

## EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN CHRISTIANITY

A new phenomenon in Christianity is the “emerging church.” Why is this movement extremely dangerous? What is contemplative prayer? What is a labyrinth? What does “ancient-future” mean? Who is involved in this movement?

### Dennis Priebe

It's Saturday night, and inside an old brick building, in the heart of downtown, flames from candles dance on the walls. This is a church service. A twenty-something crowd sits on couches and chairs in the darkened room. One fellow sits on a bar stool asking questions. He suggests possible answers and leads the discussion. This pastor occasionally sips his cappuccino. Young man begins playing a song on a guitar. The smell of incense fills the corners of the room. What is happening here is called the emerging church. It is occurring all across North America, with perhaps twenty million participants. One person commented, “It's really not a rebellion so much as it's just finding a new set of answers, a different way of being Christians.”

In this presentation we are going to deal with things which will sound very strange to Adventist ears. I will explain all the terms and their implications, and why Seventh-day Adventists need to be aware of them.

---

### New Age Movement

Back in the 1980's the term New Age movement inspired a sense of dread in conservative Christians. There was a conviction that something sinister surrounded this movement. But in the 1990's this fear largely subsided. However, this movement has not gone away. It has quietly permeated western culture and is invading Christian churches. By 2002 it was estimated that 20% of Americans now embrace aspects of this movement. In national chain bookstores the number of New Age books equals or surpasses Christian books. Perhaps the bottom line belief of the New Age movement is that God is within all of us, and we need to bring out this divine essence in us to find peace and happiness.

The emerging church or the emergent church is an attempt to break away from traditional church activities and goals. One pastor said, “Five years ago I left the established church. I gave up my job as pastor at one of the largest churches in America to go...well, nowhere, except my garage turned office.” (Spencer Burke, *Making Sense of Church*, p. 19) The salvation message of the emerging church is not found in doctrine but in discussion, not in truth but in dialogue, always searching but never finding.

Another pastor said, "Sermons are not primarily about my extracting truth from the Bible to apply to people's lives. The sermon is putting words around people's experiences to allow them to find deeper connections in their lives." (Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined*, p. 166) This allows everyone to have a say and come to some kind of consensus about what the Bible might be saying. Since cultures are always changing, theology must change with it. A pastor noted, "When we change the medium, the message that's received is changed, however subtly, as well." (Brian McLaren, *Church on the Other Side*, p. 68) Another pastor said, "The old paradigm taught that if you had the right teaching you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God you will have the right teaching." (Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, p. 21) Now, what are some of these experiences which will produce the right teaching?

---

## Contemplative Prayer

At the heart of this entire emerging church movement is the concept of contemplative prayer. How does one experience this kind of praying? "When one enters the deeper layers of contemplative prayer one experiences the emptiness...the profound mystical silence...an absence of thought." (William Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 13) How does one achieve this silence? By the repetition of a prayer word or a sacred word. "Do not reflect on the meaning of the word; thinking and reflecting must cease. Simply sound the word silently, letting go of all feelings and thoughts." (Willigis Jager, *Contemplation: A Christian Path*, p. 31) In other words, the mind has to be turned off to experience the presence of God. One observer writes, "Contemplative prayer has once again become commonplace in the Christian community." (Sheed & Ward Catalog, Winter/Lent, 1978, p. 12) Once again is an interesting phrase. Where was it before? We find in a Catholic catechism the phrase, "Contemplative prayer is silence." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, p. 652) The mainline Protestant churches (Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Church of Christ) have dived into the contemplative waters.

