal of Contemplative Prayer?” And he answers, “To this question the old writers answer with one voice: union with God.... Bonaventure, a follower of Saint Francis, says that our final goal is ‘union with God,’ which is a pure relationship where we see ‘nothing’.”¹⁶ Foster’s statement, “Our final goal is ‘union with God,’” is just an Evangelical rehashing of the Catholic concept of a divine element with man as the basis of mankind’s union with God. Foster has a whole website devoted to deceitful mysticism. See Renovare.org. In 2005, he went so far as to publish what he calls the “Renovare Study Bible” to further pave the trail for pantheistic identification with God. Subsequent to Richard Foster the Emergent Church movement has been the most successful promoter of Catholic mysticism, and increasingly the movement is affecting many people across the world.

The Teaching of an Emerging Church Leader and Its Outcome

Tony Jones was the National Coordinator of Emergent Village. He had been a regular speaker at National Youth Workers Conventions and respected enough to be one of the featured seminar presenters for the Zondervan National Pastors Conference in February 2006. He had written the books, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (2003), and *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (2005). Like so many leaders in the Emergent Church, his personal testimony was without hope before God. For example, in writing about “The Quest for God,” he showed himself fumbling in the darkness of unbelief. He wrote, “[Some of us] have this nagging feeling that God is following us around, nudging us to live justly, and expecting us to talk to him every once in a while... Every time I leave God’s side, as it were, it’s not too long until I feel God tagging right along beside me, I can’t seem to shake him. Yet having this sense of God’s company doesn’t necessarily translate to a meaningful spiritual life. I know this because despite my awareness of God’s presence, I have spent most of my life trying to figure out what to do about it.”¹⁷ This sad testimony is of a man who was a leading light of the Emergent Church movement. In the Epilogue to his two books, in the sections called “Developing a Rule of Life,” Jones urges his readers to use certain religious exercises. He wrote,

“Following some experience with the ancient practices outlined in this book, you may decide to incorporate some of them into your personal Rule of Life. An example of a rule could look something like this: Pray through two centuries of the Jesus Prayer in the morning and evening every day. Keep the Sabbath from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday every week. Walk a labyrinth once a month. Take a two-day silent retreat once a year. Fast and walk the Stations of the Cross every Friday during Lent. Take a 28-day Ignatian retreat every decade...”¹⁸

His final advice he declares is mandatory,

“We have lots of options in our ministries, but developing a disciplined spiritual life isn’t one of them. That is, it isn’t optional. It’s mandatory... Slow down. Listen to God. Be silent. Meditate. Make the Stations. Stare at the icon. And there, do you feel it? The divine light of the Risen Christ flickering within you, slowly building to a roaring fire....”¹⁹

A biblical Christian is startled by the endorsement of so many Roman Catholic practices. In the words of Scripture this is, “counsel by words without knowledge.”²⁰ And the Word of God specifically forbids staring at icons for spiritual life, and the consequences of such idolatry.²¹

Because of allegations of a marital affair, Tony Jones resigned as National Coordinator in the autumn of 2008. While he was National Coordinator for Emergent Village, *Relevant Magazine* interviewed him on the issue of homosexuality. He was asked, “You mentioned earlier that you have lesbian pastors and conservative absolutists. It seems that it would create a tension point when it comes to endorsing that person’s view or platform.” Jones replied, “If you believe that Christianity is – at its very heart – a tension-filled, dialectical endeavor, you have less problems with these tension-filled relationships with believers. Christianity is paradoxical. Life comes out of death. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. We haven’t yet found that there’s anything that justifies us breaking fellowship with somebody else who loves and is trying to follow Jesus.”²²

Jones’ personal blog is now at the inter-spiritual website called Belief.net. In *Same Sex Marriage*

Blogalogue: How I Went from There to Here, Jones removed all doubt as to his position. He thinks that Christians should also take his position regarding those who are unrepentant in their persistent and determined practice of the sin of homosexuality. He states,

“And yet, all the time I could feel myself drifting toward acceptance that gay persons are fully human persons and should be afforded all of the cultural and ecclesial benefits that I am. (‘Aha!’ my critics will laugh derisively, ‘I knew he and his ilk were on a continuous leftward slide!’) In any case, I now believe that GLBTQ [Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Trans-gendered, Queer] can live lives in accord with biblical Christianity (at least as much as any of us can!) and that their monogamy can and should be sanctioned and blessed by church and state.”²³

Tony Jones has shown the end result of his emergent beliefs. As the Lord Himself explained, “even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”²⁴ Jones let go of the knowledge of Christ Jesus as the only Mediator and became entrapped within the traditions of men and the bankruptcy of worldly spirituality. Jones made mystical exercises seem so worthy – that by endorsing Catholic mysticism, idolatry, and fleshly devotions – he bewitched those who read or tried to implement his teaching. The manufactured relics of Catholicism that were presented by Jones are absolutely opposed to biblical truth. The Lord God’s command is that believers are to be “casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”²⁵ Tony Jones is an example of evil treasure brought forth from evil things.

