

Emergent Delusion

A Critique of Brian McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy

by Bob DeWaay

"always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"
(2Timothy 3:7)

My favorite TV show as a teenager was Green Acres. On the show was a county agent by the name of Hank Kimball whose job was to answer technical questions for farmers. Mr. Douglas, a misplaced New York Lawyer and wannabe farmer, would often call Hank for advice. Hank, however, was the master of using many words to say absolutely nothing. His advice would go something like this:

After Mr. Douglas calls Hank for advice about his sick pig, Hank shows up and accompanies Mr. Douglas to the barn.

Mr. Douglas: "I think there is something wrong with my pig."

Hank: "You have pigs huh; my cousin used to raise pigs" . . . pause . . . "No it wasn't my cousin it was my uncle" . . . pause . . . "No my uncle lived in town." . . . pause . . . "I remember now, my uncle had a bunch of cats. They drove my Aunt nuts, but they were sure some nice cats."

Mr. Douglas: "WHAT ABOUT MY PIG?????"

Hank: "I didn't know you raised pigs. Well some people make a lot of money raising pigs. I think I better get back to town now. See you."¹

Invariably Mr. Douglas would be left frustrated with no answers.

Reading Brian McLaren's book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*,² I thought for a moment Hank Kimball had become a theologian. The subtitle gives more than a slight hint as to why it reads like this: "Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/Calvinist + Anabaptist/Anglican + Methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian." If this confuses

you, welcome to “post-modern” Christianity in the age of despair. This despair is what Francis Schaeffer predicted would happen when man gave up the possibility of validly knowing truth about God and the world He created.³ Brian McLaren speaks as one on the other side of Schaeffer’s “line of despair.”

Brian McLaren recently appeared in Time Magazine’s list of the twenty five most influential evangelicals.⁴ His selection to the list is based on his role as a key leader in the “emergent” (sometimes called “emerging”) church—a movement popular with young people. His book is published by Youth Specialties, a ministry which promotes mysticism as a means of connecting young people with Christianity.⁵ In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren tells the story of how he has created a unique version of Christianity by gleaning parts he likes from many sources. The result is what he calls “emergent” Christianity.

The teachings found in *A Generous Orthodoxy* may sound very unusual to many of my readers because they are. What follows is a summary of these teachings (these issues will be explained in the body of this article). The kingdom as envisioned by McLaren involves holistic, planetary “salvation” without any apocalyptic intervention of God (McLaren despises dispensational theology⁶). Personal salvation from hell is disparaged as a wrongly motivated “consumer product” that distracts from the more important issue of saving the “whole world” in the here and now.⁷ Rather than providing Christian hope to a generation of young people who have rejected all forms of Christianity, McLaren undermines the possibility for anyone to have a valid Christian hope based on knowing the truth of the gospel. I say that because he removes the hope of validly knowing anything. I will show that this ill-defined version of Christianity offers a feeble hope based on the idea that God is somehow working in history and creation to bring forth the kingdom of God in this world.

A Religion of Perpetual Doubt

As McLaren himself says, if you are looking for a clearly stated theology that asserts what is true about itself and false about other ideas, you will not find it in his book. To argue about what is true or false is a relic of the bygone era of “enlightenment rationalism” that is the hallmark of

modernity.⁸ The Bible, for McLaren, is about doing good works, as God's people, for the benefit of all people; it is not about propositional, objective truth.⁹ He even anticipates that people like me will ask, "what is your definition of 'good works,' and who is included and excluded from the category of "God's people"? These, according to McLaren, are the "wrong questions," and they show that we are naïve captives of modernity. Here is how he describes such approaches: "And we have languished and wandered when we have used the Bible as a weapon to threaten others, as a tool to intimidate others and prove them wrong, as a shortcut to being know-it-alls who believe the Bible gives us all the answers, as a defense of the status quo"¹⁰

For those of us who still have nagging questions about knowing whether or not McLaren's approach is "true" given his premise that seeking to know the "truth" as opposed to falsehood is a fool's mission, he has a caveat:

If I seem to show too little respect for your opinions or thought, be assured I have equal doubts about my own, and I don't mind if you think I am wrong. I'm sure I am wrong about many things, although I'm not sure exactly which things I'm wrong about. I'm even sure I'm wrong about what I think I'm right about in at least some cases. So wherever you think I'm wrong, you could be right.¹¹

We can take comfort in the fact that he (and everyone else) is likely wrong and does not know it. So why construct a post-modern articulation of a (sort of) theology? Here is his answer: "A warning: as in most of my other books, there are places here where I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity."¹² He is saying that his purpose is not to tell us what is true or false about propositional statements regarding God, man, salvation, and eternity; but to stimulate our thinking by purposely promoting obscurity. I wonder what value "stimulated thinking" has if coming to the knowledge of the truth is ruled out as a reasonable outcome? Paul warned about the result for those who indulge in this type of end times delusion: "*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (**2Timothy 3:7**).