Do the terms mantra and meditation ring any bells of memory? They come straight out of New Age methods. A college professor writes, "My students have been typically middle-aged and upper middle class Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, active in the lay leadership of their churches. To outward appearances, they are quite conventional people. Yet I have found that virtually every one of my students has encountered the new age in one of its many forms and has been attracted by its mystery." (Bruce Epperly, *Crystal & Cross*, p. 14)

---

## **Ancient-Future**

Another phrase commonly heard is vintage Christianity, or ancient-future faith. This refers to a spirituality out of the past which makes our Christian experience more real. The ancient or vintage practices do not refer to the first century apostles, but to the desert fathers who lived hermit-like lives in small communities. They adapted the Hindu mantra method to be their method of prayer. Other ancient practices which are becoming popular are incense and candles, the sign of the cross, anointing with oil, and services like Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Holy Week. In one list of ancient mystics, all are Catholic books. One authority on worship renewal says, we must "see Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches as various forms of the one true church--all based on apostolic teaching and authority, finding common ground in the faith expressed by classical Christianity." (Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, p. 85) A number of these mystics had visions of a woman they believed to be Mary. One interesting aspect of this worship renewal is the darkened room. This is commonly found in Buddhist temples, as well as Catholic and Orthodox churches.

---

## **Interspirituality**

What is interspirituality? This is the desired outcome of contemplative prayer. Since God is in all religions and individuals, all things are connected. There is common spiritual ground in all religions. The church needs to study and seek common ground with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Taoists, Confucians, and indigenous peoples. In an opinion poll, 84% of Americans believed God to be everywhere and in everything.

---

## **Labyrinth**

Have you heard of the labyrinth? It is a maze-like structure used in contemplative prayer. The participant walks through the labyrinth until he comes to the center, and then he goes back out again. Often prayer stations with candles and pictures can be visited along the way. The goal is to center down to reach God's presence while reaching the center of the labyrinth.

---

## Drumming Circle

Then there is the drumming circle, which is exactly what it sounds like. One advertisement reads, "We are uniting people around the world in one hour of drumming in unison! Getting together in a true global village of drumming!" (World wide Drumming event, Heartfelt Arena [One World Beat, 2006 event])

---

## Catholic and Hindu Ties

There is no fear in this emerging church in going back to Catholic sources for instruction. One worship leader writes, "The early fathers can bring us back to what is common and help us get behind our various traditions. The words One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic point to the oneness of the church." (Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, p. 89) In a book titled *Journeys Home* we find many examples of Protestants returning to Catholicism, and for some the church fathers played an important role in their return. The ancient-future path has the potential to lead many into the arms of Rome.

This Christian mysticism has direct ties to Eastern mysticism. A world-renowned Catholic monk came to believe through a Hindu mystic that the realm reached through meditation is the same no matter what religion you are. "At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin, a point of pure truth. This little point is the pure glory of God in us. It is in everybody." (Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 157-158)

---

## Major Proponents

These are a few of the names and books which may not be familiar to us, but which are well known in this movement.

---

- M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* – Millions of copies of this book have been printed. It teaches that the goal of spiritual growth is to become totally, wholly God. The author is proud to be part of the New Age movement.
- Thomas Merton, the father of the contemplative prayer movement, is a Catholic monk.
- Henri Nouwen is a Catholic theologian. He believes that all make their own way to God, because God dwells in each human being.
- Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington are Catholic monks.

- Tilden Edwards and Gerald May, an Episcopal priest and a psychiatrist, are teachers at Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, D.C.
- Morton Kelsey is an Episcopalian priest.
- Matthew Fox is an Episcopalian priest who believes in New Age mysticism and deep ecumenism and divinity existing in all creatures.

Then we move to the evangelical Christian world, where believers insist on verbal inspiration, the literal return of Christ, the importance of the new birth, and the name of Jesus being the only way of salvation.

