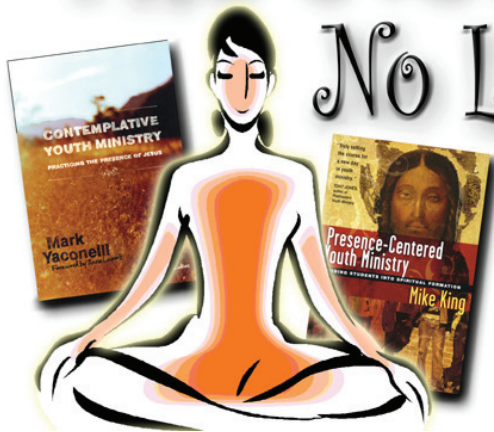


The New Mystic Youth: No Longer Just Pulp Fiction



Sorting Out the Mystical from the Biblical in Today's Youth Ministry

by **Gary E. Gilley** and **Brian E. Gilley**

For many years, publishers of comic books added to their roster of adult super-hero characters — and subsequently their selection of available titles and profits — by creating new, younger breeds of fictional heroes. One of the teams of young warriors spawned in recent times was DC Comics' "The New Mystic Youth," a band of young super-heroes formed by the fictional character Tim Hunter, an English teenager with superficial similarities to Harry Potter. If today's "mystic youth" were confined only to pulp fiction, there would be little concern. Unfortunately, for the Body of Christ, there is a whole other — more serious — dimension to "mystic youth" which transcends the pages of comic books.

Engaging over-stimulated teenagers with the truth of the Word of God without boring them to tears has challenged teachers since the invention of the teenager.¹ Many programs and philosophies have been tried. Some appear successful for a time only to fade away when more carefully analyzed or a new generation becomes immune to currently accepted techniques.

The youth rallies sponsored by parachurch organizations such as Youth for Christ have been touted as both the beginning of aggressive and effective ministry and the beginning of the end of the very same. Proponents point to the great turnouts and

obvious interest of that generation of young people. Opponents wonder if all that the programs did was condition youth to want entertainment rather than substance.

More recently we witnessed Willow Creek Church modeling an already fading fad in which young adults were separated from those over thirty years old by using dedicated buildings, different music, and teaching formats with specially trained leaders. But Willow Creek abandoned this concept in the face of mounting evidence that such ministries neither effectively changed the lives of the youth nor integrated those young people into the adult body of the church as they grew older.²

A new fad is making the rounds of evangelical churches. It could be called "mystical youth ministry."

Perhaps the strongest promoter of this philosophy is Youth Specialties, which through its seminars and conferences affects the lives of tens of thousands of youth leaders and young people every year.³ Youth Specialties publishes a great deal of literature as well, much of it promoting mysticism.⁴

Mark Yaconelli's recent book, *Contemplative Youth Ministry, Practicing the Presence of Jesus*, seeks to propagate an approach to youth work that would mirror ancient Roman Catholic mystical practices of the Middle Ages. This

book well represents what some are trying to introduce as the next wave of youth ministry.

AN IDEA IS BORN

Yaconelli's ideas were born out of frustration. Mark, the son of the late Mike Yaconelli, founder and longtime leader of Youth Specialties, learned firsthand about mysticism from his father, who later in life sought a solution to his own frustrations with the Christian life. But Yaconelli's mystical formation went well beyond his father's input. He participated in the "Program in Christian Spirituality" and received a diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary, which is perhaps the leading seminary in the country for mystical studies. He co-founded and co-directed what would become a seven-year (1997-2003) endeavor called "Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project."⁵ And he has drunk deeply at the well of classical mysticism, both past and present. Concerning all of this, Yaconelli writes:

"In recent years there has been a rediscovery of the significance of presence within the Christian life. Locked away within ancient books, monastic communities, and the lives of individual praying Christians is a deep concern for presence — presence to God

(continues on page 8)

as well as presence to other people. ... Contemplation means 'being' with God within the reality of the present moment. Contemplation is about presence."⁶

Yaconelli has incorporated what he learned from his mystical studies into his "contemplative youth ministry," which he defines as "courageously beholding the reality of our own lives, the reality (whether it be joy or suffering) of the young people we serve, and the reality of God's love beneath it all."⁷ In addition, Yaconelli's incentive for developing his youth ministry philosophy was his observation of weak youth programs, which he calls a "Nickelodeon approach to youth ministry that seeks to appeal to kids' propensity for fun and recreation. ... It's the ministry of excitement; discipleship through fun, culture-friendly, 'Christian-lite' events."⁸