Since the book is about orthodoxy, a clear definition of "orthodoxy" should be provided. But alas, clear definitions are too "modern." Here is his

deconstructed version of what he says most of us hold as “orthodoxy”: “For most people, *orthodoxy* means right thinking or right opinions, or in other words, ‘what *we* think,’ as opposed to ‘what *they* think.’”¹³ “Deconstructed” refers to the idea that some personal or social motivation lies behind what people claim to be saying. The clever, post-modern, deconstructionist is able to cut through what was said to discern what was *really* being said. So if I say, “orthodox means that which is in keeping with the clearly revealed truth that God has given us in the inspired, inerrant Scriptures,” the deconstructionist tells me that this is just code for my arrogant belief that I am right and others are wrong. After all, “Winners write history,”¹⁴ so the doctrinal formulations of “euro-centric, western civilization” are highly suspect, having been written by “winners” with the motive of keeping themselves in power.

What is the alternative? – “In contrast, orthodoxy in this book may mean something more like ‘what God knows, some of which we believe a little, some of which they believe a little, and about which we all have a whole lot to learn.’”¹⁵ Since we are quite “sure” that we cannot be sure what parts of what God knows that we truly know, and what parts are false, then everything we think we “know” we probably do not really know (maybe – welcome to Hank Kimball theology). So to summarize, McLaren is very sure that he knows that most of what any of us believes to be true is likely false, but then he knows he might be wrong about that. Yet, being true to the title of his book he is “generous”: “While I see this practice as a way of seeking and cherishing truth, some will interpret this approach as abandonment of truth, doctrine, theology, etc. You are free to be among them.”¹⁶ I appreciate that option and I will take it.

The Line of Despair

When we discuss the postmodern approach to knowledge, we must consider the “under the surface” matters that influence one’s “knowing.” For example, the person who interprets, reasons, or understands is influenced by the culture, society, and his or her own prejudices. Thus “knowing” is tainted, skewed, and not in true correspondence to the way things really are. These issues have been discussed for centuries. However, the postmodern approach considers the internal workings of the mind of the one knowing to

be so determinative that objectivity is impossible. Therefore all knowledge is relative and consequently it is not possible to know absolute truth.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. It is particularly concerned about how one distinguishes valid knowledge from invalid knowledge. Postmodern scholars in that field see flaws in every possible approach to validating human knowledge. They have abandoned the possibility of a field of knowledge that is any more than “tribal” (i.e. “true” for our group only in as much as it helps us make sense of things in our situation). Now theology has jumped on the bandwagon of despair that characterized much of secular philosophy in the twentieth century.

Francis Schaeffer claimed that this despair was the result of autonomy. Modern man had posited the notion of the uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system.¹⁷ Schaeffer distinguished “rational” from “rationalistic,” meaning by the later term, “[M]an begins absolutely and totally from himself, gathers the information concerning the particulars, and formulates the universals.”¹⁸ By accepting the rationalistic presuppositions of a closed system (i.e. no God who speaks and intervenes) and the necessity of beginning totally with the self (“I”) who thinks, the result was despair. An example of the type of despair to which autonomous reason leads can be seen in the following quotation of the humanist Paul Kurtz:

The humanist, on the contrary, asks that we as human beings, face up to the human condition as it is. Humanists accept the fact that God is dead; that we have no way of knowing that he exists; or even of knowing that this is a meaningful question. They accept the fact that human existence is probably a random occurrence existing between two oblivions, that death is inevitable, that there is a tragic aspect to our lives, and that all moral values are our own creations.¹⁹

The alternative to rationalistic despair, for Schaeffer, was found in the Reformation understanding of the Scriptures:

The Scriptures give the key to two kinds of knowledge—the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of men and nature. The great Reformation confessions emphasize that God revealed His attributes to man in the Scriptures and that this revelation was meaningful to God as well as to man. There could have been no Reformation and no Reformation culture in Northern Europe without the realization that God had spoken to man in the

Scriptures and that, therefore, we know something truly about God, because God has revealed it to man.²⁰

This should settle the issue for evangelicals, but postmodern teachers like McLaren see a horrible, fatal flaw in this. The problem is that it is a fallible person reading the Scriptures.

