Reformation & REVIVAL JOURNAL

A Quarterly for Church Renewal

VOLUME 14 · NUMBER 3 · 2005

Charting a New Way for Orthodoxy?

Elmer M. Colyer

Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* is far too rich, complex, and subtle a book to be easily captured in a review. It is especially admirable for a busy pastor to take the time and effort to read so widely in theology, reflect on it, and even write about it. And who can disagree with "a generous orthodoxy"—particularly when McLaren is far more correct than mistaken in his critique of the contentious and factious character of segments of the evangelical subculture in North America. I find myself in whole-hearted agreement with more than a little of the content of McLaren's book. So I am grateful for this opportunity to dialogue with McLaren about his ideas.

At one level, *A Generous Orthodoxy* is easy to read. The chapters are short. McLaren, who used to be a college English professor, writes well. He eschews technical theological vocabulary and carefully defines the jargon he uses. Yet McLaren complicates the interpretative process by his early admission that "there are places 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 . . . often stimulate more thought than clarity" (23). In fine postmodern fashion, this opens the book to multiple interpretations.

At first blush, this provocative, playful obscurity appears to be a mild form of deconstructionism by which McLaren purposefully attempts to destabilize the categories and thought processes of his rigidly orthodox conservative evangelical readers, as well as others who are so fixated on getting their ideas right, that in the process they forget how to live good and generous Christian lives in relation to others (see 27–31). On this reading, McLaren wants to pry these kinds of readers out of their mental fixities and create space for them to entertain a new thought or two: "A playful, provocative, unclear . . . book could . . . be more worth your money than a serious clear book that tells you what to think but doesn't make you think" (23).

The problem with this reading is that this is not the primary audience McLaren says he wants to address. The book claims to be for "Christians (or former Christians) . . . who are about to leave" and also "spiritual seekers who are attracted to Jesus, but they don't feel there's room for them in what is commonly called Christianity" (39). If this is his real audience, then maybe the provocative, often frustrated, at times alienated ambiance is designed to create resonance or commonality with the primary audience. This represents the "evangelist" or "apologist" side of McLaren (21): he wants to speak to the cultured despisers of religion who might be interested in orthodox Christianity, if that orthodoxy could at the same time be generous.

At more than a few points, however, it appears that McLaren has simply told us what he really believes. The book then becomes Brain McLaren's *credo* (which might be a title that more accurately depicts the contents of the book). He even claims this as his intent. At the end of the book, he asserts: "The preceding chapters are as close as anything I have written to a kind of personal confession or testimony of faith" (289). The most humorous passage supporting this reading has McLaren under interrogation by the police until finally he breaks down and sobs, "I confess, I confess!" "Then the cops soften, get me a cup of bitter black coffee in a white paper cup, pull out a tape recorder, and push the red button as I pour out

with remorseful tears the pathetic contents of this book" (38).

Despite McLaren's humor, I suspect that there is more than a grain of truth in this way of reading the book. Maybe McLaren simply wrote a brutally honest book stating what he believes. The problem is that after he finished reading what he wrote, he was too uncomfortable with the content to simply publish it (note the numerous places where he belittles the book). So he added the introduction and especially chapter 0, all the stuff about his ultra-conservative background ("the most conservative twig of one of the most conservative branches of one of the most conservative limbs of Christianity," 35), and about his writing in a provocative and obscure fashion (and so forth) to somewhat soften the impact of his *credo*.

There is ample evidence for this construal of the book as well. First, chapter 0 anticipates many of the criticisms that could be lodged against the book; so much so that as a reviewer I was tempted to simply say, "read McLaren's own review and critique of his book in chapter 0," and end my review at that point. Listen to McLaren's own account of the chapter: "Speaking of confession, I confess I just reread this Chapter 0, and it strikes me as so weird—arrogant? defensive? tortured? complex? anxious?—that I can't imagine why anyone would push through it to Chapter 1" (38). Or how about this disclaimer:

> Beyond all these warnings, you should know that I am horribly unfair in this book. . . . I keep elbowing my conservative brethren in the ribs in a most annoying—some would say *ungenerous*—way . . . unless by some chance it could generously be included under the proverb, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6 NASB), (35–36).

Sometimes the book sounds like it is for McLaren's own particular "emergent" postmodern clan or kin, designed to reassure them that they have in fact found—or founded—a "generous orthodoxy" after the collapse of both liberal and conservative positions, each tied in its own unhelpful way to

modernity and equally unworkable forms of foundationalism.