Mike King, in his book *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, writes, "The notion of youth workers as entertainers and program directors must give way to youth workers as authentic shepherds, spiritual guides with a holy anointing to lead youth into the presence of God."⁹

The problem that Yaconelli and King see is genuine. Their solution is a mystically oriented youth ministry, which has at its heart contemplative prayer. The problem with Yaconelli's solution becomes apparent when he quotes Roman Catholic mystic Thomas Keating, saying, "Contemplative prayer is the opening of mind and heart — our whole being — to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions."¹⁰

Yaconelli prescribes a type of prayer not found in Scripture. Biblical prayer is rational. It uses the mind and words and can involve the emotions. Contemplative prayer is super-rational: it "relied not on words, study, and reason, but on silence, prayer [the contemplative variety], and imagination."¹¹

Such prayer is the heart and soul of classical mysticism. The goal of mystically oriented youth ministry is to share with young people "the idea of sacred space, a thin place where heaven and earth meet, where God's presence is so real that the place and encounter take on profound sacredness."¹²

Yaconelli describes the mechanics of contemplative prayer:

"Take a moment to set down this book and simply become aware of your surroundings. Allow your eyes to receive the light, colors, and shapes around you without seeking to 'do' anything with what you see. Then gently close your eyes and turn your awareness to your ears. Allow yourself to receive the sounds and noises around you without judgment. Then take a moment to become aware of your body. Beginning with the top of your head, allow a gentle attention to move down your body to the soles of your feet. Allow yourself to notice places of tension or pain without passing judgment. Can you compassionately receive your physical self? Spend a few moments allowing your body, just as it is, to breathe and rest in the presence of God. When you're ready, take a moment to direct your attention toward God. Quietly turn your awareness to the presence of God within all that you see, all that you hear, and all that you feel."¹³

No such directives are ever found in Scripture. However, they are found in Eastern mystical religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism as well as medieval Roman Catholic mysticism.

THE FORMS

"Christian" mystics have tried to connect with God in numerous ways. To this end, Mike King, in his book, prescribes virtually every practice ever invented by Catholicism: sacred spaces where God's presence is so real,¹⁴ labyrinths or prayer chapels,¹⁵ stations of the cross,¹⁶ incense,¹⁷ icons,¹⁸ respiratory prayers,¹⁹ the

Jesus prayer,²⁰ prayer ropes,²¹ making the sign of the cross,²² daily offices and liturgy of the hours,²³ *lectio divina*,²⁴ crucifixes,²⁵ and confession to a priest.²⁶ Yaconelli gives his attention to two primary practices.

LECTIO DIVINA

This is Latin for "holy reading," and is becoming a popular method of contemplative "Bible reading" in mystical and emergent circles. It was introduced to the West by Eastern "desert father" Cassian in the fifth century and became part of the Benedictine monastic tradition. As Yaconelli tells us, "When we engage in *lectio divina*, we are not seeking to read the Bible for knowledge or instruction (although both of those may come), nor are we seeking the escape of a good story. Instead we come to the words of the Bible seeking to be with God."²⁷ Ken Boa, another promoter of mystical Christianity, explains that *lectio divina* involves four movements:²⁸

Reading (Lectio): "Since *lectio divina* engages the whole person, your bodily posture is important. A seated position that is erect but not tense or slouched is best ... Remember that unlike ordinary reading, in *lectio* you are seeking to be *shaped* by the Word more than *informed* by the Word."²⁹

Meditation (Meditatio): "Meditation is a spiritual work of holy desire and an interior invitation for the Spirit to pray and speak within us (Romans 8:26-27) in such a way that our whole being is transformed into greater conformity with Jesus Christ. ... Meditation will do you little good if you try to control the outcome."³⁰

Incorporating the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola is recommended for meditation.

