

Eckhart Tolle

By Rhyne Putman

Publications and media: *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (1999), *Practicing the Power of Now: Essential Teachings, Meditations, and Exercises from The Power of Now* (2001), *Stillness Speaks: Whispers of Now* (2003), *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (2005), and *Milton's Secret: An Adventure of Discovery through Then, When, and The Power of Now* (forthcoming).

Organizations and Workshops: Eckhart Teachings Network; Oprah.com *A New Earth* online classes

Unique Terms: Silent groups, the Power of Now, the eternal I AM

HISTORY

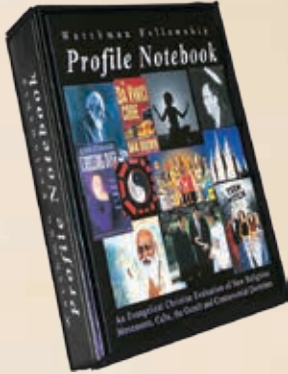
Eckhart Tolle attributes much of his unique worldview to his international rearing and adult life. He was born on February 16, 1948 in Germany, and moved to Spain with his father at 13. He describes his childhood in a broken home as unhappy, filled with “a lot of conflict.”¹ He notes, “Even aged 10 or 11 I was trying to figure out ways I could commit suicide.”² As a teenager, Tolle received no formal education but did choose to study languages independently. When in his twenties, he enrolled in the University of London to pursue further studies in linguistics. Tolle earned a research scholarship to Cambridge University where he continued study in languages, literature, and philosophy.³

Tolle claims that when he was 29, he had a “profound inner transformation [that] radically changed the course of his life.”⁴ Suffering with severe depression, he was again contemplating suicide when he had an “awakening” experience. Tolle awoke in the middle of the night, experiencing what he calls “nausea of the world”⁵ and said, “I can’t live with myself any longer.”⁶ Fear overcame him, and physical symptoms such as shaking and unconsciousness followed. He awoke from his panic-induced slumber with new understanding and a joyous new perception of reality. Tolle described feeling as if he “had just been born into this world.”⁷ In 1996, he moved to Vancouver, Canada.⁸ His domestic partner, Kim Eng, is also a popular New Age teacher and motivational speaker.⁹

Tolle has quickly become one of the most popular spiritual teachers in the world. He has authored a number of bestselling self-help books, including *The Power of Now* (New World Library, October, 1999), *Stillness Speaks* (New World Library, August, 2003) and *A New Earth* (Dutton, 2005). The Eckhart Teachings Group, Tolle’s company, has become a booming industry of self-help books, tapes, conferences, and retreats. Tolle has also created a global network of “silent groups” who meet together regularly for silent meditation, an audio or visual presentation by Tolle, and reflection on his teachings.¹⁰

The real success came with the endorsement of one of America’s most popular New Age advocates. Shortly after *The Power of Now* made the New York Times Bestseller List, actress Meg Ryan introduced Oprah Winfrey to the book. Tolle quickly became one of Oprah’s favorite spiritual mentors and teachers. When Winfrey added *A New Earth* to Oprah’s Book Club, the book’s sales skyrocketed and broke a number of records for various booksellers. Within four weeks of Oprah’s endorsement of *A New Earth*, it sold 3.5 million copies—topping Amazon’s best-seller list and becoming the fastest selling pick in Barnes and Noble history. In the spring of 2008, Oprah and Tolle began a 10-week webcast calling for spiritual awakening and the realization of life’s purpose in the “now.”

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For the first session, more than half a million people logged on to Skype for the live broadcast making it “one of the largest single online events in the history of the Internet.... resulting in 242 Gbps [billions of bits per second] of information” streaming throughout the world.¹¹ By week five, almost 10 million webinar sessions had already been downloaded.¹²

TEACHINGS

Monistic Pantheism: What exactly did the spiritual awakening mean for Tolle? When he was on the verge of suicide, he questioned himself, “If I cannot live with myself, who is that self that I cannot live with? Who am I? Am I one—or two?”¹³ For the first time, Tolle distinguished between the “I” consciousness and the unhappy “self.”¹⁴ He began to understand that his individual identity was a harmful, “fictitious entity” created by the mind. The “awakening” led him to believe that real freedom comes in dropping the identity of self and becoming aware of “Beingness,” or one’s identification with the “the eternal I AM.”¹⁵ Tolle now conceived himself as one with the essence of being, no longer hindered by the “illusion of separation.”¹⁶ This awakening birthed Tolle’s understanding of the “power of now”—each person’s need for immediacy living in the moment with an understanding of their true shared consciousness.