Maybe the book is simultaneously all of the above! If so, then McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* is really postmodern and truly generous: the book is capable of multiple actualizations—wish-fulfilling fantasies, to use Edgar McKnight's phrase for postmodern, reader-oriented assimilation of texts! Nevertheless, I read the book as McLaren's own *credo*, possibly more honest than one might expect given all his talk about being provocative, playful, unclear, and so forth. Hence my question for McLaren: Is the book simply his honest *credo*? Who is his real audience? And what does he really hope to accomplish through the publication of this book?

A Generous Orthodoxy consists of two parts. The first contains four chapters that tell his readers why McLaren is a Christian. There is a lot of good stuff in these chapters, especially the first one titled, "The Seven Jesuses I Have Known." McLaren leads his readers through seven christological phases in his spiritual-theological journey and likens these various Christologies to "partial projections that together create a hologram: a richer multidimensional vision of Jesus" (66). Yet McLaren never develops this synthesis into the holistic Christology intimated by the hologram, seemingly content to peak the readers' interest and leave them to reflect on what the multidimensional whole might actually look like.

The irony is that when McLaren deals with "Jesus: Savior or What?" in chapter 4, he seems to forget the holism of the seven Jesuses he recounts in chapter 1, for he deals with salvation under a three-part rubric of judging, forgiving, teaching (close to the classic *triplex munus* of Jesus as Prophet, Priest and King, if one inverts the first and third), and a two-part focus on the scope of salvation as personal and/or holistic (does Jesus save individual souls or the whole world?). Yet should there not be a bit more coherence between the seven Jesuses McLaren articulates in chapter 1 and the character of salvation he describes in chapter 4?

This kind of ambiguity is in keeping with the strong apophatic element (the apophatic tradition seeks to preserve the mystery of God by stressing the unknowability of the

divine) in McLaren's theology: "Consider for a minute what it would mean to get the glory of God finally and fully right in your thinking. . . . Then I think you'll see the irony: *all these years of pursuing orthodoxy ended up like this—in front of all this glory understanding nothing.*"[1] Thus for McLaren, "perhaps orthodoxy will mean not merely correct conclusions but right processes to keep on reaching new and better conclusions . . ." (294).

This apophatic dimension helps explain McLaren's emphasis throughout the book on the "emergent" (see the excellent chapter 19 devoted to this characteristic). The emergent is not simply a discrete linear progression but more like an Hegelian *aufhebung* in which the earlier stage is not merely negated or excluded, but rather the gains of the previous stage are embraced, integrated, and revalued along with new elements so as to rise to an even higher level. In good apophatic fashion, however, each new level is then subject to a subsequent *aufhebung* ad nauseam, until finally we stand in front of God's glory "understanding nothing."

Yet, the question then becomes, if the apophatic element finally wins the day, how does McLaren know that the "emergent" is a good thing? Indeed, how does he "know" that a higher level, or bigger perspective, is in fact attained? If this complex progression, in which the good of the previous stage is revalued, is ever upward (or if McLaren can see any direction in it at all), on what basis does McLaren discern it? Does not this kind of "talk" of "emergence" and "a higher level" presuppose an "ideal observer" who stands outside the fray and who can accurately (or at least brokenly) render these kinds of judgments on the basis of some sort of knowledge not subject to that strong ever-present apophatic element McLaren embraces?

When this apophatic tendency comes to the forefront, McLaren can draw some quite radical conclusions: "Ask me if Christianity (my version of it, yours, the Pope's, whoever's) is *orthodox*, meaning *true*, and here's my honest answer: *a little, but not yet*" (293). A bit further on McLaren adds, "The achievement of 'right thinking' therefore recedes, happily, far-

ther beyond our grasp the more we pursue it. As it eludes us, we are strangely rewarded: we feel gratitude and love, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming" (296).

Indeed, notice that McLaren asserts, "we're all on the court . . . all players" (31). He even acknowledges, "the winners label previous divergences as heretical and unorthodox and unchristian, leaving the impression for their descendants that everyone everywhere under the banner of orthodoxy has always agreed with them" (29). So at times this apophatic dimension threatens to dissolve every position, even McLaren's own, into just one more cultural-linguistic framework expressing the ideology of an emergent "winner" in this particular context and moment in history. Throughout the book, McLaren repeatedly struggles to articulate enough of a hermeneutic of trust (see, e.g., 18) to moderate the hermeneutic of suspicion latent in statements like those noted above.

