

ECKHART TOLLE AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

By Richard Rohr, OFM

Although Eckhart Tolle is arousing great interest today, many think he is a novelty, New Age, or even non-religious. The *process*—and that is what it is—that he is teaching, can be traced through the Greek and Latin traditions of contemplation, the apophatic tradition in particular, and the long history of what was sometimes called “The Sacrament of the Present Moment” (Brother Lawrence, OCD, Francisco de Osuna, OFM, Jean Pierre de Caussade, S.J.).

The mystical tradition inside of Orthodoxy and Catholicism often divided contemplation into two types: infused or natural contemplation, and acquired contemplation. Evelyn Underhill, the brilliant historian of mysticism sees three forms of contemplation: 1) Mystical Contemplation of the Natural World, 2) Metaphysical Contemplation of the World of Being and Consciousness, 3) Theological Contemplation of the World of God.

After the oppositional mind that set in place during and after the Reformation of the 16th century, and after the Enlightenment of the 17th-18th centuries, this ancient tradition was largely lost, except among individuals. We lost the older Tradition of “praying beyond words” as the entire Western and Eastern Churches became quite preoccupied with words and proving words to be true or false. This is the only period that Protestantism and Evangelicals have ever known. So for at least 400 years, *we have had neither an understanding of infused nor acquired contemplation!* It is such foreign terrain to almost all Protestants, and most Catholics and Orthodox that they immediately think it is heresy or even pagan, when in fact, it is the solid tradition of the first 1400 years of Christianity! (Which I will try to document in my next book, *The Third Eye*).

Tolle is, in fact, rather brilliantly bringing to our awareness the older tradition of both “infused” or “natural contemplation,” and the two first types in Underhill’s listing. These are both the ground and the process for breaking through to theological contemplation of God, and acquired contemplation of Jesus, the Gospels, and all spiritual things. He is teaching process not doctrine or dogma. He is teaching *how* to see and *be present*, not *what* you should see when you are present. Tolle is our friend, and not an enemy of the Gospel. There should be no conflict for a mature Christian. “Anyone who is not against us, is for us,” as Jesus said, and he also said, “Fear profits nothing.”

What Tolle Is Not:

- 1) Eckhart Tolle is not a Christian theologian or teacher.
- 2) He is not teaching Christian contemplative prayer or Christian prayer at all.
- 3) He is not teaching any dogmas or doctrines as such.
- 4) He is not presuming or teaching that there is a personal/relational God (but neither is he denying it).
- 5) He is not a proponent of the social, communitarian nature of religion.

What Tolle is doing:

- 1) Eckhart Tolle is teaching a form of natural mysticism or contemplative practice.
- 2) He is teaching a morality and asceticism of recognizing and letting go of “the self that has to die” (Matthew 16:25), which he calls ego and Jesus calls the “grain of wheat” (John 12:24) ; so that another self can be born, which he would call “consciousness” and we would call the person born again in Christ, or something similar.
- 3) He is giving us some *practices* (Similar to how John Wesley gave “methods” or Ignatius gave “exercises”) whereby we can be present to the grace of the moment and stop the “passions,” the “egocentric mind,” or the “prideful self” which keeps us from true goodness (or God, as we would call it). Each tradition uses different language for what is to be overcome, but it is always some form of “un-love” and selfishness (which he calls ego). TOLLE IS NOT ASKING YOU TO BELIEVE ANYTHING. HE IS ASKING YOU TO TRY SOMETHING! You will know if it is true, if you try it, and you will not know if it is true or false, if you don’t try it. No point in arguing it theoretically or in the abstract.
- 4) He does *assume and imply* a worldview that is foreign to many, if not most Christians. For Tolle, Being, Consciousness, God, Reality are all the same thing, which is not all bad, when you come to think of it. Of course, his very point is that you cannot *think* of it at all, you can only *realize* it. I would not call him *pantheistic* (all things are God) as much as panentheistic (God is IN all things).
- 5) His brilliant understanding of the “pain body,” as he calls it, is actually very close to the Catholic notion of Original Sin, and does give a corporate, communitarian, mystical understanding to religion. We are all in this together, and share one another’s pain. I’m not sure he makes clear how we share one another’s joy, except that he tends to create very “low maintenance” people who can relax and enjoy life.

In Tolle’s world, Jesus is not central. However, he is a beloved teacher, who does it perfectly right himself. “Redemption,” as we understand it, is not necessary beyond letting go of our own fears, negativity, and oppositional energy. He might understand reality itself as gracious. We would localize that grace in and through Jesus, as the “Sacrament” of all of Creation.

Although Tolle is not a Christian teacher, we must not assume that makes him an anti-Christian teacher. Today we need whatever methods or help we can receive to allow the Christian message to take us to a deeper level of transformation. Our history, and our guidance of Western history, shows this has clearly not been happening on any broad scale. This is an opportunity for us to understand our own message at deeper levels. It would be a shame if we required him to speak our language and vocabulary before we could critically hear what he is saying—that is true and helpful to our own message.

What if John's Gospel had refused to use the word "Logos" which was a term directly taken from Platonist philosophy? What if Paul had kept the limited vocabulary and categories of Judaism when he preached in Rome and Athens? What if Thomas Aquinas had not written his *Summa* because it was a dialogue with Aristotelian philosophy? Would they have had any success as evangelists?

Admittedly, this will be much harder for those Christians who emerged after the 16th century when the older contemplative tradition was no longer taught, or understood even by the older Tradition. Catholics and Orthodox simply have the trustful advantage of apophatic saints like Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Palamas, Dionysius the Areopogite, Bonaventure, Francisco de Osuna, Meister Eckhart (whose name Mr. Tolle chose when he recognized his gift as a spiritual teacher!), the Cloud of Unknowing, John of the Cross, and Jean Pierre de Caussade.

Unfortunately, most of Western Christianity has understood Jesus apart from the eternal Trinitarian life and the Pre-Existent Cosmic Christ that is presented in Colossians 1:15-20 or Ephesians 1:8-11. Here "The Son" is at work in the universe from the very beginning and everywhere, and not just during and after Calvary (which Protestantism has tended to exclusively concentrate on). Remember, both Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure said "*Deus est Ens,*" God is Being Itself. This is not new or dangerous teaching, but if one's denominational tradition has no tradition of philosophical theology, or no tradition of the pre-existent Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity inherent in the very pattern of creation, then I admit that Eckhart Tolle will be quite foreign terrain. That does not make him wrong.

I have learned to join with Peter, who said after much resistance, "God has made it clear to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean" (Acts 10:28), and I am willing to hear truth today wherever it comes from, as long as it does not compromise the Gospel. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, "If it is true, then it is from the Holy Spirit."

I must join with Paul who in preaching to the secular Athenians, said "God is not far from any of us, since *it is in him that we live, and move, and have our very being*" (Acts 17:28). That is an excellent foundation for trusting Tolle's natural mysticism. We are also preaching to a largely secular world, and must find a language that they can understand and draw from, as Paul did, and not insist that they learn our vocabulary before we can even talk to them or hear them. How else can we ever be "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22) or dare to think that we can "preach the Gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:16)?



Center for Action and Contemplation

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