PHYLLIS TICKLE

EVANGELIST OF THE FUTURE

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Reflections on the Impact She's Had on Publishing, Religion, and the Church in America

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY Tony Jones

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INTRODUCTION

Tony Jones

When asked, "What does your husband do?" my wife, Courtney, replies, "He's a freelance theologian." She likes that response because (1) it usually gets a chuckle and (2) it doesn't make me sound like a pastor or professor who can't find work.

Truth be told, I love the freelance life. But it's not without anxiety. Yes, I get to write books, speak, teach, and take part-time work here and there, but I've also got to worry about things like health insurance and retirement without anyone to back me up.

I have taken more lessons on this way of life from Phyllis Tickle than from anyone else. She is the queen of freelance theologians. In fact, it'd be more accurate to call her an ecclesial gadfly. She shows up everywhere, and she's got an opinion on everything. I've seen Phyllis Tickle challenge a nave full of becollared Episcopal clergy to get their heads out of the sand, and I've seen her address a stadium of 10,000 evangelical youth pastors. At the latter, she made one guy so angry that he rushed the stage and looked like he was going to deck her. One of the conference organizers jumped in between them and restrained the ornery youth pastor.

And, like a superhero, Phyllis escaped into the night.

■ ■ ■

Festschrift is a bit of a strange word. As you might guess, it comes from German and means "a celebratory piece of writing." It's what the colleagues of a prominent theologian write when he or she retires. In academia, it's an honor both to have a Festschrift devoted to your work and to be asked to edit a Festschrift for one of your mentors.

But as a freelance academic—as one who travels the country and teaches clergy and laity outside the confines of a seminary faculty position—Phyllis doesn't have academic colleagues, per se. She's done more to teach church history, biblical interpretation, and practical theology than a truckload full of seminary professors, but without a faculty job, she wasn't going to get a Festschrift. That's why I approached Paraclete Press about this volume. Happily, they concurred: Phyllis deserves a Festschrift.

■ ■ ■

Another thing that Phyllis and I have in common is a great love of the Latin language, so I'm quite sure that she will agree with me that the Latin term for this kind of volume is superior: *liber amicorum*—literally, "a book of friends."

This is, indeed, a collection of essays by Phyllis's friends. And, as much as I implored them to focus on Phyllis's *work*, on her *contribution to scholarship and church history*, and on her *challenges to future generations*, they continued to default to at least some mention of her as a person. What you will find in the pages that follow is a wonderful mix of the personal and

the professional, from Sybil MacBeth telling about how Phyllis is her literary midwife to Jon M. Sweeney tracing the influential arc of Phyllis's work in the publishing industry. In each chapter, you'll get some of Phyllis the person and some of Phyllis the professional; some chapters lean more to one side, some to the other.

The plain fact is that you can't really reflect on Phyllis's work without reflecting on her as a person. If she likes you, she'll take you into her heart faster than a redneck superchicken. She did with me. If she doesn't like you, look out. (But chances are she'll like you.)

Here's the thing, Phyllis has a keen bullshitometer. She's shoveled her share of literal BS on her farm, and she's seen plenty of it in the church and publishing worlds. She can smell it from a mile away. And she doesn't like it. Recently, during an interview, National Public Radio's Krista Tippett jokingly told Phyllis that she's not very politically correct, and I've got to say that's one of the things that I love most about Phyllis. Maybe it's her age, or her Southern charm, or a combination thereof, but she's able to write and say things that would get the rest of us in a lot of hot water.

Phyllis gets in her own hot water from time to time. There was the aforementioned evangelical youth pastor who took exception to her talk. And there was the time when, on her home turf at St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis, she suggested the birth control pill had allowed women to go back to work and thus stunted the spiritual development of a generation of children. Needless to say,

that didn't go over very well with the feminists in the crowd, and the blogosphere expressed its displeasure for days afterward. I was shaken, since I'd organized the event along with Doug Pagitt.

I called Phyllis to see how she was doing with all of the criticism. She was completely unfazed.

■ ■ ■

Phyllis Natalie Alexander was born on March 12, 1934, to Philip Wade Alexander and Katherine Ann Porter Alexander. As Phyllis tells it, one Samuel Milton Tickle was in the next crib in the nursery at First Presbyterian Church of Johnson City, Tennessee—she was two weeks old, and he was exactly fifty weeks older than she. (He'll show up later in the story, as you might guess.)