---

- Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* – Two million copies have been printed. He recommends Tilden Edwards, Thomas Merton, and Henri Nouwen. The terms spiritual formation and spiritual directors have moved from Catholic orders to evangelical seminaries, along with contemplative prayer or breath prayer using a mantra and emptying the mind. It is a tragic reality that contemplative prayer and pantheism go together like a hand in a glove. You simply cannot have one without the other. Foster's books were rated #1 and #3 in a poll of evangelical Christians.
- Brennan Manning is a former Catholic who is endorsed by Philip Yancey. He recommends Basil Pennington, Thomas Merton, and Thomas Keating. All of this ties Christians to something very dangerous. Tilden Edwards writes, "This mystical stream (contemplative prayer) is the Western bridge to Far Eastern spirituality." (Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*, p. 18) The path has led from India to Alexandria to the Catholic fathers to Thomas Merton to Foster and Manning. Manning recommends that you stop thinking about God when you pray so you can enter into the great silence of God—just repeat one sacred word slowly and often. Manning was invited by Malcolm Maxwell to be the Week of Prayer speaker at Pacific Union College a number of years ago.
- *Chicken Soup for the Soul* is a series of books very popular among Christians. It promotes many occult writers and books like *Hot Chocolate for the Mystical Soul* with mediums and channelers telling their stories. As the Word of God becomes less read and less important, the rise of mystical experiences escalates as people desire to get closer to God. *Christianity Today* calls the road to maturity the fact that evangelicals are learning from wise teachers in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, which is a reason to rejoice.

- Tony Campolo has embraced mysticism, centering prayer, the mantra, and the Catholic mystics, especially Ignatius of Loyola. He says that the Protestant Reformation left too much Catholic truth behind.

Now we will look at some individuals who are more familiar to us. They also have embraced some aspects of Eastern mysticism. Who is the most influential practical mystic today? None other than Oprah Winfrey. "God isn't 'up there'. He exists inside each one of us, and it's up to us to seek the divine within." (Eric Butterworth, *Discover the Power Within You*, front cover) Her talk show has launched many New Age authors into national prominence. Another individual is even more difficult to believe. A book was written which says that the Holy Spirit and the Buddha nature are synonymous. The 23rd Psalm and I Ching are quoted together. We are to listen to God, Jesus, all the Buddhas and the saints. In this book is an endorsement by none other than Fred Rogers. (Wayne Muller, *Sabbath*, front matter) Have you ever heard of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood? This fits with the results of a poll in 2002, in which 70% of all Christians believe that those in other religions should be left alone. There is no need to present Jesus Christ to them. Now we will look at a minister who has replaced Billy Graham as the leading pastor in America. Rick Warren believes the church should lay down its differences with other religions to work together on social problems. He said to Eric Sawyer, co-founder of ACT-UP, a gay activist group, "Eric, how can I help you get your message out?" He said, "I'm working with these guys." (Interview by Charlie Rose, August 17, 2006) His vision is for global cooperation which will include Catholics, Muslims, and homosexuals. "If you want Jesus to come back sooner, focus on fulfilling your mission, not figuring out prophecy." (Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Life*, p. 286) In other words, let us not focus on the return of Christ, but let us help people realize that Christ is already in them. Tony Campolo says that those who emphasize final events and the second coming have been the cause of extremely detrimental consequences. (Tony Campolo, *Speaking My Mind*, pp. 209, 211) Rick Warren says that these Christians are one of the big enemies of the 21st century and are like Islamic fundamentalists. (Paul Nussbaum, "The Purpose Driven Pastor," Philadelphia Enquirer, Jan. 8, 2006) Pastor Warren says he learned about breath prayers from a Catholic monk named Brother Lawrence. (Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Life*, p. 89) A follower of Lawrence describes him singing and dancing violently like a mad man. (Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, p. 87) Very often Warren promotes Richard Foster, Brennan Manning, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton. Warren is a major force in the effort to bring contemplative prayer and spiritual formation into mainstream Christianity. Rick Warren says that one of the church's most important and provocative thinkers is Leonard Sweet, who says, "Reinvent yourself for the 21st century or die." (Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*, p. 75) He speaks of "a channeling of Christ energies through mindbody experience." (Leonard Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality*, p. 70)

Sue Monk Kidd, a Baptist Christian, states, "The ultimate authority of my life is not the Bible. My ultimate authority is the divine voice in my own soul. Period." (Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, p. 76) "I came to know myself as an embodiment of Goddess." (Ibid., p. 161)

Richard Foster envisions "a great, new gathering of the people of God....I see a Catholic monk standing alongside a Baptist evangelist together offering up a sacrifice of praise." (Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, pp. 273, 274)

