

Panentheism! What is That?

Have you ever heard of "panentheism"? It sounds a lot like pantheism but there are those two additional letters "en" inserted after "pan." The word broken into its constituent parts is pan=all, en= in, and theos= God. Panentheism is the belief the universe is contained within God and that the universe is part of God. Unwittingly protestant and evangelical leaders are embracing panentheism, thinking it just an ancient form of prayer, and discipleship flying under the radar with the alias of "Spiritual Formation." It appears that the pragmatics and superficiality of the seeker sensitive, market driven church has prompted a need for mystical medication. Larry Crabb, a popular evangelical Christian psychologist of the last decade and author of many books, has apparently graduated to the contemplative. He expresses clearly the bankruptcy of pragmatic seeker sensitive spirituality. For him the mindless mysticism of Contemplative Prayer has brought him reality he apparently never found in pragmatic seeker sensitive spirituality. Here is his description of his former prayer-life.

"[Biblical] praying to God is something like e-mailing a relative you've never met, who lives in a place you have never been... Your relative never sends a picture of himself, never sends a picture of his house or land, and always writes a generic letter addressed to 'my much loved relatives,' like the ones we receive every Christmas. His emails never come only to you and are therefore never addressed only to you. He never calls, and you can't call him. He has no phone." (Crabb, *The Pappa Prayer*). It Amazes me that silent nothingness of the contemplative solves his problem.

The antidote to Crabb's unbelief appears to be an openness to mystical experiences repackaged centuries later from the so-called Desert Fathers and Mothers of 3rd and 4th centuries. These Christian monastics migrated and lived as hermits in the Egyptian wilderness. Here these Catholic monastic mystics interacted with eastern monastic's and mystics. Living as hermits, these Desert Fathers developed "hesychasm" from the Greek word meaning "stillness" and "silence") (wikipedia) Hesychasm was the practice of interior silence. It didn't become a formal movement until the 14th century. Now centuries later these Catholic mystics have been elevated to the status of celebrities tasked with saving us from the superficiality of pragmatic church growth spirituality. Unfortunately these Catholic mystics down through

the centuries also engendered an alien non-Christian worldview which has gained the name of panentheism. These ancient Catholic mystics as well as Catholic mystics in later church history never used the term panentheism. But their experience and writings clearly exhibit what we now call panentheism.

Today panentheism is enjoying a phenomenal resurgence even though it never employs the term panentheism. This panentheistic worldview is well hidden by such terms as "Spiritual Formation" and "Spiritual Disciplines" etc. But though well hidden, panentheism is the undeclared foundational worldview of the so-called "Spiritual Formation" movement now becoming wide-spread in evangelical circles. Furthermore, panentheism is the worldview of the myriads of versions of the New Age. It is also the foundational worldview of eastern religions. These 4th century hermit/monastics such as John Cassian and Anthony the Great apparently reasoned that if the eastern monks with whom they had contact could find mystical union with their god why couldn't the same techniques be successful to find mystical union with their Christian God. These monastic fathers, however, fell into oblivion for centuries only to be resurrected by other Catholic mystics in later centuries (14th-15th centuries). Now in the later part of the 20th century these ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers and other Catholic mystics are being heralded as the harbinger of a new spirituality. Many trace this current revival of contemplative meditation to 1974 when Father William Menninger, a Trappist, monk found an ancient book entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the library at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer Mass. This 14th century book of an unknown author offered a means by which contemplative mystical practices long used only by ancient Catholic monks, could be taught to lay people. As Menninger began teaching these contemplative practices, his Abbot Fr. Thomas Keating, and Fr. Basil Pennington began teaching and promoting these contemplative techniques to the laity both in the west and the east. Thus was born the use of centering prayer and a mantra (repeated word) as the means to enter a mystical union with God. Centering prayer and meditation using a mantra became a short-cut method for meditation for Catholics as well as New Age mediators.

