Is Brian McLaren a New Ager?

by Mark W. Christy, PhD

In *Unmasking the New Age*, Douglass Groothuis offers six distinctives that are common among New Age proponents: All is One, All is God, Humanity is God, a Change in Consciousness, All Religions are One, and Cosmic Evolutionary Optimism (18-31). New Agers resoundingly agree that all is one, i.e. all is “interrelated, interdependent, and interpenetrating” (18). In *Naked Spirituality*, McLaren argues, “Put beauty, diversity, complexity, and harmonious interdependence together and you have something very close to the biblical concepts of ‘glory’ and shalom.”[i] In *Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren prefers a God who created a “universe of interdependence.”[ii]

On his blog, McLaren says, “I'm especially interested - both in my life and in the book - in how prayer achieves results ‘in here’ - in my soul, my character, my innermost being. And then I'm interested in how ‘in here’ results bring change ‘out there.’ So instead of seeing the two dimensions in opposition or as unrelated, I want to see them as interrelated.”[iii] McLaren is particularly concerned with the idea that all humanity is interrelated, and as such, all humanity is to engage in social justice. For evidence, McLaren points to Scripture: “This is why in the Old Testament, God commands his people to be charitable but also to work for justice.”[iv] Social justice is defined in many diverse ways. In the extreme, it can be used as a call to action in regard to “the inequality of opportunities, income, or outcomes.”[v] Conversely, social justice can be described as equal and fair treatment under law.[vi]

McLaren seems to view social justice in the extreme way. So what does the Old Testament say about social justice? In *Micah 6:8* NIV, the prophet says, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” In *Jeremiah 7:5-7* NIV, the prophet says, “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.” Based on this sampling of the Old Testament, God desires individuals to act fairly and lovingly in all their dealings. While collectively such actions should, in theory, lead to a more just society with fair and equal treatment under the law, the Bible itself calls upon each individual to act justly in their own immediate sphere of influence first and foremost.

McLaren’s strong advocation of social justice indicates that he does perceive some inherent dualism in the world. Even so, he sees the world moving in the direction of pantheism (all is God) or at least panentheism (all is in God and God is in all):
“As you can see, as attractive as pantheism seems to me, and as superior as it appears when compared with atheism, agnosticism, polytheism, or dualism, I find myself drawn beyond pantheism to monotheism. Pantheism certainly has much to offer, and our understanding of monotheism is enriched, I believe, by dialogue with monotheism’s primary theological colleague. Incidentally, if Christian monotheism is true, pantheism might not be so much false as it is ‘not true yet,’ for Christians believe that history is flowing toward a goal in which God is in everything, and everything is in God.”[vii]

To support his statement, McLaren points to Ephesians 1:10, 22-23, 4:6, 10. Except for Ephesians 4:6, these verses refer the exaltation of God’s authority over the created world. According to Ephesians 4:6 NIV, there is “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” This verse, however, refers to the indwelling presence of God’s Spirit in believers. God the Spirit indwells believers (“and in all”) but is not confined within believers (“and through all”). Believers, to contradict McLaren, are not everything; rather, they are those who have come to a right relationship with God by knowing Him through repentance and faith in Christ. While McLaren does not completely embrace pantheism (a major characteristic of the New Age Movement), his support for panentheism likely arises from his rejection of the doctrine of original sin and his affirmation of the original goodness for all people which is still retained by all people.[viii] McLaren believes original goodness is “inherent to all things in God’s good world.”[ix] In an effort to change the doctrine of the original sin to make it more appealing to postmodernists, McLaren minimizes the original sin of Adam and Eve by focusing on sins of humanity as a whole and believes that God’s punishment for sins of humanity is temporal suffering as opposed to separation from God in hell.[x] Instead of the original sin being the common problem of all humanity (individuals and communities), the common problem, McLaren offers, is sin’s effects on creation as a whole.[xi]

McLaren’s rejection of the doctrine of original sin allows him to affirm an ongoing relationship between God and humanity. His denial of the eternal consequences of sin and his acceptance of eternal security as a given for all humanity allows all people to participate in God’s Kingdom presently without fear of condemnation for their beliefs and actions. With this in mind, evangelists, McLaren observes, need only inform everyone that they are now reconciled to God and call upon them to accept reconciliation.[xii] Given his perspective, is it any wonder that he makes social justice the central issue in so many of his writings?