McLaren acknowledges that the Reformation shifted the understanding of authority from the church to the Scriptures. He also sees this very much tied into modernity: “Martin Luther’s famous individualistic statement, uttered before the Catholic authorities with whom he disagreed, expresses the shift perfectly: ‘Here I stand.’”²¹ McLaren calls this, “[T]he first statement uttered in the modern world.”²² The great problem in the minds of post-modern scholars is the humanness of Biblical interpreters—the “I” who does the interpreting. The following extended quotation from McLaren aptly illustrates the reason the Bible cannot function authoritatively for postmodern thinkers:

How do “I” know the Bible is always right? And if “I” am sophisticated enough to realize that I know nothing of the Bible without my own involvement via interpretation, I’ll also ask how I know which school, method, or technique of biblical interpretation is right. What makes a “good” interpretation good? And if an appeal is made to a written standard (book, doctrinal statement, etc.) or to common sense or to “scholarly principles of interpretation,” the same pesky “I” who liberated us from the authority of the church will ask, “Who sets the standard? Whose common sense? Which scholars and why? Don’t all these appeals to authorities and principles outside the Bible actually undermine the claim of ultimate biblical authority? Aren’t they just the new pope?”²³

McLaren sees many other problems with the idea of Biblical authority including continual doctrinal disputes among Protestants, the supposed foolishness of trying to write systematic theologies, and the dependence on epistemological foundationalism.²⁴

McLaren and others of the postmodern ilk have erected a sophisticated system of doubts that are expressed in various versions of relativism. These are debated in academic circles and call into question the possibility of knowledge that goes beyond our language or cultural identities. Some even question if any human communication is valid (and write books to

“communicate” this idea). In the midst of such a discussion in a seminary class, one of my fellow students said, “This sounds like the ‘Little Engine that Couldn’t.’”

I contributed this to the discussion: God holds us accountable for the knowledge we have. The postmodern view of the hopelessness of knowing the truth flies in the face of the Biblical claims that God will judge us and hold us accountable if we suppress the truth: *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them”* (**Romans 1:18, 19**). The problem, according to the Bible, is not a supposed human inability to know or communicate, but a sinful repression of what IS known. Paul continues, *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse”* (**Romans 1:20**). During the discussion I asked, “Is God going to acquit anyone on the Day of Judgment on the grounds that certainty about knowing is impossible for humans”? I think not. According to the Bible we know well enough to be held fully accountable.

Which Jesus Should we Serve?

McLaren’s doctrine of Christ is confusing. He claims to have known “seven Jesuses.”²⁵ I do not think that this was meant to be a literal claim there were “seven Jesuses,” but rather that various Christian groups have emphasized a different aspect of Jesus and that McLaren has gleaned some useful bits from each of them.

This is his theological approach in a nutshell. Having disparaged that we can know the truth of the Bible by means normally accepted by evangelicals, McLaren then gleans from various versions of Christianity what seems amenable to his own religious sensibilities. This approach characterizes his Christology, where he picks and chooses what he likes from various traditions.

What he learns (i.e. decides for himself are the good parts he likes and therefore keeps) from various “Jesuses” is interesting. For example, he

learned mysticism from these Catholics: “Through him [Walker Percy] I discovered other Roman Catholic writers—twentieth century writers such as Flannery O’Connor, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Roman Guardini, and Gabriel Marcel, as well as the medieval mystics and others.”²⁶ Mysticism becomes an important part of McLaren’s “emergent” Christianity. He writes, “Many of those little churches [within Roman Catholicism] in the contemplative tradition emphasize how God may be mystically experienced through contemplation, through a quiet mindfulness.”²⁷

From Eastern Orthodoxy McLaren learned about Jesus saving the whole cosmos by entering it and becoming part of it: “Second, as humanity (and all creation) enters into God through Jesus, God also enters Jesus’ people, species, and history. And by entering all creation through Jesus, God’s heart is forever bound to it in solidarity, faithfulness, loyalty, and commitment.”²⁸ This aspect of Jesus becomes ground for McLaren’s understanding of planetary, cosmic salvation within history. He later describes an experience where he personally felt the interconnectedness of all things in God:

I felt that every tree, every blade of grass, and every pool of water become especially eloquent with God’s grandeur. Somehow they seemed to become transparent—or perhaps *translucent* is the better word—because each thing in its particularity was still utterly visible and unspeakably important . . . These specific, concrete things became translucent in the sense that a powerful, indescribable, invisible light seemed to shine through. . . . It was the exuberant joy of simply seeing these masterpieces of God’s creation...and knowing myself to be among them. It was to be one of them, and to feel and know that “we”—all of these creatures, molecules, and phenomena—were together known and loved by God, who embraced us all into the ultimate “We.”²⁹

To me this experience of the interconnectedness of all things is so New Age that it would not fit into any Christian category. However, given McLaren’s understanding of a Jesus who enters “all creation” and is “bound to it in solidarity,” then there is plausibility for this experience as being from God. One’s theology determines how he interprets such experiences.

