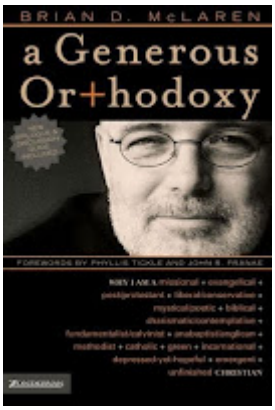
Review: A Generous Orthodoxy



Having interacted with him indirectly through other books I have read, and because he is the keynote at a conference I am going to in October, I thought it was about time I read some Brian McLaren. Apparently A Generous Orthodoxy is as close as definitive of him as it gets.

I think that many reviewers of McClaren have not been able to get past the form and style of his writing. He has a strange style of provocation mixed with self-effacement.

I must admit that the style bugs me at times. The buzzword compliance is one of these annoynaces – I need a non-inline quote to fit the subtitle for instance:

> *"Why I am 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."*

And the self-effacement always reduces the weight of his argument. For instance, after quite a resonable chapter against dead religion entitled "Would Jesus be a Christian?" he writes

> *"Now I've gone and depressed myself. I'm wondering what right we – and especially I – have to even talk about a generous orthodoxy. I feel completely lost and stupid and pathetic. Lord, have mercy."*

All it does is undermine a chapter that *does* have some

prophetic value. The self-effacement, ironically, has the effect of increasing the readers focus on *him* – as does his annoying use of footnotes to insert parenthetical self-reflections.

And so many commentators argue his style. The provocative words lead to arguments about semantics. The self-effacement leads to *ad hominem*. But is what he *says* actually that bad?

Broadly, my answer is "no." It isn't that bad. He is not theological precise, or indeed accurate at times. I believe he is on the right side of the line. Jesus is his saviour, I have no doubt. It is not helpful or valid to come at him, as some have, with the "Brian Mclaren is not really a Christian and is just a promoter of liberal fluff" line.

If you're looking for an exposition of theological precision or accuracy, you won't find it (despite the word "orthodoxy" being in the title). What you will find is a healthy challenge to face your own doctrine and beliefs and practices. I'm thinking about the sort of lecturer on evangelism who gets up at the front of class and poses the question "Why on earth would you believe in Jesus?" He is not suggesting that believing in Jesus is stupid or wrong, but he wants you to think about it, confront it in yourself, and articulate your reasons.

McLaren's approach is what he calls "postcritical" – "a way to embrace the good in many traditions and historic streams of Christian faith, and to integrate them, yielding a new, generous, emergent approach that is greater than the sum of its parts" (Page 22). This is at the heart of the word "generous" in the title. It is not necessarily a bad approach – there has always been that form of adage such as "Preach like a Presbyterian, pray like a Pentecostal, serve like a Catholic, etc." McLaren ends up summarising his own equivalent of this in a table on pages 72 and 73.

The problem with this approach is that it's very hard to cherry-pick the bits you like from various traditions and still manage to obtain the true heart of that tradition. The so-called synergy can so often come across as being oxymoronic – like a "feminist pluralist" you can't be 100% both. This is the key issue – even if the building blocks are not of himself, but gained from a myriad of traditions – the eventual arrangement of them is the shape of… Brian McLaren. It's at the problem of virtually all post-x dialogue. If you haven't got something absolute to proclaim you end up proclaiming yourself.

But I still find the content broadly acceptable. Because the Brian McLaren that Brian McLaren preaches isn't all bad.

I like how he keeps a strong tie between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Hard unemotional, unmoveable, objective academic abstract study of the things of Jesus has always bugged me as futile at best, pride-filled at worst.

I like his chapter on being poetic! It is this encountering of the not-just-purely-rational that puts life into theology. It is where I find the most value in interacting with postmodernity. The quotes from Brueggemann around page 162 are good ones ("Poetic speech is the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name preaching").

There are times when he goes to places that are touchstones of liberalism and manages to walk away reasonably intact.

> *"Although I believe in Jesus as my personal savior, I am not a Christian for that reason. I am a Christian because I believe that Jesus is the Savior of the whole world."*

The reason he gets away with this, in my view, is because he couches such words missiologically. Salvation is personal for sure, but it is *towards* something that is eschatologically broader than one person – it is towards "Go, baptising",

towards “your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is towards right-living, and doing, and speaking – it is towards mission. Good works are not simply personal assurances of personal salvation, they are the things to which we have been saved to and for. There is strength in this that cuts down the secular-sacred divide.