These New Monks have not only brought these ancient techniques into popularity and prominence into Catholic circles, but now these promoters have spawned a pandemic revival within protestant, evangelical and New Age circles as well. Father Flanagan who was involved in both contemplative prayer and TM says: "contemplative prayer is TM in Christian dress."

But the fame and distinction for introducing Contemplative Prayer into the evangelical world goes to Richard Foster. Foster's book *the Celebration of Discipline*, was first printed in 1988 and launched Contemplative Prayer among evangelicals. The evangelical periodical *Christianity Today* acknowledged Foster's book as one of the ten best books of the 20th century. Foster, a Quaker with affinity to mysticism, was able to insert Contemplative Prayer as hidden yeast into the loaf of evangelical spirituality. He and his now myriads of evangelical comrades suggest that bible study only feeds the head, but if one wants to feed the heart they must enter the silence of Contemplative Prayer. This revival of contemplative spirituality of course means a revival of the accompanying panentheistic worldview. But as already asserted, panentheism is a world view that Catholic contemplative spirituality does not own as its own. Panentheism today is a widespread worldview with many editions and versions beyond Catholic church history. Panentheism works well and provides a congenial mystical foundation for many varieties of mysticism for Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus and all the varieties of New Age spirituality. It is like panentheism is a long table and on this table is a smorgasbord of varieties of panentheistic spiritualites.

Some are Catholic, some New Age and others eastern mysticism. But all rest on the one worldview table of panentheism. The long historical tradition of Catholic monastic mystics, now resurrected from ages gone by, have become a spiritual movement not only in Catholic circles but also among a burgeoning protestant and evangelical market. In what appears to be a sweeping phenomena, evangelical leaders are embracing these ancient prayer and mystical practices as if they are new toys or new versions of an iPad. Still the underlying panentheistic world view remains hidden from view, papered over with more appealing terms such as Christian meditation or prayer disciplines and most often vaguely called "Spiritual Formation." This underlying philosophical worldview clashes directly with a biblical view of creation and theism.

Classical biblical theism contrasted to philosophical panentheism

Biblical theism asserts that God alone is absolutely self-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, all powerful and all knowing. Although He does not need the world, God eternally and freely choose to create it from nothing and sustain it through time. "The bible teaches that God is distinct from his creation. He is not part of it, for he has made it (out of nothing, ex nihilo) and rules over it... Faulein Maria, in Sound of Music got it all wrong when she sang "nothing comes from nothing." (ex nihilo, nihilo fit.) Very simply theism requires God as far "above" the creation and is independent of it. (Grudem p.1270) In distinction from theism, panentheism, a term coined by Karl Krause (1781-1832) means "the being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part exists in Him." (John W.Cooper *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* p. 127).

Unfortunately, biblical and theological unfaithfulness among protestants and yes also among evangelicals has allowed this new spirituality, sufficiently veiled by the term Spiritual Formation, to make deep and unbelievable penetrations among evangelicals. If contemplative prayer is taught at Saddleback or Willow Creek (and it is) then it is apparently endorsed for all. Church growth needs churches to grow right? Evangelical leaders of all stripes take it on board always looking for a new gig or a new toy for their ministries. Panentheistic and contemplative practices have been given the evangelical version of the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. The writings of Catholic monastic panentheists have been adopted and promoted by evangelical celebrities and so the door is opened for contemplative spirituality among evangelicals.

Richard Foster the evangelical godfather of the contemplative, exudes confidence when he states: "By now enough water has gone under the Spiritual Formation bridge that we can give some assessment of where we have come and what needs to be done. When I first began writing in the field in the late 70's and early 80's the term Spiritual Formation was hardly known, except for highly specialized reference in relation of the Catholic orders. Today, it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiple thousands for spiritual direction." (online source, The Ooze).