One cannot help but see here a postmodern favoring of Heraclitus over Parmenides, of becoming over being. Indeed, do we not see a postmodern favoring of epistemological humility that is in danger of trapping the human knower within the subject pole of the knowing relation over the biblical emphasis on a humble yet joyous acknowledgment that the very Word of God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us," and that "we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)? If the history of philosophy and theology teach us anything, it is that there is no solution to be found by gravitating to one side or the other of these age-old antinomies between being and becoming, between the subjective and objective poles of the knowing relation, and between a hermeneutic of suspicion and one of trust.

Thus there is a noticeable tension in McLaren's book between this "lifelong pursuit of expanding thinking and deepening, broadening opinions about God" and other such similar statements that *presume some kind of broken grasp of God*, which allows us to recognize a "higher level" or a "deeper opinion" when we see one, and that apophatic element

where finally we are *"in front of all this glory understanding nothing"* (294). At his best, I think McLaren wants to assert the former (we can know something about God) but temper it with the latter (*Deus semper maior*—God is always greater—is a better way to say it).

On pages 286–87, McLaren comes close to articulating this point. He views "pluralistic relativism . . . as a kind of needed chemotherapy" against "modern exclusivism/absolutism." He passionately asserts that the way forward is a third alternative: "the way ahead is not to *stop short* of the pluralistic phase, but rather to *go through it* and *pass beyond it*, emerging into something beyond and better" (287). Yet the problem is that he provides *no account of* this "beyond and better" or anything about *how it is possible* (his postmodern fear of foundationalism?), and so his better thinking remains repeatedly imperiled by the strong dose of apophatism he reasserts throughout the book.

Unfortunately, McLaren seems to be unaware that *there already are* other intellectual options beyond the modern/postmodern fallacy of false alternatives: for example, Alister McGrath and, behind him, Thomas F. Torrance, both of whom develop nonfoundational yet critical-realist third options beyond modernity and postmodernity. In the end, McLaren's proposal is a bit too uncritical of the postmodern cultural context he inhabits. Or is all of this simply an example of being playfully provocative and unclear?

Christians who take seriously the incarnation, the affirmation that the Word fully became flesh, that the Son of God assumed all our humanity, including the human mind, cannot be as epistemologically skeptical as McLaren is when he gravitates into his apophatic mode. For those who affirm the incarnation, the one who possesses full *human* knowledge of God is the man, Jesus Christ himself, who lived, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended back to the Father as still the fully incarnate Son of God, with a fully human mind and with *full human knowledge of God* (the one true orthodoxy?). This same Jesus Christ left an apostolic community to bear witness to the *truth* that Christ was, is, and ever will be

(Acts 1:4–5); he also sent the Holy Spirit upon this community to lead it ever more fully into the *truth* that Jesus Christ is (John 14:5–21, 25–27; 16:12–16).

The reason why the New Testament is so full of "gratitude and love, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming" is not because of a final negation of all human knowledge before the sheer unknowability of God, but because the mystery of the Word become flesh is so profoundly replete with grace and truth that *we can apprehend,* even though *we cannot fully comprehend,* a grace and truth that we will spend all eternity trying to fathom and yet only scratch the surface. What is ever so astonishing to the New Testament writers is that we *can know something* of the mystery of the Triune God precisely because God's being is in God's act in Jesus Christ, and God's act in Jesus Christ finally inheres in God's being! There is no dark inscrutable deity behind the back of the love of God the Father that we come to know through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit. Here in the gospel, knowledge and love finally coincide. A robust Trinitarian theology always qualifies every overemphasis on the apophatic dimension of Christian faith in the history of the church. I am curious to hear how McLaren accounts for the tension in his book that I have noted, and also whether he accepts this kind of Trinitarian qualification to the apophatic dimension so prevalent in parts of his book.

The final sixteen chapters delineate "The Kind of Christian" McLaren is. Every one of these chapters begins with "Why I am . . ." and then deals with one of the following sixteen descriptors that define McLaren's "take on *a generous orthodoxy*":

> *missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/conservative, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished* **Christian**. (25, italics and bold in original)

If you think some of these descriptors are incommensurate with one another, do not worry, McLaren redefines many

of them so that they mean something quite different from what you might expect.