Part of what disturbs me about McLaren’s discussion of learning from seven versions of Jesus, is that he implies that one cannot come up with a clear doctrine of Christ from the authoritative Scriptures alone. The Bible says, “*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many*

portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Hebrews 1:1, 2). This tells us that God has spoken fully, authoritatively and definitively. Here is McLaren’s version of it: “This full, radiant, glorious experience of God in Jesus Christ eventually revolutionized the whole concept of God, so that the word *God* itself was reimagined through the experience of encountering Jesus, seeing him act, hearing him speak, watching him relate, and reflecting on his whole career.”³⁰ In the Biblical version God spoke (authoritatively and propositionally) through authoritative prophets and ultimately through His Son. In the McLaren version, people experienced Jesus and then “reimagined” the term “God.”

We end up having to decide what sort of God we would like to believe in. Evidently, in McLaren’s version, the church had to continue the reimagining and reflecting process that led to the idea of the Trinity.³¹ This, for McLaren leaves us a choice between “God A or God B”:

Think of the kind of universe you would expect if God A created it: a universe of dominance, control, limitation, submission, uniformity, coercion. Think of the kind of universe you would expect if God B created it: a universe of interdependence, relationship, possibility, responsibility, becoming, novelty, mutualilty, freedom. . . . I find myself in universe B getting to know God B.³²

In this approach, rather than searching the authoritative Scriptures for the Biblical doctrine of God, one assumes a God who would fit a type of universe that seems preferable. McLaren tells why he is a Christian: “The image of God conveyed by Jesus as the Son of God, and the image of the universe that resonates with this image of God best fit my deepest experience, best resonate with my deepest intuition, best inspire my deepest hope, and best challenge me to live with what my friend, the late Mike Yaconelli, called ‘dangerous wonder,’ which is the starting point for a generous orthodoxy.”³³

What this says is that McLaren’s orthodoxy is an orthodoxy of personal preference based on the type of universe he wishes to live in. He has chosen the “Jesus” he prefers from various traditions and now chooses the aspects of Christianity he will follow from various versions of Christianity. The result is the type of Christianity he feels good about. Rarely does he do any exegetical work from the Scriptures to validate the aspects of “orthodoxy”

he chooses to embrace. The criterion, as we shall see, is what fits into his understanding of the kingdom of God emerging in the process of planetary salvation.

Jesus and Planetary Salvation

One of the key features of the “generous orthodoxy” promoted in McLaren’s book, is that practice must precede theology. This means, rather than going to a people group with a fixed set of theological beliefs about God, man, the world, Christ, salvation, justification, the Holy Spirit, and other important Biblical matters, one goes to the people first and finds a practice that fits their needs and priorities. For a role model in this endeavor, McLaren has chosen Vincent Donovan, a Roman Catholic priest and missionary from the 60’s and 70’s.³⁴ He cites Donovan from Donovan’s book *Christianity Rediscovered*: “. . . praxis must be prior to theology. . . In my work [theology would have to proceed] from practice to theory. If a theology did emerge from my work, it would have to be a theology growing out of the life and experience of the pagan peoples of the savannahs of East Africa.”³⁵ What Donovan and then McLaren gained from this was a theology of creation rather than a theology of personal salvation.³⁶

The practice that McLaren found to inform his theology leads him to what appears to be a version of “liberation theology” in which God comes to judge oppressive systems. He does so by bringing “truth and justice” into our deceived world and liberating us from the vicious cycle of injustice we created in this world.³⁷ Reducing Jesus’ teachings to the commands to love God and neighbor, McLaren conceives of the mission of the church in terms of planetary salvation in history:

I am a Christian because I believe that, in all these ways, Jesus is saving the world. By “world” I mean planet Earth and all life on it, because left to ourselves, un-judged, un-forgiven, and un-taught, we will certainly destroy this planet and its residents. And by “the world” I specifically mean human history, because again, it was and is in danger, grave danger, ultimate danger, self-imposed danger, and I don’t believe anyone else can rescue it.”³⁸

In this light, personal salvation from hell is seen as a foolish sidetrack from the mission of planetary salvation. Salvation is about being taught to live a better way (for the sake of others and planet earth).