Catholic/Contemplative/New Age leads to monistic universalism

A unifying element of Catholic/New Age mysticism is the panentheistic view that "everything" is one. In philosophy this is called "monism" derived from the Greek word "monos" meaning "one." The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers asserted that reality was "One." This is the teaching of monism which states that there is no distinction between gods, men, animals or things.... These are the "One." This is ultimately and completely opposed to the Judeo-Christian revelation from God that all creation is distinct from the creator. The ancient Greeks and Hindus and Buddhists are all monists. Catholic New Age mysticism with its roots in the 3-4th century Desert Fathers is also monistic. They qualify this in saying they are not pantheists. But they are still monistic panentheists. The contemplative way of Foster, Willard and Scazzero to find union with the "One" is through wordless, silent meditation. This the contemplatives share with Eastern mysticism. Merton quotes Trich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Buddhist contemplative): "Buddhists and Christians know... the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed planted in the soil of consciousness. The Buddhist sutras speak of the Buddha nature as the seed of enlightenment that is already in everyone's consciousness." (Merton *Introduction to Contemplative Prayer*, Doubleday, 1996, p. 5).

But the result of this is realizing the "unity of all that is." Henri Nouwen tells us that this leads to the "unity of all things. Henri Nouwen whom Ravi Zacharis calls one of the greatest saints of the church died a universalist. When liberal theologian Paul Tillich was interviewed shortly before his death, he was asked, "Dr. Tillich, do you pray?" He responded, "No, I meditate." Tillich called his god "the ground of all being." Tillich's view of God was monistic. It is interesting the author of the "Shack" identifies God as the "ground of all being" as well. Yet the shack's author is a common speaker in our churches. Even Bill Johnson's Bethel church in Redding CA. invited him to his church. The pastor of an huge AOG church passed out copies of the "Shack" to his whole congregation.

Dr. Robert Morey has offered the solution to all this apostasy; "With all the paganism around us today, now is not the time to water down the Gospel or deny the historic concept of God. The Church must arise and put her armor on... She must take up the shield of faith to quench all the fiery darts of doubt... to do this, the Christian Church needs truth - not error; courage not cowardice, doctrinal vigilance, not sentimentality; sacrifice - not sacrilege; faithfulness - not betrayal; and strength not weakness." (Robert Morey, *Battle of the Gods*, 1989).

Distinguishing panentheism from pantheism

Historic pantheism simply means that all matter is God. All matter is impersonal and that is all there is. There is nothing beyond matter and the universe. But panentheism is a variant view to pantheism. The two are strikingly similar. Their differences are about as significant as the difference between an agnostic and an atheist. The pantheists and panentheists share the view that the universe and everything in the natural world and universe is pervaded by divinity. This is the view that the universe is contained within God and that the universe is a part of God.

For panentheists, God is located in all matter and the universe, but in some way God is greater than the universe. God is like the head and creation the body. Krause, the originator of the term panentheism stated "everything is in God and God is in everything, but God is more than everything... God in essence contains the entire universe within Himself, but is not exhausted by it. The medieval Sufi (Islamic

mystic) Kabir once noted "all know that the drop merges into the ocean, but few know that the ocean also merges into the drop." All matter becomes inspirited - it breaths divinity. Earth becomes alive and sacred and offers us holiness in everything both upon the earth **and the universe.**

How did I learn about "panentheism"?

It wasn't easy. About 10 years ago I became embroiled in a controversy over the inner healing ministry of John and Paula Sandford. I was forced to read their book *"The Transformation of the Inner Man.* I was shocked by their psychological regression therapies based directly and unashamedly on Freud and Jung. I began a wide ranging investigation of the Sandfords and their ministry. In the process I happened upon some transcriptions of tapes by the Sandfords. These tapes and other Sandford books revealed a thorough going panentheistic worldview.