Of course, the list is something of a hodgepodge, which McLaren seems to grant again in chapter 0 (38). The question that keeps coming to the surface when reading through the chapters that explicate this unusual set of adjectives describing a generous orthodoxy is, Why this particular combination? McLaren provides his readers few clues. He does tell us, "The last thing I want to do is get into nauseating arguments about why this or that form of theology . . . or methodology . . . is right (meaning approaching or achieving timeless technical perfection). Hence the important adjective *generous* in the title of this book" (19). Maybe he worries that providing some justification for his configuration of a generous orthodoxy might involve him in this kind of "nauseating argument." So my question is, why this combination? While being generous toward others is obviously a good thing, what gives this list any claim to being orthodox?

These questions become especially acute in light of McLaren's own admission that while his

> approach affirms the importance of orthodox doctrine (as contained, again, in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds), it severely doubts the long-term value of highly emphasizing doctrinal distinctives, distinctives being those secondary doctrines beyond the core beliefs contained in the ancient creeds that are unique to this or that denomination (32).

I fully agree with McLaren's emphasis on the necessary coinherence of orthodoxy and orthopraxy (30), and also his appropriation of Michael Polanyi's insight of the tacit and personal way ultimate beliefs function without at times our even being aware of them (33). I agree with McLaren that the ecumenical creeds are subject to Scripture, and that from time to time new creeds are needed (28). But I am somewhat baffled by his linking of "orthodox" with the ecumenical church's "We believe," combined with his warning about emphasizing secondary doctrines, yet then providing us with

a rather idiosyncratic list of his own personal "Why I am" as being descriptive of a "generous orthodoxy." Can an individual's "Why I am," rather than the church's "We believe," ever define "a generous orthodoxy"?

In fact, this is what bothers me most about the book: when we finish reading *A Generous Orthodoxy*, we know a whole lot more about Brian McLaren and what he believes. We know what he looks like (there are two pictures of him on the jacket), and we know what he thinks on a whole range of interesting and peculiar subjects—much of which is excellent. We even know approximately how much the man weighs (17), although I think this is too much information! But we know a lot less about what he believes on the main loci of theology thematized in the ecumenical creeds, although we know he affirms them both.

Postmodernity's profound consciousness of epistemic limitation certainly leads to a humility and openness to other viewpoints. But postmodernity often forgets how consciousness of epistemic limitation easily traps one within one's own horizon and can lead to an insidious postmodern preoccupation with "Why I am," in rather stark contrast to the communal Christian "We believe." This can degenerate into rank postmodern, individualistic, buffet religion so prevalent in our culture today: "Mmm, that tastes good; I like that; how about a little of this, and maybe a bit of this and this and this." I am not saying that McLaren himself is guilty of what I identify in this paragraph, but where in his book does he guard against it as he should, especially in light of how many times McLaren's "I am" appears in the table of contents? Once again, his book seems to be too uncritical of the foibles and excesses that haunt postmodernity in America. So my question for McLaren on this point is, why this combination of sixteen descriptors? How can this particular set have a claim to orthodoxy over the ecumenical creeds, or at least some kind of communal Christian "We believe"?

It might also be, however, that McLaren's anti-foundationalism is at the root of this: to provide a rationale for his set of adjectives could easily drag him back into some kind of

legitimation of the knowledge on which his decisions are based. Here readers would do well to consider the nonfoundationalist way of argumentation, which often appeals to Thomas S. Kuhn's monumental study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Foundationalism establishes a set of self-evident beliefs by rendering the conditions for their justification entirely explicit, and then moves forward via various methods to establish other truths, ideas, and so on. Of course, since nonfoundationalism rejects this pattern, its form of argumentation shifts as well. The way scientific and other intellectual, nonfoundationalist revolutions actually occur (paradigm shifts—and thanks be to God that McLaren avoids this overworked category) is that the older categorical schema is inadequate to account for the ever-growing list of anomalies. Finally, a new set of categories is found (constructed?) that accounts for the anomalies and the relevant data. Might this be what McLaren is really up to in his book?

Nonfoundationalist argumentation follows this pattern. The first task is to exhibit the inadequacy (anomalies) of rival theories. This is also called "undermining." McLaren does this in clever ways throughout the book, sometimes playfully poking fun, at other times launching frontal attacks on various other viewpoints, often "conservative Protestant Christians" (35).