---

## The New Spiritualism

Listen to one young writer describe his method of praying. "I built myself a prayer room. In that space I lit candles, burned incense, hung rosaries, and listened to tapes of Benedictine monks. I meditated for hours on words, images, and sounds. I reached the point of being able to achieve alpha brain patterns, the state in which dreams occur." (Mike Perschon, "Desert Youth Worker: Disciplines, Mystics, and the Contemplative Life," *Youthworker*, Nov.-Dec. 2004) Now listen to a practitioner of another supernatural power. "The science of Witchcraft is based on our ability to enter an altered state of consciousness we call 'alpha.'...Here we may...receive mystical, visionary information that does not come through the five senses....Alpha is the springboard for all psychic and magical workings. It is the heart of Witchcraft." (Laurie Cabot, *Power of the Witch*, pp. 173, 183) But, you say, this young man is not into witchcraft. He is a devoted Christian. Listen again. "Mystics in every religious tradition speak of alpha states of consciousness. ...In their own ways they have learned how to enter alpha as they pray or worship. They learn how to become enlightened." (Ibid., p. 200) Do you see what is happening? Dedicated Christians are connecting directly to Satan's realm. They are allowing Satan to bypass frontal lobes of rational thought and go directly to the subconscious, by which he becomes their master just as surely as demon possession in Scripture. Listen to one woman describe her labyrinth experience. "I remember...praying prayers of gratefulness to all the spirits that we had called on during our ritual....Then I saw beings of light blue in hue, faceless but human in form in solemn procession....I felt wonderful to be sharing the space with these beings—angels, guardians of the labyrinth." (Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, pp. 95-96)

This has become an important part of Christian youth ministries. In 16 test churches, middle school and senior high youth "were eager to learn contemplative spiritual practices." (Mark Yaconelli, "Ancient Future

Youth Ministry," Group Magazine, July- Aug. 1999, p. 39) Even Charles Swindoll endorses Henri Nouwen and Richard Foster. (Charles Swindoll, *So You Want to be Like Christ?* p. 65)

---

## **"Churchless" Christianity**

One important thread runs through these spiritual formation teachings. You don't have to receive Christ as your Saviour and be born again to be a follower of Christ. Anyone, not just believers, can practice the spiritual disciplines and become like Christ. Jesus is a role model to follow rather than a Saviour. Since many professedly born-again Christians do not have the indwelling Christ, they are desperately searching for a Christian experience, and spiritual formation looks like a gift from heaven to provide peace and the assurance of salvation.

Several missions organizations are testing a new approach to missionary work. They are making converts but allowing them to hold on to many of their traditional religious beliefs and practices, so as to refrain from offending others within their culture. This leads, for example, "to a Christianized Hinduism," because both are at heart the same. "We do not want to change...the religious genius of India." (H. L. Richard, "Christ- Followers In India Flourishing Outside the Church," *Mission Frontiers*, March-April 1999) In practical terms, this means the family worships Jesus along with Hindu gods in their home. Leonard Sweet refers to "the flickers of the sacred in followers of Yahweh, or Kali, or Krishna." (Leonard Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality*, p. 130) One book states, "Christians cannot truly evangelize unless they are prepared to be evangelized in the process." We must "learn from faith traditions outside the Christian fold" because "the Spirit has been with these people all along." (Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, pp. 131-132) Does all of this bring back historical memories of what happened to Christianity in the second to fourth centuries?

---

## **Substitutionary Atonement?**

An Episcopal priest says, "The church's fixation on the death of Jesus as the universal saving act must end." (Alan Jones, *Reimagining Christianity*, p. 132) Another writer states, "The God of Noah...the God of the desert...the God of David...this God does not exist." (William Shannon, *Silence on Fire*, pp. 109-110) This obviously leads to the next step. "I let go of the notion that the Bible is a divine product. I learned that it is a human cultural product....Jesus almost certainly was not born of a virgin, did not think of himself as the Son of God, and did not see his purpose as dying for the sins of the world." (Marcus Borg,

*The God We Never Knew*, p. 25) One author refers to the idea that Jesus was trying to get more souls into heaven after they die, by saying, "A fair reading of the Gospels blows that out of the water." (Brian McLaren, "PBS Special on the Emerging Church," *Religion and Ethics Weekly*, July 15, 2005, part 2) Then he comments that he is rethinking evolution and creation. The atonement is not needed in the emerging church because all creation is already being saved and unified with God.