In one of the tapes, Dan M, the interviewer, asks Sandford about a statement made in the Sandfords book *Elijah Task* in which the Sandfords state: "Every plant and bit of earth, all seas and winds each animal and thing has intelligence, will, and desire in it." (*Elijah Task*, p. 144). John responds: "You need to understand that God has so created everything and that his Spirit is redolent in it... all things have intelligence." Sandford continues: "And in criminology they have found they can bring 4 suspects before plants and the plants will tell them who the criminal is... But they can't use it in court. Can you imagine, "I was convicted by a rhododendron." (tape 57). In these tapes Sanford refers to "animal spirits" which he says are looked after by satan and others by angels. Sandford even allows for spirits of the departed to attach themselves to living persons, justifying this from the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras.

The Sandford's book *The Transformation of the Inner Man* and related materials were used in a local church and as a regional minister with oversight I confronted this and received a rebuke and curse from the Sandfords for my efforts.

Initially I called Sandford's view pantheism. But I found out later it was not pure pantheism as stated above but a close variant called panentheism which is a difference that is only slightly different.

Finally I again encountered Contemplative Prayer ideas in a church nearby. It presented itself in a well disguised form and became the basis of an 8 week series of sermons and bible study groups. The source was Peter Scazzero's book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* and an introduction video and a self published prayer guide called the *"Daily Office."* I found out later that Scazzero, a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Seminary and his wife go on meditation retreats to a Trappist monastery each year. The Trappist monks and monasteries have become centers of contemplative prayer. *"The Daily Office"*, Scazzero's workbook title, should have been a dead give away in that "Daily Office" is a well recognized Catholic term used by monks for daily devotion. But for me it was the end notes of *The Daily Office* that concerned me in that it was loaded with copious quotes from many current Catholic purveyors of Contemplative Spirituality including Merton, Nouwen, Keating and DeMello etc. These Catholic monks and mystics are the source of the current fad of Roman Catholic mystical teaching called Contemplative Prayer. These endnotes in *The Daily Office* were of no meaning to anyone in this bible study group but myself. It turns out that Scazzero has a full agenda for his ministry of introducing Contemplative Prayer to evangelicals. I found that Scazzero has led retreats sponsored by Focus on the Family and at Saddleback church. Scazzero is well schooled in the Desert Fathers etc.

The bait and cover for evangelicals is found in Scazzero's book titled, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. The appeal is to believers drained emotionally and needing a place of quiet and stillness. Contemplative Prayer and stillness seems to be the answer for these emotionally challenged evangelicals. Historic Contemplative Prayer promises to help us slow down and enter quietness and find a new victory for our harried lives. In a congregation of 1200, as far as I know, no one realized what was going on. The pastor was able to loosely preach from the Scazzero's book and retranslate Scazzero's teaching back into familiar Christian evangelical terminology. I am not sure he was aware of what he was doing. For him it was an honest attempt to help people get off their treadmill existence and refocus spiritually. Who was to know that this study material was a clever introduction to an evangelical church of the historic practice of contemplative spirituality. Indeed in his book Scazzero does refer to "Centering Prayer" and entering into silence (p. 45). But who knows what "centering prayer" and entering "The Silence" actually is. Who would know that Merton, Nouwen, Keating and DeMello and others listed in the endnotes were the new catholic monks and mystics who are panentheistic practitioners.

Thomas Merton..

Thomas Merton was the forerunner among the New Monks promoting the Contemplative Spirituality. He became a monk at age 26 just three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Merton advocated moving the practice of Contemplative Prayer from its use by cloistered monks to a broader use by the common man. During his years practicing mystical contemplative prayer, he became more and more drawn to Buddhist and Hindu mystics. Ultimately, he saw no real difference between Christianity and Buddhism. He once visited the Dalai Lama to "discover truth in dialogue." (Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul*, pp. 269-277). He actually was electrocuted while on a teaching trip among Buddhist monks. Shortly before his death he acknowledged that he was more Buddhist than Catholic. Merton was to the current Contemplative Spirituality what Henry Ford was to the automobile. Merton stated: "At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusions - a point of pure truth... This little point is the pure glory of God in us. **It is in everything.**" (quote from *Merton and Sufism*, Rob Baker and Gray Henry... 1999 p. 109). At an interfaith conference in Thailand Merton stated: "I believe that by openness to Buddhism and to Hinduism and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about these traditions. We stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our Christian tradition' (William Shannon, *The Silent Lamp, The Thomas Merton Story* p. 276] By the way Scazzero quotes Merton 8 times in his devotional *the Daily Office*.

