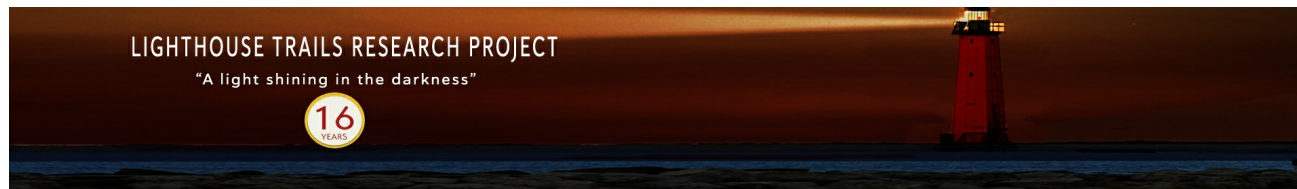


What Your Church Needs to Know Before Doing a Priscilla Shirer Study

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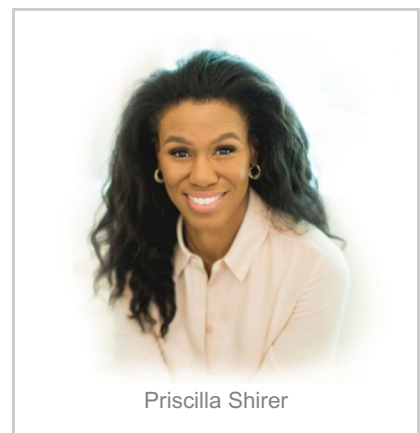
June 1, 2017



The repetition [of a word or phrase] can in fact be soothing and very freeing, helping us, as Nouwen says, “to empty out our crowded interior life and create the quiet space where we can dwell with God.”—**Jan Johnson**, *When the Soul Listens*, p. 93

Years ago, I got a chance to meet Jan Johnson. . . . I was encouraged and *redirected* in so many ways. As a young woman trying to navigate the ins and outs of my relationship with the Lord, Ms. Jan spoke wisdom into my life that was *extremely pivotal* in my life—personally and *in ministry*.—**Priscilla Shirer** (emphasis added; <http://www.goingbeyond.com/blog/wisbits>; quoted in 2010 and still up on Shirer’s website)

This week, our office received a call from a woman who was concerned that her church is going to be doing a study using material by Priscilla Shirer. Our caller wanted to get some information she can show her pastor as to why her church should not be doing a Priscilla Shirer study. Because Priscilla Shirer is a contemplative proponent, we concur with our caller’s concerns. In John Lanagan’s booklet, *Beth Moore & Priscilla Shirer – Their History of Contemplative Prayer*, Lanagan shows how both Moore and Shirer have been advocates of contemplative spirituality for quite some time. In that booklet, and this is what we want to focus on in this article, Lanagan discusses a woman named Jan Johnson. Because Priscilla Shirer embraces and has gleaned spiritually from Johnson, we need to take a closer look at what Johnson believes.



Priscilla Shirer

We first heard about Jan Johnson in Ray Yungen’s book *A Time of Departing* where Yungen explains:

Spiritual director Jan Johnson, in her book *When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer*, is a perfect example of an evangelical Christian who endorses and promotes this practice [contemplative prayer]. She leaves no doubt about what this type of prayer entails:

“Contemplative prayer, in its simplest form, is a prayer in which you *still your thoughts* and emotions and focus on God Himself. This puts you in a better state to be aware of God’s presence, and it makes you better able to hear God’s voice, correcting, guiding, and directing you.” [emphasis added]

Johnson’s explanation of the initial stages of contemplative prayer leaves no doubt that “stilling” your thoughts means only one thing; she explains:

“In the beginning, it is usual to feel nothing but *a cloud of unknowing*. . . . If you’re a person who has relied on yourself a great deal to know what’s going on, this unknowing will be *unnerving*. [emphasis added] (Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*, 2nd ed., p. 82.)

When Johnson talks about stilling the mind in order to experience God’s presence and hear His voice, she is referring to something that is universal with mystics—putting the mind into a neutral, altered state where one is not aware of the distractions around him. This inner stillness can only be achieved through some type of meditative practice (see Johnson’s quote at top of this article), which in the case of “Christian” mystics is contemplative prayer. For those of you unfamiliar with contemplative jargon, the “cloud of unknowing” is taken from a small book of the same name, written by an anonymous monk several hundred years ago. The book is a primer on contemplative prayer and in it instructs:

Take just a little word, of one syllable rather than of two . . . With this word you are to strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*)

This is describing a mantra-style practice, no different than that used in eastern meditation. It is interesting that Jan Johnson says the effect of this type of prayer is “unnerving.” *Webster’s Dictionary* defines unnerving as “inspiring fear.” This reminds us of another contemplative teacher, Richard Foster, who suggested that people pray prayers of protection before practicing contemplative prayer in order to avoid an evil encounter. But where in Scripture is prayer to God described as inspiring fear or something that needs prayers of protection first? Nowhere. That’s not how God’s Word defines prayer.

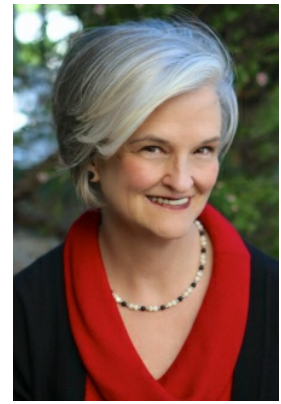
In Jan Johnson’s book, *Invitation to the Jesus Life: Experiments in Christlikeness*, Johnson shows her resonance with a number of contemplative figures with quotes by and references to them. One particular name that jumps out is New Age sympathizer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Read a few quotes by Chardin and then ask yourself, why would a Christian author (Johnson) be drawn to someone with these views:

Jan Johnson

What I am proposing to do is to narrow that gap between pantheism and Christianity by bringing out what one might call the Christian soul of pantheism or the pantheist aspect of Christianity.—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 56

Now I realize that, on the model of the incarnate God whom Christianity reveals to me, I can be saved only by becoming one with the universe. Thereby, too, my deepest 'pantheist' aspirations are satisfied.—Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 128.