Do you see how dangerous this experience-driven Christianity is? The atoning death of Christ is replaced by Roman Catholic rituals and Eastern mysticism which connects us directly to spiritualism. It says that since God is within all of us, all religions are pathways to God, and no one is wrong for the way in which they are walking.

The process to reunite with Rome has already begun through experience-based spirituality and contemplative prayer, which are all based on subjective experiences. Spiritualistic manifestations will appear, with much attention to Mary. The world's religions will come together for the cause of peace. The new Christ will expect all to bow down and worship him.

---

## The Adventist Connection

We can easily recognize how dangerous all of this is to the Christian church and especially to evangelical Christians, but what does this have to do with Seventh-day Adventists? Surely we are immune to this great deception. Well, maybe fifty years ago, but not today. Tragically, our defenses against delusions have been worn down by years of growing apostasy.

Samir Selmanovic has been a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. Today, he is part of the emerging church movement. "To believe that God is limited to it [Christianity] would be an attempt to manage God." His vision is to bring progressive Jews, Christians, Muslims, and spiritual seekers of no faith to become an interfaith community for the good of the world. "What belongs to the kingdom of God cannot be hijacked by Christianity." (Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, "The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness," *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, pp. 192-194)

The Australian *Signs of the Times* and a new book advocate centering prayer, breath prayer, and using a phrase or the name of Christ in prayer. One United States conference has been inviting emergent church leaders to hold seminars for them. One Seminary course requires all students to read Richard Foster's

book. Leonard Sweet and Samir Selmanovic have been speaking at Adventist-sponsored meetings. Books dealing with ancient practices are being advertised in the *Adventist Review*.

This new approach to Christianity holds all of the keys to the fulfillment of the final prophecies of Revelation. Let us faithfully warn all we can to recognize Satan's final deceptions and to remain faithful to God's inspired Word.

---

## **Addendum**

Nothing in the above article should be used to discourage the proper use of meditation. As is true of all good gifts of God, Satan has perverted the process of meditation in order to connect human beings directly to his realm. But Christian meditation is extremely important for Christian growth. "Meditation and prayer are necessary to a growth in grace." (2T 187)

Some have questioned the use of any type of visualization or imagination by the growing Christian. Ellen White has much to say about the dangers of an undisciplined imagination. She warns that there can be no real reformation in a person's life unless the imagination is reformed by the power of God's grace. But note carefully the following statements.

---

It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. (DA 83)

Let your imagination picture the home of the saved. (SC 86)

In the Bible a boundless field is opened for the imagination. (CG 507)

Their (children's) minds should be filled with stories of the life of the Lord, and their imaginations encouraged in picturing the glories of the world to come. (CG 488)

Oh, how much we lose by not educating the imagination to dwell upon divine things, rather than upon the earthly! We may give fullest scope to the imagination. (6BC 1085)

Obviously there is a proper use of the imagination in seeing in the mind's eye scenes in Christ's life or Bible stories or heaven. In Christian meditation the mind is focused on Bible truths and the thoughts are directed by concentrating on Bible realities. In Eastern meditation the goal is to empty the mind of all conscious thought so that it is open to "divine" impressions. Methods are employed to cause the mind to shift into "neutral" so that it is open to whatever is placed into the mind. What a perfect avenue this provides for Satan to place his thoughts directly into the conscious mind without any analytical evaluation.

In Christian meditation the mind is thought directed and controlled. In Eastern meditation the mind is emptied of all conscious thinking. The track of truth always lies close to the track of error.

---