Henri Nouwen

Nouwen, also deceased, like Merton has been able to influence evangelicals with his deep homespun spirituality. He is widely read by evangelicals. Even someone in my family relishes his spirituality. One of his biographers revealed in 1994 that Nouwen ranked second only to Billy Graham in his influence. In his book *The Way of the Heart*, Nouwen advised his readers: "the quiet repetition of a single word can help us to descend with the mind into the heart... That way of prayer... opens us to God's active presence." Nouwen displays his panentheism by stating: "The God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is the same as the one who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being." (from *Here and Now*, p. 22). Nouwen further states: " Prayer is soul work because our souls are those sacred centers where all is one. In the heart of God we can come to the full realization of the unity of all that is." (Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, Harper, San fran, 1997). Nouwen's phrase "all is one" is pure panentheistic monism.

Fathers Keating and Basil Pennington.

These two monks have honed the method of "centering prayer" to the point that mystical silence and union with God that took cloistered monks sometimes years to achieve can now through "centering prayer" and a repeated word (mantra) achieve it in days. Pennington and Keating have written a popular classic on centering prayer entitled *Open Mind Open Heart*. Keating boasts that by 1991 he had taught 31,000 people the art of "centering prayer"... Keating attended the 6th annual conference on Christian and Buddhist meditation held in Boulder CO August 10, 1986 with Christian and Buddhist attendees making contributions which included Keating's presentation on "centering prayer."

Keating and Pennington's major contribution to the contemplative movement is the technique of "centering prayer." Brennan Manning, a former Catholic monk calls it wordless prayer involving breathing exercises and the chanting of a sacred word or phrase. The purpose as Keating asserts is to speed up the sensitizing of the unconscious. After reading a published description of "centering prayer", a psychology professor said: "Your question is, is this hypnosis? Sure it is." (from *The Danger of Centering Prayer*, by Rev. John Dreher, pastor of Our Lady of Czenstochova Church in Coventry, Rhode Island.)

The centering prayer process

Brennan Manning provides a step by step process for centering prayer. The first step is to stop thinking about God. (*Signature of Jesus*, p. 212). The second step is breathing exercises and choosing a sacred word or phrase and inwardly and often repeating it (218). Finally close with the Lord's Prayer or a Psalm. The result of this practice is the practitioner becomes less interested in objective spiritual knowledge as found in the bible and more interested in mystical revelation. Richard Foster speaks of "letting go of all competing distractions, even good ones... This can be done by focusing on a name, word or phrase." (Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul, Journey into meditative Prayer*, p. 15). Deepak Chopra, a popular New Age Hindu who is a panentheist and believes all creation is God and divine, recommends the Catholic contemplative manual *The Cloud of Unknowing* and considers Christian centering prayer techniques to be the same as Hindu yoga. Chopra asserts: "There is no doubt that people resist the whole notion of God being an *inner phenomena*... Yet its importance is stated eloquently in the medieval document known as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written anonymously in the 14th century...The writer (*Cloud of Unknowing*) informs us that ANY THOUGHT IN THE MIND SEPARATES US FROM GOD, because thought sheds light on its object...we are advised to go into a cloud of forgetting anything other than the silence of the inner world..." (Chopra, *How to Know God*, 2000, pp. 94, 95, 98). In the same book Chopra says, "I believe that God has to be known by looking in the mirror" (p. 9). Thus Chopra is describing meditative methods whereby the individual can allegedly come into contact with his "higher self" or divinity.", yet he advises using Catholic mysticism to get there. And the same manual, *The Cloud of Unknowing* is one of the most popular manuals among evangelical contemplatives.