In Tolle’s monistic worldview, the “illusion of separation” has led to a number of errors of the “thinking” mind. First, he believes that people under the delusion of self have wrongly assumed the existence of real evil and sin. Tolle prefers the terms “insanity” or “unconsciousness” to describe the apparent evils of the world.¹⁷ All conflict and all “evils” such as genocide, war, hunger, and violence¹⁸ stem from the “effects of unconsciousness.”¹⁹ Second, sin is not guilt or something wrong with an individual or even the wrong that a person does. Sin is the “collective insanity” found in ego-centered thinking (being under the illusion that you are distinct from others).²⁰ Tolle understands the “fall from the state of grace” to be the point where humanity ceased to understand their divine identity and started to see themselves as mere animals.²¹ Finally, Tolle sees time itself as an illusion. Time, too, is part of the problem of unconsciousness that permeates humanity in that people “are so consumed with time that they have forgotten eternity, which is their origin, their home, their destiny.”²² He encourages his students to quit thinking in terms of past, present, and future and to start thinking in terms of the Now.

Truth: While Tolle claims no affiliation with any particular religious group or faith system, he does claim influence from teachers in various religious traditions, such as Buddha, Lao Tzu, and even Jesus. These spiritual teachers, according to Tolle, were the “first human beings in whom the new consciousness emerged fully.”²³ Tolle admits that Gnosticism, medieval mysticism, Zen Buddhism, the Sufi movement in Islam, and the Advaita Vedanta of Hindu teachings have also made an impact on his understanding of spirituality.²⁴ Tolle, however, claims, “All religions are equally false and equally true” and that any claim to exclusive truth is nothing more than self-service that hinders true consciousness-awakening.²⁵

Tolle claims that one can maintain their religious affiliation while participating in his movement of awakening. Also, no religion—including the Christianity of the Bible—has exclusive claims on truth. Exclusive claims on truth are nothing more than the feeding of the ego or unhappy self. “The Truth,” he notes, “is inseparable from who you are. If you look for it elsewhere, you will be deceived every time. The very Being that you are is Truth.”²⁶ Tolle concludes that truth is not external information or knowledge but rather the inward inclination of Being that each person is capable of attaining through new consciousness.

God: Traditional beliefs about God in monotheistic faiths are rejected. Tolle explains that “The word *God* has become empty of meaning through thousands of years of misuse.”²⁷ For example, God has been misconstrued by male-dominant cultures eager to subordinate women to male leadership.²⁸ Tolle envisions a depersonalized god who is not a “who” or a “he” but rather a “what.” What is this god? God is “the eternal One Life underneath all forms of life.”²⁹ This concept of God is typical of New Age teaching and Eastern esoteric religions.

For Tolle, knowledge of God is not in belief about or in a God distinct from one’s self but is instead knowledge of one’s “oneness with all that is.”³⁰ According to Tolle, one does not encounter God by believing but by “feeling experience.”³¹ Tolle argues that for us to truly know and understand God, we must “realize that there is no separation between [us] and God,

between [us] and the source of life.”³² Tolle believes that all people really are part of the “I AM” and that they can experience true awakening when they make that realization.

Jesus Christ: Tolle insists that traditional about Jesus are sorely mistaken. “To say that Christ *was* or *will be* is a contradiction in terms,” Tolle writes, “Jesus *was*. He was a man who lived two-thousand years ago and realized his divine presence, his true nature... Thus, the man Jesus became Christ, a vehicle for pure consciousness.”³³ Tolle concludes that the Jesus of history was simply a man who came to understand himself in light of the eternal Christ-consciousness that all people share in common. Jesus had a heightened sense of spiritual perception, but he was not Christ in a distinctive sense.