I believe that the Messiah whom we await, whom we all without any doubt await, is the universal Christ; that is to say, the Christ of evolution.—Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 95.



Johnson's 2016 book *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-On Guide to Lectio Divina* leads readers in lectio divina meditations. Lectio Divina is used today as a gateway practice into contemplative mystical prayer. In her book, Johnson provides a section titled "Relax and Refocus (silencio)" which is instruction to readers on how to get rid of mental distractions when trying to practice lectio divina:

Each exercise begins with brief guidance to slow down, quiet your inner self and let go of distracting thoughts. . . . focusing on God. A way to interrupt this [mental] traffic is to focus on being present in the moment by breathing in and out deeply— even overbreathing. It also helps to relax our body parts one by one: bending the neck, letting the arms go limp, relaxing the legs and ankles. Loosen each part from the inside out. This doesn't mean you're setting aside your mind— you're redirecting your mind away from the busyness that often consumes you. Being present in the moment prepares you to wait on the still, small voice of God. If you are distracted, you may want to try the palms up, palms down method. Rest your hands in your lap, placing your hands palms down as a symbol of turning over any concerns you have. If a nagging thought arises, turn your hands palms up as a "symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord." [Foster] If you become distracted at any time during meditation, repeat the exercise. (*Meeting God in Scripture, Kindle version, Kindle location 102*)

To back up her teaching on practicing contemplative meditation and finding that inner stillness of the *mind*, Johnson turns to several contemplative teachers in *Meeting God in Scripture*. Sadly, God and Scripture are not the only things readers are going to meet when they read this book by Johnson. They will also meet Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Henri Nouwen, and David Benner. Other books Johnson has written have the same caliber. A few of those titles are: *Spiritual Disciplines Companion: Bible Studies and Practices to Transform Your Soul*, *Enjoying the Presence of God: Discovering Intimacy with God in the Daily Rhythms of Life*, *Abundant Simplicity: Discovering the Unhurried Rhythms of Grace*, and *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice: Experiments in Spiritual*

Transformation (Willard and Johnson). She has written several others books which carry the same message: you've got to have the inner mental silence to *really* know God (something Beth Moore has said too—in the *Be Still DVD*).

We could give several more examples of Johnson's embracing contemplative spirituality. You won't find much that she has written that doesn't include this element. In one article on her website titled "What Is Solitude & Why Do I Need It? or . . . Turn Up the Quiet," she quotes panentheist Thomas Merton from his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Why does Jan Johnson keep referring to contemplative mystics in her writings? There can only be one answer to that question—because she resonates with them.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this article, Priscilla Shirer "was encouraged and *redirected* in so many ways" when she met Jan Johnson. She added that Johnson "spoke wisdom into [Priscilla's] life that was *extremely pivotal* in [her] life—personally and in ministry." Shirer said these words in 2010 and has left them up on her website to this day. Obviously, she still feels this way about Johnson. In Shirer's popular book 2006/2012 *Discerning the Voice of God*, she favorably quotes Jan Johnson twice from *When the Soul Listens*. Shirer also quotes contemplatives Joyce Huggett and Phil Yancey in *Discerning the Voice of God*. Shirer clearly has been influenced by Jan Johnson as she admits herself.

We'll close with this: On Priscilla Shirer's website, where she talks about meeting Jan Johnson, she also includes an article by Johnson who is quoting panentheist Catholic priest Richard Rohr (founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation) from his book *Everything Belongs* (meaning everything and everyone is part of God). Rohr's spirituality would be in the same camp as someone like Episcopalian panentheist Matthew Fox (author of *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*). Rohr wrote the foreword to a book called *How Big is Your God?* by Jesuit priest (from India) Paul Coutinho. In Coutinho's book, he describes an interspiritual community where people of all religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity) worship the same God. For Rohr to write the foreword to such a book, he would have to agree with Coutinho's views. On Rohr's website, he has an article titled "Cosmic Christ." One need not look too far into Rohr's teachings and website to see he is indeed promoting the same Cosmic Christ as Matthew Fox – this is the "christ" whose being they say lives in every human—this, of course, would nullify the need for atonement by a savior. Lighthouse Trails has written numerous times about Rohr as he is aggressively pushing his panentheistic mystical spirituality into the evangelical church. If everything you have read in this article has not persuaded you to steer clear of Shirer's studies, then this should do it, hands down. The fact that she keeps the post about Rohr on her website should alarm all Bible-believing Christians and illustrates the spiritual affinity Priscilla Shirer is drawn to.

Before your church does a Priscilla Shirer study, please keep in mind the things you have read in this article. Contemplative prayer has roots in panentheism (God is in all) and interspirituality (all paths lead to God) as you can read in Ray Yungen's article "The Final Outcome of Practicing Contemplative Prayer: Interspirituality." Do you really want your church influenced in any way by a spirituality that is so against the Cross? Are we saying Priscilla Shirer is necessarily against the Cross? No, but for someone who wrote a book on how to discern the voice of God, she sure isn't showing any discernment in the voices that she herself is listening to and being persuaded by.