Prayer (Oratio): "*Oratio* [prayer] is a time for participation in the interpenetrating subjectivity of the Trinity through prolonged mutual presence and growing identification with the life of Christ."³¹

Contemplation (Contemplatio): To the uninitiated, "contemplation is often confused with meditation" but

they are not the same. The word "meditation" can describe deep thinking and analyzing with a rational mind and some may use contemplation as a synonym for this activity. But contemplation in mystical circles "is a theological grace that cannot be reduced to logical, psychological, or aesthetic categories. ... it is best for us to stop talking and 'listen to Him' in simple and loving attentiveness. In this strange and holy land we must remove the sandals of our ideas, constructs, and inclinations, and quietly listen for the voice of God."³²

Yaconelli tells us that one technique to help in this process is take a word or phrase (in essence a mantra) and "repeat it to yourself, allowing the rest of the text to fall away. As you prayerfully repeat it, different thoughts, feelings, and images may arise."³³ By this methodology, Yaconelli maintains that we can "pray" ourselves "empty" and "Sink into God beneath all your thoughts and feelings."³⁴

CENTERING PRAYER

This fourth and final movement of *lectio divina* overlaps with the second way Yaconelli tries to connect with God, which is centering prayer, sometimes known as contemplative prayer or breath prayer. Boa tells us that this is a practice "recently revised and updated by three Cistercian monks — Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington. This method of prayer is based on the fourteenth-century classic of mystical theology *The Cloud of Unknowing*. ... In this tradition, the invocation of the name of the Lord Jesus is used to create a state of receptivity and interior recollection of the presence of God."³⁵

While biblical prayer is vocal, mental, rational, thoughtful, and reflective, contemplative prayer is wordless, mysterious, filled with silence and a loss of feelings, mental images, and concepts, and even the ability to meditate.³⁶ Boa explains, "This is a discipline of silence, of loss of control, of abandoning the attempt to analyze and intellectualize, and of developing the intuitive faculties."³⁷

Yaconelli wants us to know that, "In centering prayer we remove the temptation to spend our prayer time in thought and study,"³⁸ and the best way to do that is through the use of a mantra:

"Before you begin in prayer, choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to be with God. This word expresses your desire to be in God's presence and to yield to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal a word that is suitable for you. Examples include *Jesus, Lord, Abba, Love, Mercy, Stillness, Faith, Trust, Shalom, and Amen*."³⁹

King offers a version of this he calls respiratory prayers, which "are usually said in association with the breathing rhythm."⁴⁰ In conjunction with what he calls the "Jesus Prayer," King gives these instructions:

"With the inhale, pray the first part, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God.' With the exhale, pray the second part, 'Have mercy on me, a sinner.'"⁴¹

These men assure us that centering prayer is "time tested"⁴² and "is a summary of various silent prayer practices that can be traced back to the very beginnings of Christianity."⁴³ But when Yaconelli footnotes this statement he takes us back to the "Desert Fathers and Mothers" of Roman Catholicism of the 14th and 15th centuries, not to the "very beginnings of Christianity."

There were, in fact, some mystics prior to the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation of this period, but they were few and mysticism certainly was not a mainstream Christian practice. And when we examine the "true beginnings of Christianity" as found in the New Testament, nothing resembling centering prayer can be found. The only feeble attempt at proof-texting Boa offers for contemplative prayer is Matthew 17:4-5 in which the Father said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him," and Psalm 37:7, "rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him."⁴⁴

Yaconelli's only effort at finding a Scriptural base is a misinterpretation of Romans 8:26, "Yet God often communicates [with us] in 'sighs too deep for words'."⁴⁵ The modern mystical movement has no roots whatsoever in God's Word. Rather, it is drawn from the corrupt doctrines and practices of medieval Roman Catholicism.

Yet Yaconelli, Youth Specialties, Zondervan, and a horde of others want to take our young people down this path of mysticism. Some Christian ministries are introducing mysticism to small children. NavPress, the publishing arm of the Navigators, produced a curriculum aimed at children ages 7 to 12, entitled *PrayKids!*. An entire issue is devoted to contemplative prayer. One article recommends praying the *lectio divina* and tells the children to "Be still before God. Get a picture of a sunset in your mind ... or something else He has made that amazes you. Wait quietly to let Him tell you about Himself."⁴⁶ The children are given a sample prayer to repeat which begins, "God, I'm really glad to be with You today. I want to hear everything You want to tell me about Yourself, Your ideas, Your plans, and Your world."⁴⁷

Yaconelli, in his book, supplies an appendix purporting to show the superiority of contemplative youth ministry with other approaches. He stereotypes biblically oriented youth ministries as complacent, conforming, dogmatic, indoctrinating, regurgitating, and institutional. On the other hand, he claims contemplative oriented youth ministry is loving, informed, the way of Jesus, reflective, and seeking the living God.⁴⁸ Sounds great, but contemplative youth ministry fails one very important test: the test of Scripture.