McLaren says this about personal salvation: “But I fear that for too many Christians, ‘personal salvation’ has become another personal consumer product (like personal computers, a personal journal, personal time, etc.) and Christianity has become its marketing program.”³⁹ Again, agreeing with the Roman Catholic Donovan, McLaren is “uncomfortable” with a “hell-centered” approach to salvation.⁴⁰ He says that explaining this planetary “saving” Jesus to an agnostic Jewish friend evoked this response: “I could believe in a Jesus like that.”⁴¹ It offends sinners to hear about the need to repent and believe the gospel as preached by Christ and His apostles. It does not offend them to hear that God is angry about corporations that make products in a way that might be deemed not environmentally friendly and that in His judgment He is raising up a cadre of “Christians” to save the planet from the industrialists. For the postmodern young people McLaren is targeting, that is “speaking their language.” But is that the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Donovan and McLaren are right about one thing: if one’s practice (what works for people in our mission defined in terms of their willingness to accept our version of Christianity) must determine our theology, then we will certainly end up with a much different theology than that of the systematic theologies of church history. It is true that God’s wrath against the personal rebellion of individuals who “worship the creature rather than the Creator” (see **Romans 1:18-25**), that can only be averted by the blood atonement provided by Christ, is not a message that appeals to pagans. So for those whose theology is determined not from the teachings of Scripture, but from the desires of a young, postmodern, audience, personal salvation is shelved and planetary salvation becomes front and center.

So for McLaren the mission is to save the world in a social and environmental sense, not to rescue lost sinners from a lost and dying world that God is going to destroy in judgment. When he says, “He creates the church as a missional community to join him in his mission of saving the world,” that is what he has in mind.⁴² This gives him the ability to reject the “us-them” thinking that he so loathes. However, this thinking is very much in the Bible: *“and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels*

in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2Thessalonians 1:7-9).

How does that square with this statement from McLaren? – “The idea that the Christian message is universally good news for Christians and non-Christians alike is, to some, unheard of, strange, and perhaps heretical. To me, it has become natural and obvious.”⁴³

In the following section McLaren explains why his understanding of the Christian message will be good news even for non-Christians:

Even if only a few would practice this new way, many would benefit. Oppressed people would be free. Poor people would be liberated from poverty. Minorities would be treated with respect. Sinners would be loved, not resented. Industrialists would realize that God cares for sparrows and wildflowers—so their industries should respect, not rape, the environment. . . . The kingdom of God would come—not everywhere at once, not suddenly, but gradually, like a seed growing in a field, like yeast spreading in a lump of bread dough, like light spreading across the sky at dawn.⁴⁴

In most matters of historical, theological importance, McLaren is quite doubtful that one can be sure of anything. He considers the Bible to be mostly narrative.⁴⁵ He concludes that only persons who naïvely do not realize that their understanding of the Bible comes from Enlightenment foundationalism think that terms such as “authority, inerrancy, infallibility, revelation, objective, absolute, and literal” are appropriate to justify ones view of the Bible.⁴⁶ By making the Bible mostly narrative,⁴⁷ McLaren hopes so save it from yielding a clear theology and create space for his own planetary salvation gospel.

But he is not consistent. He somehow is VERY sure that the dispensational understanding of the kingdom of God is false and that his version (which is apparently post-millennialism though he is loath to defend any historical position) is true. Exactly how the Biblical narrative leads us to a gospel of planetary salvation that is good news even for those who reject it is completely unclear.

Because Biblical exegesis becomes a fool's mission where practice on the mission field determines theology and only those hopelessly stuck in modernity believe in finding objective, propositional truth in the Bible, McLaren has no need for exegesis of Biblical passages to prove his gospel of planetary salvation. The readers of his book need to decide if, lacking Biblical evidence, one should take him seriously. He has told us over and over "Why I am . . ." His personal story about why he thinks as he does is a very shaky foundation for overthrowing almost everything evangelicals have believed about the Bible and the gospel.

Practicing Christianity With No Clear Message

What does one do once he or she has crossed the "line of despair" as described by Francis Schaeffer? Such a person has given up hope for a unified field of knowledge when, according to Schaeffer, he or she rejected the Reformation view of the Scriptures. This is precisely what McLaren has done. In rejecting foundationalism, he has cut himself loose to any system that seems "coherent," however unattached it may be to Scripture or reason. If such a system works for the moment in dialogue with others and doesn't claim ultimate truth, it may be useful.⁴⁸ The objective is to attain a state of perpetual uncertainty, thus being fully delivered from modernity (and Biblical hope for that matter). McLaren states, "We must, therefore, never underestimate our power to be wrong about God, when thinking about God, when imagining God—whether in prose or in poetry."⁴⁹

According to Schaeffer, the true fool's mission is "escape from reason," the title of one of his books. Schaeffer says, speaking of the rational as understood in epistemological foundationalism, "As a matter of fact it is the only way man can think. The sobering fact is that the only way one can reject thinking in terms of an antithesis and the rational is on the basis of the rational and the antithesis. . . . This is the way God has made us and there is no other way to think. Therefore, the basis of classical logic is that A is not non-A."⁵⁰ I fully agree with Schaeffer. The term "postmodern" has come along to describe the results of the rejection of both reason and Scripture. We are left floating in a sea of subjectivism.