Objective Salvation in the Lord of Glory

As Mediator, Christ Jesus is the only means of union between God and man, “that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him.”²⁶ Christ Jesus is exalted to “the right hand of the Majesty on high”²⁷ as the One Savior. He and His Gospel are objective and real. This Gospel is not an idle tale, nor a piece of incomprehensible mysticism; rather, it is the proclamation of the awesome, historical work of redemption accomplished by God Himself. The Father appointed Christ Jesus as the guarantor of real salvation. Christ Jesus was glorified for finishing the Father’s mightiest work. In Christ’s own words, “I have glorified thee on earth; I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.”²⁸ He had fulfilled all the Father’s will, and so, gloriously honored the Father. As Savior, He is exalted high above “all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.”²⁹ He alone – not some mystic charm of Papal Rome or Buddha – has been given all authority in heaven and in earth. He has been given power over all flesh that He should, in His own words, “give eternal life to as many as thou [God] hast given him.”³⁰ He alone has been given a name, which is above every name, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”³¹ It is God’s commandment that we trust on Christ. “This is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ.”³²

True faith involves a repudiation of the self-deceit of any experiential mystical means of reaching God, “for there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”³³ The Lord Jesus stands ready to receive every sinner who will throw away his rebellion and pride and trust in Him alone for salvation. Preaching the real historical Christ and His Gospel is the answer to the mindless adumbrations of Rome and the ecumenical mystics. Thus alone, can the true Church, God’s people, go “forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.”³⁴ The Gospel is a mighty deliverance from the groveling religious subjectivism of Rome and her Emerging Church cohort. To know God is life itself to a Christian. In the words of the Lord Himself, “this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”³⁵ Knowledge of God, and faith in Him, are the means whereby all spiritual supports and comforts are conveyed to the true believers. “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that

pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.”³⁶

Conclusion and Application

We now understand how serious is the infiltration of Catholic mysticism into its own system, and now the same mysticism is being propagated by the Emergent Church movement. The machinations of Catholic mysticism, and that of the Emergent Church, have clearly unveiled apostasy, seeing that they have rejected the Christ of history, received “the christ of Satan,” which “christ” is “enlightenment,” and “self realization;” while they sport and play with Satan’s rites for fulfillment in such as “Centering Prayer,” “The Ignatian Examen,” and “The Labyrinth.”

There is no valid excuse for true believers to be deceived by “false apostles” who transform themselves into the “apostles of Christ,” “for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.”³⁷ There are many false prophets gone out into the world, but if we diligently study these things, which God has recorded for our safeguard against the subtle deceptions of Satan, we need not mislead nor be misled. The forces of evil are present in the influence and power of the Papal Church, and at the time, the Emerging Church is powerful, but not all-powerful. It has been fought and overcome by One greater and mightier. We take courage, though the subtleties and deceit of mysticism beats fiercely upon us, they only drive us closer to Christ. “But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”³⁸ What a glorious closing for the Lord’s final discourse to His Apostles, what a wonderful Word to us at this hour. There must be no surrender, no compromise, and no fellowship with the world of mysticism. Here is the Lord’s war-cry; “him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.”³⁹ As we stand strong in Him, it will not be long before the conflict will cease! For “Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”⁴⁰

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ENDNOTES:

1. Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, No. 56, Nostra Aetate, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” 28 Oct. 1965, Austin Flannery, Gen. Ed., Vol. I, Para. 2, p. 739.
2. Vatican II Document No. 64, Gaudium et Spes, 7 Dec. 1965 in Flannery, Vol. I, Sec. 2, 3 pp. 904-5. Bolding in any quotation is added in this presentation.
3. William Johnston, *The Mirror Mind* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990) p.7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33, 39
5. <http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/conferences/emer/1/8/2009>
6. Others, Shane Claiborne is a founding partner of The Simple Way, a faith community in inner city Philadelphia. Alexie Torres-Fleming is the founder of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in the South Bronx. In addition, she is the co-founder of the Southern Bronx River Watershed Alliance.
7. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Baker: Grand Rapids, MI., 2008)
8. <http://pomomusings.com/2006/11/20/sblaar-day-23-what-is-emergent/> 1/21/09.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 46 & 47
10. *Ibid.*, p. 100 & 101
11. <http://www.explorefaith.org/stepstones/everyday.html>

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12. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UnMn_sOFXw
 13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Image edition Dec. 1989 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966) pp. 157-158. This book has official Roman Catholic approval.
 14. William Shannon, *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and Non-Violence* (New York: Crossroad Publ. Co., 1996) p. 73
 15. Foster, Richard J., *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) p. 155
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 159
 17. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) p. 15
 18. Sole Shaper, p. 233
 19. *The Sacred Way*, pp. 198-199; *Soul Shaper*, p. 233-234
 20. Job 38:2
 21. Exodus 20:4-5 Verse 5 "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD they God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me."
 22. Transcript on file at Apprising Ministries Website: <http://apprising.org/>
 23. <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2008/11/same-sex-marriage-blogalogue-h.html>, 1/21/09, bold theirs.
 24. Matthew 7:17
 25. II Corinthians 10:5
 26. Ephesians 1:10
 27. Hebrews 1:3
 28. John 17:4
 29. Ephesians 1:21
 30. John 17:2
 31. Philippians 2:10-11
 32. I John 3:23
 33. I Timothy 2:5
 34. Song of Solomon 6:10
 35. John 17:3
 36. II Peter 1:3
 37. II Corinthians 11:13-14
 38. John 16:33
 39. Revelation 3:21
 40. I John 5:4

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