The second task in nonfoundationalist argumentation is to show that the proposed alternative approach—in this case McLaren's generous orthodoxy—overcomes the difficulties of the other approaches, while accomplishing everything they are designed to do (note how even the title/label he chose for his book is designed rhetorically to engender the superiority of his approach to others, despite all of his humble caveats about the possibility of being wrong). This is called "overwhelming" and is accomplished *holistically*. It is the illuminating power of the *entire* revival perspective over the *whole* landscape in question that establishes its persuasiveness as the *preferable* account in this particular context.[2]

Could this help explain the wide range of topics covered

under the sixteen "Why I am" chapters of the book? McLaren is simply showing how his generous orthodoxy incorporates the very best of the rest ("evangelical," "liberal," "conservative," "charismatic," "biblical," "Methodist," and so forth) within his own horizon. The unstated point that the reader is supposed to get is that this "generous orthodoxy" is able to subsume into its purview the valid insights all these other positions have to offer, combining them into a single more adequate vision (paradigm) that better illumines the whole landscape of Christian faith, and more fully engages our emerging postmodern context than any of the other positions. Indeed, it is the rise of postmodernity and the failure of previous foundationalist approaches—especially the conservative evangelicalism out of which McLaren has come—to adequately cope with the "anomalies" thrown up by postmodernity that demand both the horizon-shift McLaren presents in his generous orthodoxy, and the form of argumentation he employs to inculcate it.

Furthermore, might McLaren's postmodern anti-foundationalism explain his use of forms of argumentation that are "provocative, mischievous, and unclear," reflecting his "belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity" (23)? What is this kind of discourse other than a form of rhetoric—a way to use words persuasively (read: undermine and overwhelm other positions and establish one's own)? If one cannot appeal to a "truth" that we all have some kind of chastened and humble access to, is one not repeatedly tempted to employ rhetoric in order to make persuasive one's own position? It is no coincidence that rhetoric has come into vogue among some recent postmodern nonfoundationalist theologies!

Nevertheless, the danger here is that this kind of "undermining" and "overwhelming" can easily slide into a merely humorous and nice form of Nietzsche's will to power. Remember that Nietzsche was the great harbinger of postmodernity and the master of rhetoric, including beguiling genealogies and the use of esoteric discourse (obscurity, playfulness, and

intrigue for an ulterior purpose), all as a form of will to power. Without a critical-realist element, without some kind of humble access to a transcendent reality beyond us that has a claim on us and to which we all can appeal in our dialogue with one another, is postmodernity not continuously tempted to resort to this kind of argumentation?

Of course, this is not what McLaren intends! At his best, McLaren is simply trying to create space, to break up the rigid and oppressive conceptual frameworks—especially of hyperconservative evangelicalism—and to allow new and better thought forms to arise within which Christian faith can come to more faithful and efficacious expression in thought, life, and mission in our postmodern contest. Nevertheless, I still raise questions about the *form* of the book, the kind of argumentation McLaren employs, and his use of shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue, and the assumptions implicit in it all. Until McLaren articulates in far greater detail and clarity his third alternative beyond exclusivism/absolutism and pluralistic relativism, his book is in danger of sliding into a merely humorous and nice form of Nietzsche's will to power. McLaren needs at least to come clean and tell us why he employs the kinds of argumentation he does, including the use of "shock," "obscurity," "intrigue," and so on, and how it is respectful of others and not perilously close to rhetorical manipulation.

Author

Dr. Elmer Colyer is a professor of historical theology and the Stanley Professor of Wesley Studies at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. He holds a BS from the University of Wisconsin-Plattville, an MDiv degree from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and a PhD from Boston College-Andover Newton Theological School. An active participant in church renewal efforts, he is the author/editor of four books and numerous articles and reviews. He is the co-founder, and serves on the executive committee, of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, a Christian research organization. He is also pastor of the

Wesley United Methodist Church, East Dubuque, Illinois. Elmer and his wife, Natalee, have three sons and live in Dubuque, Iowa. In his free time Elmer enjoys mountaineering and racing bicycles.

Notes

1. In a revealing footnote on page 23, McLaren confides: "My favorite lyric from my favorite songwriter (Bruce Cockburn, also a compulsive thinker) goes—'All these years of thinking ended up like this: in front of all this beauty, understanding nothing.'"
2. See for instance, Ronald Thieman, *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame Press, 1985), for this kind of nonfoundationalist argumentation, though we find it in George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) and other nonfoundationalist theologians.