The word “missional” is ugly and an empty vessel into which meaning is squeezed from every quarter. McLaren fills it with that concept engaged with by the worn-out expression. “The church of God does not have a misson in the world, the God of Mission has a church in the world.” It’s reflected in his mission statement, which I like. It is very similar to that of Connections:

> *“To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world.”(Page 117).*

He doesn’t always apply this “missional” framework properly however. For instance, when interacting with the universalist/exclusivist dichotomy he tries to cut across the gap between the two by appealing to mission – “my mission isn’t to figure out who is already blessed, or not blessed, or unblessable. My calling is to be blessed so I can bless everyone.” (Page 124). In other words he is *trying* to say “Missionally speaking, universalism/exclusivism is redundant.” I would argue that a missional regard of universalism/exclusivism may not change *that* I bless – it certainly changes *how* I bless and how I see myself as blessed.

I had the most difficulty with his views on Scripture in chapter 10. Even though he begins well by applying missionality by engaging with the *purpose* of Scripture from 2 Tim 3:16-17. And even though I don’t mind the framework of considering the Bible as narrative – after all Goldsworthy and biblical theologians have done that. And even though I will not even baulk at comments that the Bible is a “timely

document" not a "timeless one" – after all that's what historico-critical exegesis is all about. There *is* something of the lefty liberal squeamishness about things he doesnt' like.

His main example in the section on the Bible is about what to do with the genocides committed by the Hebrews in the light of the apparently more pacifistic teachings of Jesus. His argument bottles down to "we know better now, the revelation has deepened, it was description not prescription." This means, however, he is not even being true to the narrative which includes themes of judgement and divine wrath – a topic he rarely if ever touches on throughout the book.

Sometimes his buzzwords are almost lip service. The best he can say about the Reformed tradition is that it is the "highest expression of Christianity" in terms of it's "intellectual rigour" (page 210) He attempts to redefine the well-known TULIP acrostic missionally but fails to see the missional aspects of the original. His own version is shallower – Total depravity is replaced with Triune love showing, once again, his squeamishness about sin and judgement and ignoring the myriad of ways in which concepts of Original Sin can and should find expression missionally.

His take on Anglicanism, unsurprisingly, is an embrace of *via media.* He advances the "practice of dynamic tension" and the "practice of compromise" (pages 234-235). I can now see why he was invited to Lambeth! In many ways I wish the revisionists within Anglicanism would take it to heart. The footnote on page 235 describes something of the present circumstance

> *"Rather than living with the difficult dynamic tension among Scripture, reason, tradition, or experience, various factions have chosen at times to abandon one or two or three of the four, or have indulged in old-fashioned power politics to get beyond both/and to either/or."*

Of course, this doesn't mean Anglicanism is always helpful. I would argue that Lambeth 1.10 is an expression of both/and and that the revisionists have by and large "abandoned" the Scripture pillar. I'm sure there are many who would disagree.

And I could go on. Each step of the way McLaren leans over the edge to see what can be seen. Occasionally he points out what others have failed to notice. Sometimes he leans too far or describes what he can see poorly.

But I will be generous with him. He is an enquirer, he is broad, but it seems his centre is Jesus. I will not deny him that.

My concern, however, is for those who come after him and who follow him now. Those who aren't standing on Jesus but standing on McLaren – who rest not in the gospel being explored but in the exploration itself. In fact we are catching glimpses of this becoming explicit – that the journey and the gospel are the same thing. McLaren would do well to distance himself from that at some point.

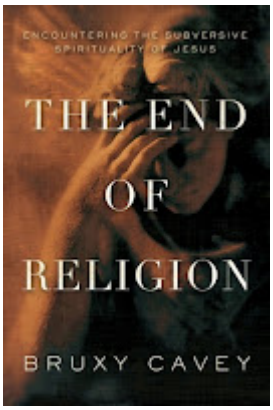
The self-effacement ends up being a disservice. He wants us to explore and discover for ourselves. He will not be so bold or as arrogant as to point the way. It's like someone who finds a treasure in a field, he goes and sells all he has and buys the field. And when he shares the story with his friends, they end up going out in his foot steps, and they all buy fields even if there is no treasure.

I was challenged by this book. Maybe I'll get to talk to him at this conference. I'd like that.



Review: The End of Religion

How can you go past a book by someone called *Bruxy Cavey*? I recently read his *The End of Religion*.



It is a book in the same vein as Dave Andrews' *Christi-Anarchy* but with less vindictive and perhaps a tad more towards the evangelical-as-we-know-it end of the spectrum.