Toward the back of Yaconelli's book, numerous other resources are offered to youth leaders to help with guiding young people into mystical Christianity. These include: *Enjoy the Silence, Soul Shaper, The Book of Uncommon Prayer 1 & 2*, and Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy*. Rather than following this literature into the unbiblical snare of mysticism, there is a better way — a way that

can truly be traced to “the very beginnings of Christianity.”

BIBLICALLY BASED YOUTH MINISTRY

There are two missing ingredients in many evangelical churches’ youth ministries, but the ingredients are no secret. At some point we decided young people could not handle the deep teaching of Scripture, so we contrived new plans and came up with “fresh thinking.” Much of the youth ministry world has bought into the theory that the Bible alone cannot get the job done. But these programs may be just pacifying youth rather than bringing them to the “fountain of living water.”

It is time to consider how to take back the ground we have surrendered. We have given in to pressure for numbers and impressive programs that have the appearance of success, but lack the blessing and power of God. Our teenagers do not need another “cool” extracurricular activity. They need to learn how to read, study, and apply the Scriptures. There is room for games, parties, and events, but they need to be in their proper place.

We need to faithfully preach the concept of biblical authority: to instill the idea that the Bible is the blueprint for how we walk, talk, eat, and breathe, and to expound and explain how we can do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). God’s Word is the authority for our lives; our self is not. This is the message our teenagers must hear. We cannot be badgered into believing that the Word of God is not exciting enough, not relevant enough, and not powerful enough for children. If we want to change their lives and reach them in a “relevant” way, then we must trust in the power of the Word to convict, encourage, comfort, and correct people of all ages.

ONE SOLUTION

One alternative to the commercially available programs is for churches to develop their own youth curriculum. Many congregations are doing this.

One approach would be this: Teach 4-5 year olds selected Bible stories. Ages 6-7 go through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in two years. Ages 8-9 go through the Bible once again. Ages 10-11 learn hermeneutics and Bible study methods. In junior high, students learn systematic theology for most of their two years. After all this, they enter high school full of knowledge and stories. There the goal is to give their faith legs, to challenge them to take all that knowledge and live it.

Charles Spurgeon once said, “The Word of God is like a lion. You don’t have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself.” We have forgotten what we are keeping caged up. We forget our place and many times we stand in His way.

We have no greater tool than what God has given to us. It is our program and starting point; without the Scriptures we are helpless, hopeless, and powerless. Our starting point is the Word. We must get our youth into the living and active pages of Scripture and let the Lion do its job.

INTEGRATING YOUTH INTO BODY LIFE

We often hear that youth are the “future of the church” or “That kid will do so much for the Lord when he gets older.” However, we never see this teaching in Scripture. We never see an age standard for ministry. The church is weaker because youth in so many churches are marginalized.

There is a troubling trend among teenagers. Many leave the nest and, upon receiving their freedom, drop out of church.

This may happen because they don’t see why church matters. Life is going well and they see no need for God’s help. Or they grew up in a fun, active, entertaining youth group that fostered a consumer mentality that makes attendance at regular church services seem dull. Or maybe they are overlooked and feel lost in the crowd.

In addition, we have a generation of youth who are failing to connect on a

personal level with anyone outside their peer group. They hide behind their computer screens and MySpace accounts and gather most of their understanding for life and priorities, not from the wise, but from their peers. They never became an active, vital, serving, essential member of the church where they grew up.

The good news is that many of the threats from pop culture can be fended off by a healthy church life. Body life in a local church should do wonders for the adolescent struggling to find where he fits in. We need to make a concerted effort to integrate youth in the ministries of the church.

Teenagers typically get to rake leaves, clean gutters, shovel driveways, help in the nursery, and maybe even spread some mulch. There is nothing wrong with those chores, but there is much more they could be doing.

Churches can involve teenagers in ways where God has gifted them: ushering, playing special music, choir, participating in congregational music, leading youth group worship, teaching small group Bible studies, teaching beginners and primaries, VBS, leading in many ways in Back Yard Bible Clubs, sound room (both audio and video), puppet ministry, prayer groups, decorating, writing, designing, organizing youth group publications, and numerous other ministries.

As they grow, they can be given more responsibility as they show faithfulness, just as is done with adults. Teenagers should not be considered an annoyance or plague on the rest of the church. They should be motivated to serve.