Richard Foster and Dallas Willard

These two men plus many others as well are kept busy introducing contemplative prayer techniques to the evangelical world. They have combined in establishing a contemplative training institution and a study bible called *Renovare*. They promote all forms of Catholic Contemplative Prayer and encourage people to read the likes of Merton, Nouwen, Rich Rohr and the full range of historic Catholic mediators. This

newsletter could never list all the intrusions of Contemplative Prayer into evangelical circles. But I encourage you to acquire the book "*A Time of Departing* by Ray Yungen." If you want a scholarly treatment of panentheism you should read "*Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers*" by John W. Cooper. Cooper who is a consistent biblical scholar

Panentheism is everywhere in the evangelical world. David Cloud (online source, Evangelicals turing to Catholic Spirituality) asserts the following evangelical celebrities as either direct participants of Contemplative Prayer or endorsing it. I couldn't believe the names on his list. I checked it out on the net and he is absolutely correct. We start off with Foster, but he is hardly a lone voice for Contemplative Prayer. Here are the others: "Dallas Willard, Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Chuck Swindol, David Jeremiah, Beth Moore, Max Lucado, Ed Young, Gary Thomas, Phillip Yancey, Charles Stanley, Leighton Ford and Phillip Yancey. Yancey in his book *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference*, favorably quotes Richard Rohr, proponent of the "Cosmic Christ", the 14 century contemplative manual called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. and Teresa of Avila whose meditation included erotic mysticism. This erotic mysticism echoes Lou Engle and Mike Bickle and IHOP bridal mysticism. This, however, at least has its source in the Song of Solomon but encourages IHOPer young people to marry Jesus.

Check out the children's books on Contemplative Prayer at Nav Press. Gary Gilley in an article, *Dr. Gary Gilley on Spiritual Formation*. (online source). lists the various evangelical publishers providing Contemplative materials (namely Nelson, Zondervan, NavPress, IVF) by a wide range of authors. Even Rick Warren, the ultimate pragmatic church growth proponent, feels obliged to get involved in breath prayers and promote Contemplative Prayer. Foster, Willard, Sweet, Scazzero and a host of others, fill their calendars speaking in evangelical conferences and churches. The horse has bolted. The dike has been breached. Many evangelical pastors have not a clue that panentheism is actually the worldview base of "Spiritual Formation. Panentheism has been sugar coated for evangelical appetites. Many of the rank and file will never actually pursue contemplative prayer practices for themselves. But others will take it up assuming it is a legitimate ancient/modern prayer method. But you will never hear the term panentheism. Rather you will hear innocuous terms like Spiritual Formation, and spiritual disciplines. It will all be retranslated into evangelical terminology, but of necessity it carries panentheism in its saddlebags, an anti biblical worldview even though it is found only in the fine print. Each time someone recommends Merton, Nouwen, Foster, Dallas Willard Sue Monk Kidd, Leonard Sweet, Manning, Leighton Ford, Larry Crabb etc, etc., just remember that each of them also have knowingly or probably unknowingly left biblical creation behind. Panentheism is hostile to and opposed to biblical creation and the gospel of Jesus Christ no matter how spiritual it appears and how much they talk about Jesus.

Biblical prayer could not be more contrastive. We don't need to learn techniques from ancient masters and hermit monks. There is no need to vacate our rationale minds and enter a mystical Silence and enter altered states using mantras from the east. We have direct access to the throne of grace won for us at Calvary. Here we present our needs in audible form. God biblically answers with the Word of Lord in scripture or He works all things according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Contemplative prayer could not be more antithetical to the revealed Word of God. Panentheism is a worldview that has no connection with the God of the Bible.

Plumblin Ministries, 74425 Co. Rd. 21, Renville, MN 56284