Cavey's basic premise is that the mission of Jesus was not to *begin* a religion but to bring about the *end* of religion – to undo the world of human institutions and rituals mediating relationship with God and to inaugurate a time of restoration through grace alone. It is a simple premise, and he does get a little bit repetitive in the many short-sharp chapters that attack the issue from a myriad of angles. Generally speaking I find myself sympathising with his view.

I certainly have some appreciation for his description of most people's perspective on religion:

> *"Our world is full of people on a quest for ultimate reality… Often they reject religion for one simple reason: They have had firsthand experience with it." (Page 11)*
>
> *"Religion can be tiring – a treadmill of legislated performance powered by guilt and fear." (Page 13)*
>
> *"Because she was not raised in a Christian home… my wife has the advantage of seeing Christian culture… with a higher degree of objectivity. Often, when I'm listening to a televangelist or radio preacher… Nina asks, "Why is he so*

> *angry?"… She tells me to listen to the tone of his voice… "What would you say if a professor was giving a lecture on biology with that tone of voice? Or if a commercial was describing the merits of a product? Or, even bettter, what would you say if a friend was talking about his or her new love interest this way?"… When I listen this way, a light goes on. Many Christian leaders and teachers seem to have an undercurrent of anger." (Page 65)*

This critique of religion (including an historical "Chamber of Horrors" chapter that is basically a more objective consideration as the same thing as Andrews' "Why?-Wham" introduction) is the fuel of the first part of the book. From the crusades to the inquisition to empty religion of the present day the negative side of religion is clearly presented.

Against this Cavey brings the second part of the book – an examination of the life and teaching of Jesus. Drawing heavily from the Gospels and the arguments of respected exegetes such as Capon he expounds Jesus' ministry. For instance, in considering the Last Supper (now one of the most traditionalised religious practices in Christendom) he writes (emphasis mine):

> *"Through the newly invigorated symbolism of the Last Supper, Jesus shows his disciples what would replace the blood of the sacrificial system – Jesus ' own blood. Jesus had condemned the temple system and now he offers himself as the replacement, the final sacrifice that would make all other sacrifices trivial.* ***Jesus claims to have successfully replaced religion with himself.****" (Page 146)*

The fundamental point is simple gospel: "We don't need religion as our way to God because *God* has come to *us.*" (Page 165). And his consideration is more than adequate.

It is in the *implications* of all this (covered in the third and last part of the book) that I find that most people on an "anti-religion" kerygmatic wave tend to come unstuck. The eventual application all too readily becomes a pseudo-hippy lets-get-rid-of-institution-and-just-love-one-another-man. And while the name "Bruxy" fits that style his substance is much more mature.

For instance he does not advocate simply the replacing of religion with a "tiring" generic spirituality that "lacks a focal point" (Page 13) – he is about replacing religion with Jesus. The rhetoric is typical – embracing a spirituality of a "centre" rather than patrolling a "perimeter' (Page 212) and occasionally walking close to the edge of having a weakened view of Scripture ("Bible knowledge is just the first step toward the goal of following Jesus." Page 182). But Bruxy is far from being a universalist who's sole task in life is to "find the Jesus in everyone." His evangelical credentials are evident throughout the book and made explicit in the final chapter (unfortunately an Appendix) which gives a solid overview of the gospel and salvation in Christ alone.

Moreover, he is also not on some sort of quest to see the end of all organisation. He writes "The problem with organised religion is not that it's *organised* but that it is *religious*." (Page 223). And I admire a spirituality that leads to this:

> *"Because I am a pastor of a church that seems healthy and vibrant, occasionally someone asks me about the question of sustainability: 'What are the leaders of The Meeting House doing to ensure that the organization endures in good form for the next generation?' Although there are some specific things I could mention in response, my answer always begins with this question: What makes you think we think The Meeting House needs to endure? Organizational expression of faith and spirituality can come and go… Knowing that no organization is indispensable to God, I can celebrate the present health of The Meeting House and elight in how God is using this*

> *organization for now without worrying about the future. This is joyfully freeing, and deeply restful." (Page 222)*

The weakness of this is that it is an overly-utilitarian ecclesiology. Cavey is right in that, in the end, organisations are the means not the end. But the visible church *is* meant to reflect the invisible church – and brevity of life can sometimes undermine that reflection. The true church transcends history and geography and so there is testimony in an institution being able to do that as well. It is not wrong to strive for spiritual health in our institutions – but truly for the sake of God's glory, not the glory of the machine.

There are other niggles in the book with overstatements and implications left hanging in a number of places. It is not rocket science. It is prophetic and a speaking of truth but with no real clear step of "how do I put this into practice in my church?" But it remains thought-provoking and for those of us who are part of ecclesiastical machines, a healthy challenge of the sort we should consider frequently.