On a show called *Dog Whisperer*, the star is often asked, “Why is my dog tearing up my yard, couch, shoes, etc.?” The answer usually is, “The dog is bored. He needs exercise. Walk your dog 45 minutes a day and you won’t have the problem.” The dog just needs an outlet for his energy! Many balk at this idea because it requires a lot more work than they honestly want to put into a dog.

The same principle can be applied to teenagers. They need to be exercised spiritually. Their energy can be harnessed and used for the good of the body.

Endnotes:

1. The term "teenager" is of recent origin, only having appeared around the mid-20th century.
2. See Madison Trammel, "Axis Denied," *Christianity Today*, October 2006.
3. Youth Specialties claims to serve more than 100,000 youth workers worldwide every year through their training seminars and conventions, resources, and web site.
4. For a more complete understanding of the resurgence of classic mysticism, see G. Richard Fisher, "What a Marriage! Why Did Evangelicalism Marry Catholicism's Stepchild?," *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 2005, pp. 1, 13-19, and Gary E. Gilley, "The Lure of Mysticism - A Path to Spiritual Growth or Road to Deception?," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2005, pp. 1, 13-23.
5. Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006, pp. 26-27.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 23.

7. *Ibid.*, pg. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 45.
9. Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006, pg. 25.
10. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 82.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 56.
12. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 87.
13. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 81.
14. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 87.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 95.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 97.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-134.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-123.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 123-124.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-132.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 134-136.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 147.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 170.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 171.
27. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 85.
28. Kenneth Boa, *The Trinity: A Journal*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2001, pp. 12-23.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15, italics in original.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 19, italic in original.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 20.
33. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 86.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *The Trinity: A Journal*, op. cit., pg. 21.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 88.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89, italics in original.
40. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 122.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *The Trinity: A Journal*, op. cit., pg. 21.
43. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 87.
44. *The Trinity: A Journal*, op. cit., pp. 20-21.
45. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 89.
46. Kim Butts, "How Divine!," *PrayKids!*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2005, "Contemplative Prayer" issue, pg. 3, ellipsis in original.
47. *Ibid.*, no author given, "Welcome, God," *PrayKids!*, "Contemplative Prayer" issue, pg. 2.
48. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 240. 

THE SECRET

(continued from page 1)

author's "street smarts" is that neither the book nor the DVD ever uses the phrase "New Age" (although the phrase "New Thought," is correctly used to describe some of its promulgators).

THE STORY BEHIND THE SECRET

Byrne briefly describes her discovery of what she calls "The Secret" in the Foreword to her book:

"A year ago [October 2004¹³], my life had collapsed around me. I'd worked myself into exhaustion, my father died suddenly, and my relationships with my work colleagues and loved ones were in turmoil. Little did I know at the time, out of my greatest despair was to come the greatest gift. I'd been given a glimpse of a Great Secret — The Secret to life. The glimpse came in a hundred-year-old book, given to me by my daughter Hayley."¹⁴

THE SCIENCE OF GETTING RICH

This book goes unnamed by Byrne until page 76 of *The Secret*, where we learn that it was *The Science of Getting Rich*, written by Wallace Wattles in 1910.¹⁵

In a chapter she wrote for a different book, Byrne says that when her daughter gave her Wattles' book:

"I began reading. With each sentence I read, my eyes widened. I had never read anything like this before. The book, as it turns out, is about getting rich — not only in terms of money, but in every possible way, including relationships and health. As I read, it became clear to me that what Wattles was presenting was actually the science of life. ... I was barely breathing as I turned the pages. Deep within, I knew that every single thing he said was true: This was the Truth, with a capital T. ... I began doing research on Wallace Wattles. I read about his life and every

single thing he had ever written. Then I wanted to find out who his mentor was. My research led me back through history, century after century, reading book after book after book."¹⁶

In *The Secret*, Byrne writes:

"I began tracing The Secret back through history. I couldn't believe all the people who knew this. They were the greatest people in history: Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson, Edison, Einstein."¹⁷

During this time, Byrne says she "read dozens of books,"¹⁸ and "In a few short weeks I had traced The Secret back through the centuries, and I had discovered the modern-day practitioners of the Secret."¹⁹ She reveals further:

"What I discovered in my search was the secret to having everything I wanted in life: money, health, love, success. When I applied this knowledge that I now call 'The Secret' to every