Another distinctive of the New Age philosophy, a change in consciousness, can also be found in McLaren’s works. In Naked Spirituality, he advocates a form of contemplative prayer which is centered in the practitioners’ inner consciousness: “Bring your inner aliveness to a place of attentive quietness and rest in God’s presence. Gradually put yourself in the posture of listening, of receptivity, waiting to hear rather than waiting to speak. Now realize that you are listening to God’s perpetual listening; your openness and receptivity mirror God’s openness and receptivity to you.”[xiii] Such an approach seems eerily similar to Eastern meditation practices favored by many New Agers.
While McLaren may or may not be advocating an altered state of consciousness, he does seem to be gravitating toward pluralism like many New Agers. In The Secret Message of Jesus, McLaren unveils some of the truths found in other religions: “In an age of global terrorism and rising religious conflict, it’s significant to note that all Muslims regard Jesus as a great prophet, that many Hindus are willing to consider Jesus as legitimate manifestation of the divine, that many Buddhists see Jesus as one of humanity’s most enlightened people, and that Jesus himself was a Jew, and ... without understanding His Jewishness, one doesn’t understand Jesus.”[xiv] Since truth can be found in all religions, McLaren views the Christian faith as “a welcome friend to other religions of the world, not a threat. [Christians] should be seen as a protector of their heritages, a defender against common enemies, not one of the enemies.”[xv] He even “hope[s] that Jesus will save Buddhism, Islam, and every other religion, including the Christian religion, which often seems to need saving about as much as any other religion does.”[xvi]

Despite his openness to the idea that truth can be found in other religions, McLaren rejects pluralism because it affirms an illogical view of all religions, namely, the idea that all religions are equally true when these same religions advocate opposing positions on various matters.[xvii] Therefore, he admits that other religions contain many falsities but adds that Christians have falsities as well at least in their interpretations of what it means to be Christian.[xviii] Several years later, he acknowledges that evil can be found in other religions but also says the same is true of the Christian religion; therefore, he believes that the good in all religions should be supported and encouraged.[xix] Since all religions have some truth, McLaren is able to find “wonderful and insightful” content in Islam and Buddhism.[xx] These other religions, it seems, are a “part of creation” because they were designed by those whom God created.[xxi] In support of his approach to other religions, McLaren states, “Paul believed in a revelation of God in creation (Rom 1:19ff.; Acts 14:17; 17:24ff.), in culture, [and] even in other religions.”[xxii]

The final characteristic of New Age philosophy offered by Groothuis is Cosmic Evolutionary Optimism. Proponents within the Emergent Church like McLaren constantly advocate an optimistic, future-oriented view of the world. This is why they often promote the Kingdom of God as the metanarrative of the Bible and call upon all people to join God in bringing the fullness of His Kingdom into fruition via social justice work. According to McLaren, this future-oriented view offers a “new vision [which] sees the universe as only partially created, an unfinished symphony, a masterpiece in progress. In this eschatology we are invited to be part of God’s creative team working to see God’s dream for the universe come true.”[xxiii]

From the six characteristics reviewed here, McLaren’s views seem to be well-connected to the New Age Movement. For McLaren, God may be found in all things and in all people. People, like God, remain inherently good even while they may be outwardly stained by sin’s
effects. Instead of getting their relationship with God fixed, people can immediately go to work helping God as co-creators.

By deemphasizing sola scriptura, McLaren is free to approach God through a myriad of ways including contemplative prayer techniques favored by New Agers. His postmodern epistemology which underlies his approach to Scripture allows him to remain at least somewhat favorably disposed to other religions. Finally, his lack of a firm biblical foundation all but forces him to remain engaged social justice projects which are future-oriented because he believe his God-given task is to bring in the Kingdom of God.

ENDNOTES:


[vi] Ibid., 181-82.


[viii] McLaren’s affirmation of the presence of original goodness within humanity is not a declaration that they are without sin.


[xi] Ibid., 79.


[xvi] Ibid., 264.


[xxiii] Ibid., 113.