The Second Coming of Christ has nothing to do with the person of Jesus. Instead, it “...is a transformation of human consciousness... a shift from thinking to pure consciousness, not the arrival of some man or some woman.”³⁴ With this statement, he follows the line of other New Age thinkers in describing Jesus as one person in history (among others such as Buddha) who has had the “avatar” of Christ³⁵—a depersonalized force that enlightens certain individuals in such a way that they understand their divine potential.³⁶

Tolle’s teaching also features a unique view of Christ’s death and its significance. Tolle notes that the cross is a “strange dualistic symbol” that is both a “torture instrument” and a “divine symbol” picturing “divine surrender” that says “Not my will, but thy will be done.”³⁷ On the surface, his suggestion of the cross’s significance does not seem to be in opposition with traditional Christian teaching. A closer look, however, reveals that Tolle defines the surrender of the cross to mean what “points to... the very thing that seems to stand in the way of realizing *who you are*.”³⁸ Instead of dying in sinful humanity’s place, Jesus’ death on the cross was a symbolic gesture for the human race to imitate. Tolle believes that Jesus demonstrated that we too can shed the illusion of self and the suffering that it entails if we embrace the “is-ness” of the moment.³⁹ The cross becomes nothing more than a symbol of the suffering that we must overcome if we are to realize our true consciousness as part of the divine essence of all things.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Monistic Pantheism: The monistic and pantheistic understanding of reality in New Age thinking like Tolle’s places each individual person at the center of his or her respective universes, with each belonging to the collective consciousness that permeates the universe. Tolle’s vision of “awakening” is virtually indistinguishable from other versions of consciousness-awareness in New Age teaching. The personal experience of transformation—an awakening to the “new reality” of God-consciousness—promises physical, psychological, and psychic dominion over the environment around each person, allowing him or her to shape the universe for the better as seen fit. Thus, this transformation becomes equivalent in some ways to “conversion” in the New Age movement.⁴⁰

Truth: Tolle’s claim that there is no exclusive truth is contradictory and self-defeating, because he makes an exclusive claim that there is no such truth. The Bible speaks clearly of a God who is faithful and true (Jer. 10:10), and Jesus himself claims that he is the “Truth” and the only way that one can really come to know and experience God (John 14:6). Tolle may claim Jesus as an influence and an elevated teacher, but he clearly skews Jesus’ words and intentions in his interpretations of Jesus’ teachings.⁴¹

God: For Tolle, God is not a personal being but rather some sort of impersonal being that lives in all life forms. The God described by the Bible, however, is a person who relates to his creation in a personal manner. As Christian theologian Wayne Grudem observes, “He interacts as a person, and we can relate to him as persons.”⁴² He speaks to us, and we respond to him with prayer and with worship. He takes on personal names such as “God,” “Yahweh,” “Father,” “Shepherd,” and “Lord.” Jesus demonstrated God’s personal nature in the relationship that he shared with him in the Gospels (Matt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:2-4; John 17). The Apostles testified to him as a personal Creator (Acts 17:24-25), someone who we can know (2 Cor. 4:6), and someone we can love and trust in (1 Pet. 1:8).⁴³

Tolle’s concept of God is the same pantheistic concept of Eastern religions and the New Age movement—the idea that everything is God. The God of the Bible makes no such claim,

actually, quite the opposite. He claims to be uniquely God: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me” (Isa. 46:9). The biblical doctrine of God is unique in that God is both *immanent* (close to and interacting with his creation) and *transcendent* (above and separate from his creation). Tolle’s teaching misrepresents God’s immanence and ignores the biblical teaching of transcendence completely. God is not the same as creation or simply part of creation. He is above his creation and he is greater than his creation. Creation exists because God “created all things” by his “will” (Rev. 4:11) or for his “pleasure” (Rev. 4:11, KJV). If God is greater than his creation, and we are his creation, then God is greater than we are. As the Preacher of Ecclesiastes notes, “God is in heaven and [we] are on earth,” so we should approach him with humility and not the vain conceit that we are his equal (Ecc. 5:2).

Jesus Christ: Christian Journalist Richard Abanes wryly observes, “Despite what Tolle might want to believe, the descriptive name ‘I AM’ is already taken.”⁴⁴ Yahweh announced to Moses that this name was unique to the eternal God who was and is and will forever be (Ex. 3:14). Of this name, Yahweh said, “This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Ex. 3:15).

While Jesus may have shared in the I AM identification with Yahweh (John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8), he did so because he distinctively shared both divine and human natures as the God-Man. “Unlike Tolle,” Abanes notes, “Jesus proved his identity as God in the flesh by rising from the dead.”⁴⁵ The biblical description of Jesus Christ is one of a person who is fully God and fully Man. Before the world began, he “was with God and was God” (John 1:1). Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15)—the perfect, high-definition picture of God’s invisible attributes and qualities. Although Jesus shared equality with God (Phil. 2:6), “made himself nothing... being found in human form” (Phil. 2:7). Jesus was not a human who simply realized his “divine consciousness” by a spiritual awakening. Rather, Jesus was uniquely God and took on human flesh (John 1:14).