This despair has taken a predictable turn. Once the hope of knowing "true truth" as Schaeffer called it⁵¹ has been given up, what sort of religious

practice makes sense? The answer is mysticism. Now unfettered from both church authority and Biblical authority, the postmodern worshipper finds meaning in the subjectivism of mystical experience. It is not surprising that among those McLaren admires are key proponents of mysticism: Brother Lawrence, Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, et. al. Mysticism is a way of having a religious experience that does not require the theological distinctions and definitions that McLaren disparages.

Mysticism is a key part of “emergent” Christianity, in my opinion, because of the rejection of propositional truth, systematic theology, conservative hermeneutics, and ultimately the belief that there can be valid, concrete language from God about God. With an uncertain concept of Jesus, uncertain knowledge, uncertain salvation, and an uncertain hope based on the tenuous idea that the kingdom of God is somehow emerging in the process of world history, McLaren offers the comfort of mystical experiences such as the one he had of the interconnectedness of all things.⁵²

Youth Specialties, who published *A Generous Orthodoxy*, promotes numerous mystical practices including: deep breathing, Lectio Divina, Ignatian Contemplation, Labyrinths, Iona, and others.⁵³ A recent national pastor’s convention at which Brian McLaren was one of the workshop speakers and Rick Warren was a keynote speaker featured a Labyrinth and Yoga.⁵⁴ Evidently Eastern mysticism is seen as an important way to reach out to and train evangelical youth. Never mind that none of this is taught in the Bible.

The idea is to escape from something. McLaren writes, “A generous orthodoxy, in contrast to the tense, narrow, controlling, or critical orthodoxies of so much of Christian history, doesn’t take itself too seriously.”⁵⁵ McLaren’s uncertain orthodoxy apparently is only “certain” about one thing—that those who believe that God has spoken clearly, verbally, authoritatively, and finally to us through the Scriptures are sadly mistaken. Those of us who believe that way have serious problems. To escape from this “control,” McLaren offers mysticism and even silence:

It [generous orthodoxy] doesn’t consider orthodoxy the exclusive domain of prose scholars (theologians) alone, but, like Chesterton, welcomes the poets, the mystics, and even those who choose to say very little or to remain silent, including the disillusioned and the doubters. Their silence speaks eloquently of the majesty of God that goes beyond all human articulation. . . . This

mystical/poetic approach takes special pains to remember that the Bible itself contains precious little expository prose. Rather it is story laced with parable, poem interwoven with vision, dream, and opera . . . personal letter and public song, all thrown together with and undomesticated and unedited artistic passion.⁵⁶

What is being escaped from is the authority of Scripture. McLaren apparently would like the Bible to say either nothing or anything, but nothing so concrete as to be restrictive.

This purposeful ambiguity that values the vague and loathes the clear and objective is not new. In his day, Francis Schaeffer called this the “new theology.”⁵⁷ Schaeffer wrote, “To the new theology, the usefulness of a symbol is in direct proportion to its obscurity. There is connotation, as in the word *god*, but there is no definition.”⁵⁸ In his day this “new theology” was neo-orthodoxy. This “new” emergent church is really a re-hash of twentieth century neo-orthodoxy which in turn was the religious version of secular existentialism (the grandchild of the philosophy of Kierkegaard⁵⁹). Schaeffer explained, “The secret of the strength of neo-orthodoxy is that these religious symbols with a connotation of personality give an illusion of meaning, and as a consequence it appears to be more optimistic than secular existentialism.”⁶⁰ His critique of the “new theology” of the twentieth century is very applicable to McLaren’s “generous orthodoxy.” For example, Schaeffer said, “All the new theology and mysticism is nothing more than a faith contrary to rationality, deprived of content and incapable of communication.”⁶¹

So when the emergent church service consists of lighting to set a mood, religious symbols, silence, and mystical meditation without clear expository preaching, this is in keeping with the logical consequence of giving up a rational, meaningful knowledge about God that has been communicated from God using human languages with concrete meaning. It is, “escape from reason.” As Schaeffer said, “rationality and faith are totally out of contact with each other.”⁶² Schaeffer wrote, “If our own young people within the churches and those of the world outside see us playing with the methodology of synthesis, in our teaching and evangelism, in our policies and institutions, we can never expect to take advantage of this unique moment of opportunity presented by the death of romanticism.”⁶³