Phyllis's dad was the dean of East Tennessee State University. Mom was a tennis fanatic and basketball coach, and during World War II, she taught in high school and college, though she lacked a college degree. Basically, she was the dean's wife—Mrs. Alexander's tea was a command performance every year, for the university faculty and for young Phyllis.

Phyllis spent her childhood in Johnson City at the university. Her first five years of life were spent in the men's dormitory, where her dad was not only dean but resident director. He decided young Phyllis was getting a bit used to the attention of 250 men, and so they bought a house off campus.

For her elementary, middle, and high school education, she attended the university's "Training School"—named such because

it was staffed by teachers-in-training—and among her memories is that she was the only girl in physics class. As a student, Phyllis fell in love with Latin and Spanish and the way that human beings learn language.

At seventeen, Phyllis enrolled in Shorter College in Rome, Georgia. She flourished there, loved her teachers, and was instructed by some very powerful and influential women. Meanwhile, Sam—remember Sam?—was premed at East Tennessee State. For her senior year, she transferred to State because that's what dad wanted, and that's what Sam wanted, and Phyllis wanted to be with Sam. She graduated in March 1955, and started teaching Latin in Memphis public schools that September.

On June 17, 1955, Phyllis and Sam were married. In 1959, after Sam's internship, they moved to Pelzer, South Carolina, a small milling town. He was a country doctor there, and Phyllis worked as the business administrator of the hospital. They already had two kids and another on the way. In the early 1960s, Phyllis earned a master's degree at Furman University, was made a fellow of the university, and started teaching human growth and development there.

After a few years as a country doctor, Sam returned to training, specializing in pulmonology. By the mid-1960s, they were in Memphis, and Phyllis was teaching at Rhodes College, then she was appointed dean of humanities at the Memphis Academy of Art. Over the next decades, Sam had an illustrious career as a pulmonologist. He taught at the University of Tennessee College of Health Sciences, and he practiced privately. Among other

noteworthy achievements, Sam diagnosed the first AIDS patient in Memphis in the 1980s, when that disease was still virtually unknown. He went on to care for many AIDS patients, and he and Phyllis have been known for many years in Memphis for their friendship with GLBT persons.

During those years, Phyllis birthed and reared seven children on the farm in Lucy, Tennessee, where they made their home on twenty-ish acres of heaven just outside Memphis. They've known much joy on the farm, where they still reside, as well as some grief—one of their beloved children died in 1970, when he was just days old. With Wade's death, Phyllis left the deanship and turned her eyes toward home.

With others, she started St. Luke's Press in the early 1970s and taught poetry for the Tennessee Arts Commission. By the late 1980s, now a seasoned book publisher, St. Luke's had been acquired by Peachtree Publishers, and they retained Phyllis to run the imprint.

She quit in 1989. She was going home to write. But after just thirteen months, Daisy Marlyes called and asked Phyllis to start a religion department at *Publishers Weekly*, the flagship trade journal of book publishing. There, Phyllis was a pioneer in the long-neglected but now booming area of religious publishing. Across the country and around the world, industry insiders, journalists, and sociologists wanted to know who in the world was buying all these religion books, and they turned to Phyllis for answers.

In 2004, after a dozen years, the neutrality of journalism was chapping Phyllis's hide. She wanted to speak her mind. She

wanted not just to report on faith, but also to talk about faith, including her own. And, as much as she respected and even loved other religions, it was her own Christianity that she was most interested in promulgating. Just as she had done with the *Divine Hours* prayer books, the first of which was published in 2000, she then did with her books on the emergence of Christianity.

■ ■ ■

So Phyllis's professional career can be roughly categorized into three periods: (1) a teacher and dean of humanities, (2) a leader in the publishing industry, and (3) an expert in the emergence of the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the first period, her influence was mostly upon students, many of whom are still expressing their gratitude to her today. In the second period, her influence was primarily in the world of publishing professionals, though a couple of her books caught the attention of larger audiences.

It was in the third period of her career—in her writing and speaking about the recovery of ancient spiritual practices and the Great Emergence—that she captured the imagination of the church, writ large.

But that's not to say that she's always been right.

Because we speak on similar topics, Phyllis and I often find ourselves speaking at the same events. Indeed, we've been asked to copresent many times, in venues as dissimilar as the Jesus People's Cornerstone Festival (populated primarily by unwashed,

evangelical hard rockers) and the Lenten Series at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis (populated by well-washed and well-heeled senior citizens). And, having done these dog-and-pony shows a few times now, we're acutely aware of the areas in which we disagree.

One such area is Phyllis's insistence in nearly every talk she gives that the crowd understand the difference between the *emerging*, *emergent*, and *emergence* church. To her way of thinking, the lattermost term—which also happens to be her favored term—is the big umbrella under which the others—plus new monasticism, house church, fresh expressions, and alt worship—all cower. *Her* vision is The Great Emergence (With Capital Letters), whilst *our* little emergences are just subsets thereof. She's damn sure she's right, and I think she's full of it.

We've playfully argued this point on numerous occasions, and, though I have made my point convincingly, Phyllis is incorrigible. She is also recalcitrant. And some other words that I can't print. But I love her, and we've laughed uproariously on stage when debating this, much to the bewilderment of audiences.

Others have objected to parts of her work as well. Several reviewers, for example, complained that the every-500-years-rummage-sale argument with which Phyllis begins *The Great Emergence* is too broad a generalization, and that it doesn't hold water with history. Her response has been twofold: (1) Yes, she's said, of course any periodization of history is somewhat unnuanced, and (2) she's written yet another book (forthcoming) about the epochal changes in the church leading to the current

Age of the Holy Spirit. So, she both caveated and doubled-down on her argument.

Others have wondered whether her prophecy that the four quadrants of the church—liturgical, social justice, conservative, and renewalist—will converge into a Christianity of the Great Emergence is merely wishful thinking. Doesn't it instead seem like the increasing hyperindividualization wrought by postmodern technology will instead mean that someday there will be as many denominations as there are Christians? This argument is a bit like astrophysicists arguing about whether the universe will continue to expand or will reach a gravitational limit and collapse back in on itself, commencing another Big Bang cycle. That is, it's pure conjecture. In *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis makes sociological and historical arguments for the convergence that she predicts; in the forthcoming book, *Age of the Spirit*, she and her coauthor Jon M. Sweeney turn to theological arguments, positing that as Christians around the world turn to the "third person" in the Trinity, God's Spirit will begin the grand reunification that Phyllis has been promoting.

No matter if you object to something she's said or written, you've got to admit that Phyllis has been right a lot more than she's been wrong—that goes for her work on "God-talk in America" to the Great Emergence. Plus, she's always got lots of footnotes, so you know she's not pulling this stuff out of thin air.

She also gets away with murder. Between the Southern charm, the white hair, and the culottes, Phyllis Tickle gets to say things

to crowds that would get me run out of town on a rail. But when she says it, with a wink and a Tennessean aphorism, people laugh and applaud. Phyllis could tell Job that his house was on fire, his cattle were dead, and his wife had run off with the neighbor, and Job would thank her and ask for boils! That's basically what she's been telling church audiences for years—that the entire way of life that they know, religiously speaking, is coming to an end. But somehow, when they hear it from her, it doesn't seem like doomsday prophecy. From her, it sounds like good news.

She's right. The church is changing, dying and being reborn, right before our eyes. Phyllis has said that in a way no one else has. She's got the *bona fides* to back it up—the footnotes and the life experience. She is equally at ease in front of a crowd and behind a keyboard, plus she's breathtakingly prolific, so her message has been heard far and wide. Her interpretations of the past and her prophecies about the future will be talked about and debated for years to come.

■ ■ ■

Now Phyllis has declared the end to her traveling. After hundreds of days on the road each year, teaching and preaching and cajoling and nagging the church into the future, she's said that she's said enough. At least about that topic. She's coming off the road as this book goes to print, in search of the next thing that will occupy her imagination. In our most recent conversation, she suggested that maybe she'll return to poetry. There have been

three major chapters in her professional life, and I don't put it past her to write a fourth.

No matter what she turns her mind to, her six kids, seven grandkids, three great-grandkids, four dogs, ten acres, and Sam are sure to keep her busy. As are we, her myriad friends.

PART I

PHYLLIS'S GIFTS TO PUBLISHING AND THE CHURCH

ONE

BEFORE AMAZON

The Two Women Who Changed Religious Publishing[1]

Jon M. Sweeney

Before Amazon.com sold its first book in June 1995, two women were transforming spiritual and religious books and the market for them. Those two women were Sallye Leventhal, religion category buyer for the superstores of Barnes & Noble, Inc. (B&N), and Phyllis Tickle, *Publishers Weekly*'s founding editor for religion.

I am not sure if Sallye and Phyllis have ever actually met, but I have long been convinced that we in religion publishing owe them a portion of our paychecks. The two of them were not simply in the right place at the right time (although, as they would both surely tell you, they were), they were also brilliant, incisive, prescient, and possessors of boundless enthusiasm. They saw, before and more completely than the rest of us, how books have the power to carry religion and spirituality where churches

1. Many thanks to Thomas Grady and Stephen Hanselman for reading and critiquing an earlier version of this essay.

and synagogues, priests, pastors, rabbis, and imams never could. They understood a foundational truth (an old-fashioned term, I realize) encapsulated in a quote from theologian Paul Tillich's Earl Lectures of 1963, used often by Phyllis back in the day: "Hear this one important warning! Never consider the secular realm Godless just because it does not speak of God."[2] And they knew that Karl Popper was wrong when he declared, in 1989, that the ancient Greeks, by creating the first commercial books in the centuries before Christ, did away forever with their sacredness.[3]

SUPERSTORE The Church of Books

Perhaps I should credit Leonard Riggio, the chairman of B&N, rather than Sallye Leventhal, for his visionary creation, or at least his rapid duplication, of "third places," which back then we called by the purely capitalistic name "superstores." (The independent bookstores called them other, less complimentary names.) The success of B&N's Fifth Avenue 150,000-square-foot flagship store led Riggio to believe that people in other parts of the United States—in places with far less to do than in bustling Manhattan—might be attracted to a shopping experience that involves expansive inventory, readily available coffee, magazines and sundries, and large, comfy armchairs. It was after adding many lucrative acquisitions to the B&N fold in the 1980s that the

2. Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, introduction by A. Durwood Foster (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 62.
3. See Appendix to Chapter 7, "On a Little-known Chapter of Mediterranean History," in Karl R. Popper, *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 107–16.

chairman turned his attention to creating these larger stores. At the time, he was spurred on by the Borders brothers in Michigan, who were doing the same sort of thing, but they never had the quality and efficiency controls of their rivals at B&N.

The superstore was defined as a seriously large bookstore, usually between 50,000 and 150,000 square feet, offering at least 100,000 titles, music selections, a café, and other amenities. They were distinguished from big-box stores, in that *big-box* usually also means a literal box shape, strictly rectangular, and also a single floor of cavernous shopping space, whereas many of the superstore bookstores never fit that mold. They also were not an exclusive creation of B&N and Borders; the "great independents" like Tattered Cover in Denver, Powell's in Portland, and Book-People in Austin come to mind.

By the end of 1989, B&N had 23 superstores across the United States. By 1992, there were more than 100. In the mid-1990s, one superstore on the Upper West Side once enjoyed a fiscal year in which they sold more than $16 million worth of books, music, and videos (it is, as you might guess, now closed). Most superstores were doing $3.5 million a year. By the end of 1995, B&N owned and operated 358 superstores, and by the end of 1997, the company posted annual sales of nearly $2.5 billion. This was the high point for bricks-and-mortar stores selling books in America. The good independents remained strong—stronger, in fact, due to the presence of competition between B&N and Borders. This competition challenged the independents to do a better job of representing a wide spectrum of inventory. By September 1998,

B&N had opened its first superstore on a university campus at the University of Pennsylvania. Penn's then-president, Judith Rodin, was quoted in the school paper saying, "The addition of the Barnes & Noble superstore to our community will dramatically enhance the quality of life on campus. The partnership between one of the best booksellers in the country and one of the nation's leading Ivy League universities will enrich our students, our community and the City of Philadelphia."[4] Those were heady days when a retailer of a much-needed and loved commodity was in sync with the needs of its customers, and its customers were genuinely thankful.

