

Mystery missed in treating the Bible as a spiritual GPS

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Oct. 24, 2011

A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIANITY: TEN QUESTIONS THAT ARE TRANSFORMING THE FAITH

By Brian McLaren

HarperOne, \$14.99

In his latest book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, author Brian McLaren proposes an updating of Martin Luther's famous 95 Theses. In what appears to be a nod to our current collective attention span, McLaren pares the possible 95 to a list of 10 questions. He begins with scripture, and asks first, "What is the overarching story line of the Bible?" Along the way he asks question No. 4, "Who is Jesus and why is he important?" and, question No. 10, "Can we find a better way of viewing the future?" The most telling, and most poignant, of these questions is the second, what McLaren calls "the authority question: How should the Bible be understood?"

He laments the many ways scriptures have been used to justify evil acts, and in Chapter 7 includes intriguing accounts of, and quotations from, pro-slavery tracts and novels written in the pre-Emancipation Proclamation American South.

He writes, "If we continue to use the Bible as we did in the past, we render ourselves likely to repeat past atrocities."

McLaren argues that the only guard against future atrocities -- he doesn't address atrocities by those, like Mao Zedong or Pol Pot, who do not look to the Christian Bible for guidance -- is for Christians to come to some mutual understanding of the Bible's message. Then he cries out, "If the Bible is God's revelation, why can't Christians finally agree on what it says?"

McLaren writes of the Bible as a single text, rather than, as the late scripture scholar Raymond Brown so aptly described it, a library. The kind of knowledge found in the poetry section is not the same kind of knowledge found in the geography section.

We do not read love sonnets with the same expectations we bring to a map, or perhaps we do, which brings me to the heart of McLaren's dilemma. McLaren, like most 21st-century Westerners, reads for information and for guidance, by which he seems to mean spiritual GPS. (Indeed, he is fond of the informational diagram, or map, as a tool for discovering where it all went so wrong.)

This is how we have been trained to read: For the who, what, where and when of the pyramidal newspaper story and for the applications and outcomes of the instruction booklet. We are after facts, facts and solutions. If I open my car owner's manual, I do not want either ambiguity or nuance. I just want to know how to open the latched gas tank cover. Quickly.

That approach works fairly well, with, say, Proverbs, a book of wisdom sayings not dependent upon revelation.

He who loves wisdom makes his father glad,

But he who consorts with harlots squanders his wealth (Proverbs 29:3).

I think we can all agree on the meaning of those two lines, even if we don't live them.

Narrative is an altogether different way of knowing. Highly effective people may have seven habits, but the story of the prodigal son has an infinite number of layers and its hearers inhabit the story at different levels through a lifetime of listening. As rebellious children, or as parents walking the roads watching for a lost child, or as grimly dutiful elder siblings, we enter the circle of the tale again and again, first through this phrase, this detail, this image, and then through another.

Do we ever reach the end of this story? Do we ever understand it? Or do we, rather, stand under the story, as it flows over us like water over a rock, transforming our contours, forging channels in stone?

This leads me to another question. Do we want a narrative we can finally understand, on the meaning of which we can, as McLaren desires, "finally agree"? Well, that's a contract or a handbook, and, however useful we find both contracts and handbooks, they are not mysteries, nor are they worthy of the mystery that is our life in God.

By mystery, I do not mean some secret a trickster God, or a trickster church, is keeping from us. By mystery, I mean that which never ends. In mystery there is more joy and more beauty and more abundance, more than we ever know or grasp or, yes, understand. We can journey into God, but we will never reach the end of God.

I live at the foot of Pikes Peak. The people here who have spent their lives exploring the mountain are the first to caution against any notion that we can ever fully know or conquer it. There is always more -- an unexpected meadow of ice, a rock fall, a turn -- teaching the wise that they stand under, not over, the mountain.

I have friends who have taught *The Brothers Karamazov* for years. They have the same respect for the novel that mountain climbers have for the highest peaks. Just when you think you know it, something else appears and you are back to wondering, and wonderment, and, finally, gloriously, wonder.

I wish McLaren the best with his questions and his quest. I will not be joining him. Our mistakes and missteps are painful, but an attempt to make the scriptures into a pocket-sized Rand McNally map, with mileages and highway numbers clearly marked, reduces our ascent to an errand. We can all agree we need a quart of milk, but it is not a trip to engage an imagination or a life.

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