How utterly shameful it is that today, in the name of reaching youth, many, including Brian McLaren, are seeking the escape from reason Schaeffer warned about. In stark contrast to Schaeffer, McLaren says, “The Christian faith, I am proposing, should become (in the name of Jesus Christ) a welcome friend to other religions of the world, not a threat.”⁶⁴ Synthesis is precisely the essence of a generous orthodoxy. McLaren laments, “Western Christianity has (for the last few centuries anyway) said relatively little about mindfulness and meditative practices, about which Zen Buddhism has said much. To talk about different things is not to contradict one another; it is, rather, to have much to offer one another, on occasion at least.”⁶⁵ We are being offered a synthesis of world religions in dialogue.⁶⁶

This synthesis (as opposed to the antithetical relationship true Biblical Christianity has always had with the world and its religions) supposedly is leading to an emergent “kingdom of God,” however many thousands of years of world history it takes for it to emerge. In McLaren’s theology, the emergence of the kingdom happens in history through forces that are already at work in the world (God is supposedly still creating) not through God’s supernatural judgment of the present order in what the prophets call “the Day of the Lord” (see **2Peter 3:10**). Biblically, the kingdom of God doesn’t “emerge” but is to be established (see **Isaiah 9:7**; **2Samuel 7:13**; et. al.). It doesn’t come forth from the forces and processes of history, it is established by the intervention and supernatural work of God.

The unbiblical notion promoted in *A Generous Orthodoxy* says that God is in the future drawing us into this emergent kingdom:

IN this way of seeing [emergent] God stands ahead of us in time, at the end of the journey, sending to us in waves, as it were, the gift of the present, an inrush of the future that pushes the past behind us and washes over us with a ceaseless flow of new possibilities, new options, new chances to rethink and receive new direction, new empowerment. This newness, these possibilities are always “at hand,” “among us,” and “coming” so we can “enter” the larger reality and transcend the space we currently fill—language you will recognize as being, again, the language of the kingdom of God, which is the language of the gospel.⁶⁷

No, this is not the language of the gospel, it is the language of “dialectic synthesis”⁶⁸ that sees the thesis and antithesis merging into a synthesis that supposedly promises a better future. McLaren further says: “We constantly

emerge from what we were and are into what we can become—not just as individuals, but as participants in the emerging realities of families, communities, cultures, and worlds.”⁶⁹

Think about what this might mean if his eschatology is wrong and what is actually emerging is the world system of the Beast prophesied about in Daniel and Revelation. The new emergent world of religions cooperating and learning to make a new, better planet earth would turn out to be the hellish nightmare the Bible predicts. The new mysticism would be an excellent way for religious differences to be laid aside because mystical experiences are not of the sort that contradict one another like theological ideas do.⁷⁰ How better to resurrect the dream of the tower builders at Babel and unify the world?

Conclusion

In the 1950’s and 1960’s disillusioned young people were searching for something that they did not find in the traditional church. In that climate, Francis Schaeffer founded L’Abri to give rational, Biblical answers that counteracted the despair of twentieth century philosophy, dominated as it was by both religious and secular existentialism. The answer he proposed was a return to the Reformation understanding of the Scriptures.

Today a new movement is reaching out to disillusioned young people. Brian McLaren is one of the most visible leaders of this movement. The answers he proposes are the polar opposite of what Schaeffer taught. Rather than returning to the Reformation view of the Scriptures, he is turning to mysticism and theological pragmatism. He offers today’s youth an undefined, mystical experience and the “hope” that somehow the kingdom of God is emerging in the processes of history to bring planetary salvation.

He offers a confused view of the exclusive claims of Christianity. According to McLaren, there is always some synthetic alternative even if it must remain undefined: “This is how I feel when I’m offered a choice between the roads of exclusivism (only confessing Christians go to heaven), universalism (everyone goes to heaven), and inclusivism (Christians go to heaven, plus at least some others). Each road takes you somewhere, to a place with some advantages and disadvantages, but none of them is the road of my missional

calling: blessed in this life to be a blessing to everyone on earth.”⁷¹ So what are we supposed to believe about Christianity’s exclusive claims? The answer must have to do with Hank Kimball’s advice to Mr. Douglas about his pig. There must be an uncle in town somewhere who raises cats.