HOW SUPERSTORES BUOYED RELIGIOUS PUBLISHING

Overnight, with the creation of all of this space, the market for books in this country was transformed. The old knock against independent booksellers (and I have been one myself) was that they were idiosyncratic in their tastes, finicky about what they stocked, and notoriously averse to handling religion. It is no secret that the "average" reader—and most people, studies show, are more than willing to call themselves "average"—were intimidated by independent booksellers. Whereas the superstores made no distinction between books worthy of inclusion and merchandising, many people had experiences of walking into an independent bookstore, inquiring after a certain

4. "Barnes & Noble To Build Nation's First University 'Superstore' at Penn," University of Pennsylvania Press Release, April 22, 1996 upenn.edu/almanac/between/bookstor.html accessed Oct 23, 2013

book, and being told in no uncertain terms that it was not, and would never be, stocked there. Before 1990, I would estimate that to nine out of ten independent booksellers, all books dealing with God or prayer or spirituality were deemed "religious," and "religious books" were deemed the proper domain of evangelical bookstores, then known as the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA). Meanwhile, spiritual books (without the word *prayer*, and often replacing *God* with *Goddess*) were to be found in so-called New Age stores. People will go to *those* stores to buy those books, the independent booksellers scornfully believed.

But, of course, they were wrong, and Sallye and Phyllis knew it. It wasn't safe to say it out loud then, but it is now: the superstores of B&N, Borders, and, later, Books-a-Million literally built and sustained the market for religious and spiritual books in this country, perhaps even long after it truly made wise, fiscal sense.[5]

In England, retailers have always been called *stockists*, which puts a fine point on the purpose of retailers in the minds of consumers: places where one can find goods that one may want to purchase. Due to the dramatic growth of superstores in the 1990s throughout the United States, booksellers finally became terrific, efficient stockists. Yes, the superstores hurt the independents, but also yes, the independents, on the whole, were not friendly to religious and spiritual books. As with other categories (e.g., science fiction), the independents needed the superstores to kick them in the pants in order to see that religion and spirituality

5. Now that the superstores are faltering, it's an open question as to whether the finally strengthening independents will change their well-entrenched aversion to the Religion category.

were not going away, but were bursting at the seams in American life. A 2012 *New York Times* story on publishing and bookselling referred to how B&N was "once viewed as the brutal capitalist of the book trade."[6] That's very true. But from a religious publisher's perspective, just as we were sad to see good independents fold, we were simultaneously, and to a far greater extent, grateful for the exponentially increasing shelf space for our category.

In the final analysis, Leonard Riggio built the stores knowing that consumers would come, but it was Sallye Leventhal who stocked them with infectious enthusiasm. Other categories had less enthusiastic managers. Believe me, I was there in those days as the national accounts sales representative for two different publishing houses. You couldn't get the attention of many of the buyers, but Sallye was always sensitive, attentive, and passionate about what her books—the ones in the large Religion sections of those enormous stores—could do in the world. A graduate of Hope College in 1978, she quickly "got it," knowing how important religion and spirituality are to Americans, and how underserved they had been for so long.

GIVING BIRTH TO NEW PUBLISHERS

Consider, for a moment, the small, vital religion trade publishing houses that were born at that time. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of all persuasions that started in the late 1980s and throughout the decade of the 90s. For example,

6. Julie Bosman, "The Bookstore's Last Stand," *New York Times*, January 29, 2012.

Wisdom Publications decided that they would begin publishing translations of Buddhist sutras and tantras from London, England, in 1987, and then moved to Boston in late 1988. They believed that if readers had the opportunity to find such books, they might even be popular. Who knew? They apparently did, or they guessed—given the climate and the support they could count on from Sallye and Phyllis—and they were right.

Meanwhile, Jewish Lights Publishing, which started in rural Vermont in 1990, became the first publisher dedicated to popular Jewish spirituality. Before Jewish Lights came along, Jewish book publishing meant resources on ritual for rabbis or the synagogue and books on history and the Holocaust for scholars and libraries. The company began simply, bringing a few Lawrence Kushner books back into print that had been dropped by Harper & Row. Jewish Lights—for which I worked in the 1990s—had the idea to create an inspirational literature from Jewish sources "for people of all faiths, all backgrounds." They figured that Christians might even become their largest customer segment if they were given the chance to find such books in bookstores, and to hear about them in the media. They were right, and they flourished.

The great old dames of religion publishing had of course been around for a long time. Doubleday, for example—where, if your book made it into the Image paperback imprint, it meant an in-print and distribution longevity and breadth comparable to ancient Roman Caesars—was founded in 1897 by Frank Nelson Doubleday. In 1910, the company moved operations to Garden City on Long Island, where the City of New York even built the