Notes

¹ John W. Parker, *Dialogues with Spiritual Teachers* (Somerville, MA: Sagewood Press, 2000), 99.

² Claire Scobe, “Why Now is Bliss,” *Telegraph Magazine* (Sept. 29, 2003). <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/09/28/1064687666674.html>.

³ Parker, 101.

⁴ “Biography,” Eckhart Teachings, http://eckharttolle.com/eckhart_biography (accessed Oct., 2008).

⁵ Parker, 101.

⁶ Tijn Touber, “There and Then,” *Ode Magazine* (July, 2004), www.odemagazine.com/doc/15/there_and_then.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Douglas Todd, “Spreading change: From his apartment near UBC, Eckhart Tolle penned the latest title in Oprah’s book club,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 2, 2008.

⁹ “Biography: Kim Eng,” Eckhart Teachings, http://eckharttolle.com/kim_biography.

¹⁰ “Small Groups,” Eckhart Teachings, http://eckharttolle.com/group_listings (accessed October, 2008).

¹¹ “About Monday Night’s Live Web Event,” Oprah.com, http://event.oprah.com/videochannel/event/email/aneearth_ondemand.html (accessed October, 2008).

¹² Richard Abanes, *A New Earth, An Old Deception: Awakening to the Dangers of Eckhart Tolle’s #1 Bestseller* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008), 12.

¹³ Parker, 102.

¹⁴ “Interview: Available The Power of Now and the End of Suffering,” Sounds True, <http://store.soundstrue.com/interview-tolle.html>, (accessed Oct., 2008).

¹⁵ Parker, 102.

¹⁶ Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, April 9, 2008.

¹⁷ Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (Novato, California: New World Library, 1999), 67.

¹⁸ Ibid., 181.

¹⁹ Ibid., 203.

²⁰ Ibid., 109-110.

²¹ Ibid., 113.

²² Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2005), 220.

²³ Sounds True, “Interview: Available The Power of Now and the End of Suffering.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Tolle, *A New Earth*, 70.

²⁶ Ibid., 71. Most noteworthy here is Tolle’s assessment that Jesus was the one told us that we are in our being, Truth. Tolle partially quotes John 14:6, excluding “no man goes to the Father but through me.” Tolle is arguing against exclusive truth claims with what might be the clearest exclusive truth claim in the New Testament. This is but one example of his twisting of Jesus’ words to reflect his own esoteric teaching—something he does without taking into consideration the historical, grammatical, or immediate contexts of the selected passages.

²⁷ *The Power of Now*, 13.

²⁸ Ibid., 165.

²⁹ Ibid., 155.

³⁰ “A New Earth Online Class, Ch. 3 Transcript,” Oprah.com, 3, http://images.oprah.com/images/obc_classic/book/2008/aneearth/ane_chapter3_transcript.pdf (accessed October, 2008).

³¹ Ibid., 52.

³² Ibid., 53.

³³ *The Power of Now*, 104.

³⁴ Ibid., 105.

³⁵ See John Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview: Conflict and Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 14. In 2000, the late Christian apologist John Newport wrote,

“Many people within the New Age movement, primarily those with a theosophical background, see the need for a world teacher—a new avatar, a new embodiment of God, a being of status such as Jesus or Gautama Buddha. This new world teacher will be a master of the highest order who comes to earth to facilitate the transformation into a new eon.” One could only wonder if this type of position as a “new world teacher” is how Tolle sees himself as he claims to share the same sense of enlightenment that Jesus or Buddha had and desires to help lead the world toward a “new earth.”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Josh Max, “An Interview With Eckhart Tolle,” *Balanced Living Magazine* (January/February 2004). http://www.innergrowth.info/power_of_now_tolle/eckhart_tolle_interview_max.htm.

³⁸ Ibid., Italics mine.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Newport, -57.

⁴¹ Abanes, 77-100. Abanes lists several places where Tolle abuses the Bible in his faulty hermeneutic. Abanes rightfully assesses that Tolle’s greatest failure in biblical interpretation is in his reinterpretation of verses to fit his New Age philosophies, his partial quotation of passages, and his “ignoring the social, cultural, and religious backdrop of both the Old and the New Testaments” (78).

⁴² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 167.

⁴³ James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, Evangelical*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 196-197.

⁴⁴ Abanes, 60.

⁴⁵ Ibid.



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