End Notes

1. I made this up from my memory of similar dialogues, it is not an exact quote of any of the episodes.
2. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Youth Specialties: El Cajon, CA, 2004; published by Zondervan).
3. See Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, (IVP: Downers Grove, 1968). I will be interacting with Schaeffer’s work in this article because Schaeffer so eloquently predicted just what is happening today and tells us why it is happening.
4. <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050207/>
5. see <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/youthspecialties.htm> for documentation about this serious situation.
6. McLaren, 237.
7. Ibid. 99, 100.
8. Ibid. 164.
9. Ibid. 164, 165.
10. Ibid. 165.
11. Ibid. 19, 20.
12. Ibid. 22, 23.
13. Ibid. 28.
14. Ibid. 29.
15. Ibid. 28.
16. Ibid. 30.
17. Schaeffer, *Escape*; 36.
18. Ibid. 34.
19. Paul Kurtz, “What is Humanism?” in *Moral Problems in Contemporary Society; Essays in Humanistic Ethics* ed. Paul Kurtz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 4.
20. Schaeffer, *Escape*; 21.
21. McLaren, 132, 133.
22. Ibid. 133.
23. Ibid. 133.
24. This approach, rejected by McLaren is based on assuming certain “givens” such as the law of non-contradiction (A is not non-A at the same time and in the same relationship) as “foundational” and building a theory of knowledge based on this foundation. R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley defend this approach in *Classical Apologetics* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1984) They say, “The triad of the law of noncontradiction, the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception is integral to all knowledge.” 90.
25. McLaren, chapter 1; 43-67.
26. Ibid. 53.
27. Ibid. 55.
28. Ibid. 57.
29. Ibid. 178.
30. Ibid. 73. McLaren cites Hebrews 1:1-3 himself, but comes to a baffling conclusion about it. “Having spoken” is hardly the idea of creating a personal experience for people to ponder and then “reimagine.”
31. Ibid. 76.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid. 76, 77.
34. Ibid. 91, 92.

35. Ibid. 92 Donovan as cited by McLaren.
36. Ibid. McLaren's creation theology so emphasizes immanence that it borders on being neo-pagan. Rather than God creating out of nothing, God moves so there are "creative possibilities" (page 161). This neo-pagan, immanent theology is alarmingly present in his discussion of "The Great Chain of Being" on pages 279, 280. Here God is the part of this chain of being that is, ". . . accessed through theology and spirituality and mysticism . . . [that] adds the experience of the sacred and conscious relationship with God." This "chain of being" according to McLaren, seeks to capture "emergence." It is hard to see the difference between this and neo-paganism or New Age ideas. I also see similarities to the Gaia hypothesis (see CIC issue 33 for a discussion of this).
37. Ibid. 95, 96.
38. Ibid. 97.
39. Ibid. 99.
40. Ibid. 99, 100.
41. Ibid. 101.
42. Ibid. 108.
43. Ibid. 110.
44. Ibid. 111.
45. Ibid. 166.
46. Ibid. 164.
47. The Bible does contain much narrative, but it does not follow that therefore the Bible has an uncertain meaning. The Bible, along with the narrative, provides commentary on the narrative and textual clues to the meaning of the narrative. For example, the story of David and Bathsheba is not just a story about adultery to entertain readers, but a story whose meaning is interpreted by authoritative prophets (like Nathan) and whose moral message is clear. McLaren obscures this and uses the narrative approach to justify finding his social gospel in the Bible when the Bible teaches no such thing.
48. See McLaren, 152, 153.
49. Ibid. 153.
50. Schaeffer, *Escape*, 35.
51. Ibid. 21.
52. As described on page 178.
53. <http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/spirituality/contemplative.php>
54. <http://www.nationalpastorsconvention.com/sched/sandiego/3.php?printIt=yes>
55. McLaren, 155.
56. Ibid.
57. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, (IVP: Downers Grove, 1968) 57, 58.
58. Ibid. 58.
59. Schaeffer, *Escape*, 43.
60. Schaeffer, *God*, 58.
61. Ibid. 61.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid. 47.
64. McLaren, 254.
65. Ibid. 255.
66. Ibid. 256, 257.
67. Ibid. 283.
68. This site shows how people who use this method think:
<http://www.jeffersonseyes.com/dialecticvalues.html> In many ways "emergent" and "dialectic" are nearly synonymous.
69. McLaren, 284.
70. Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*, (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2002). Yungen makes a strong argument that mysticism is preparing the way for world-wide deception and apostasy.
71. McLaren, 113.

Critical Issues Commentary
bob@cicministry.org

Critical Issues Commentary
c/o Gospel of Grace Fellowship
P.O. Box 390334
Edina, MN 55439-0334

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation.