

# Recovering Ancient Church Practices: A Review of Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*

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In this introductory volume for a new series being published by Thomas Nelson entitled “The Ancient Practices Series” (that will include volumes on prayer, the Sabbath, and tithing), well-known author and speaker Brian McLaren sounds a call for the recovery of some of the spiritual riches of our Christian past, in particular those associated with what are called the spiritual disciplines. In this regard, his book, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*,<sup>1</sup> is part of an interest in and fascination with spirituality that is now central to both evangelicalism and the cultural ambience of our time. McLaren rightly wants to move beyond the fairly limited range of spiritual expression associated with mid-twentieth-century Fundamentalism (his own roots are described as “mildly fundamentalist,” 54-55) and evangelicalism. Our riches as evangelicals—in the Puritans, Reformers, and the Fathers—are vaster than the classical Fundamentalists of the early twentieth century ever imagined. McLaren is confident that the time is right for “a fresh, creative alternative—a fourth alternative, something beyond militarist scientific secularism, pushy religious fundamentalism, and mushy amorphous spirituality” (5). Does this book deliver that alternative? No. As a spiritually reliable and helpful alternative to the regnant patterns of

living in our culture, the book has to be judged a failure.

First, it needs to be noted that stylistically the book reads well and McLaren is alert to the latest modes of expression, though I must admit some of them grated on this reader. His use of the word “sexy,” for example—“the sexy young word *spiritual*” (19)—is very much in tune with the ways in which that word has come to be used, though I for one have trouble dissociating it from meaning actual sex-appeal. McLaren is also attuned to the contemporary interest in discovering how the church functioned in relation to various secular empires that claimed—and do claim—the complete subservience of their subjects (23). Even the subtitle of the book is culturally hip, recalling the title of Episode VI of the *Star Wars* movie series—*Return of the Jedi*.

## **Affirming the Spirituality of Islam**

McLaren first outlines why spiritual practices matter (1-10) and how they are vital to “becoming awake and staying awake to God” (18). But problems soon emerge in the heart of the narrative about the various practices of piety that McLaren wishes to recapture. McLaren affirms that Muhammad had a “genuine encounter with God” that led to the movement of Islam (22). Even though McLaren

affirms his commitment to Jesus—he is, in his words, “at heart a Jesus-y person” (31)—his warm embrace of Islam, one of the “three Abrahamic faiths” (6) alongside Judaism and Christianity, continues throughout the book. Thus he mentions Eid ul-Adha and Eid ul-Fitr, Muslim holy meals, in the same breath as the Passover and the Eucharist (26), following Muhammad is parallel to following Jesus (37), the way in Islam—*deen*—leads to peace, wisdom, and joy like the gospel (51), and the Christian contemplative tradition has a counterpart in the Muslim Sufi tradition (92). Given that McLaren wishes to draw heavily on the wisdom of the Patristic era—the source of the Ancient Practices—this completely positive view of Islam would have been quite disturbing to the Fathers.

Take, for example, the man who can be called the last of the ancient church fathers, John of Damascus (c. 655-749), whose *The Fount of Knowledge* is one of the great systematic theologies in the history of the church. John appears to have been an Arab by ethnicity, his family name being Mansur, a name common among Syriac Christians of Arab descent.<sup>2</sup> His grandfather, Mansūr b. Sargūn, played a key role in the surrender of Damascus to the Muslim army of Khalid ibn al-Walid (died c. 641). Early rulers of Syria were tolerant of the presence of Christians, and John’s grandfather became a key administrator in the Muslim government of the region. John’s father, Ibn Mansūr, was known as an extremely devout Christian but also one of the most trusted officials of the Muslim regime. John succeeded his father as a key advisor to the Muslim ruler, Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705). After a long life of service in the public realm, John left his public position around

725 in order to embrace a monastic lifestyle.

John studied the Qur’ān in the original Arabic, and having known something of the domination of Islam at first-hand, he proved to be a deft respondent to Islam, or “the heresy of the Ishmaelites,” as he called it.<sup>3</sup> He isolated two issues central to the self-identity of Islam: its rejection of the Trinity and its denial of the death of Christ. For Islam, Allah has no son, no co-equal associates, and rules in utter solitude. Moreover, it affirms that Christ was not crucified, but was snatched away before the cross—“God raised him up to himself”—and thus Christ did not see death.<sup>4</sup> For John, however, if Christ did not die for sinners and if he is not God, then there is no salvation and we have a religion that offers no hope of redemption. For John, the devotee of God the Holy Trinity, Islam can thus only be regarded as a heresy. He would be utterly surprised that a self-professed believer in “the mystery of the Trinity and the incarnation” and “the affirmations of the ancient creeds” (33)—like the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed that John of Damascus honored as an accurate summary of biblical doctrine about God—could speak so positively of Islam without any hint of real critique.

### Where Is the Cross?

In an insightful study of McLaren’s theology, Greg Gilbert has noted that

McLaren ... seems blind to, or at least relatively uninterested in, the most central moment of the entire Christian faith—the cross. One of the most consistently puzzling things about McLaren’s books is how little space or time he has for Christ’s work of atonement.<sup>5</sup>

*Finding Our Way Again* is no exception to this pattern. In the whole of the book

there appears to be only one explicit reference to the cross. This occurs in the context of the trendy declaration that “Jesus didn’t come to start a new religion,” for he “wouldn’t have been killed simply for starting a new religion,” since the Roman Imperium was religiously tolerant (34).<sup>6</sup> Yet, throughout its history, healthy Christian piety has directed people desirous of knowing how to draw near to God to the cross.

For instance, in the New Testament sermon that we call Hebrews, the author emphasizes a number of times that inner purity—discussed by McLaren in a chapter on the so-called *via purgativa* (151-158)—is found ultimately through the blood sacrifice of Christ to his Father (Hebrews 9:14, 26; 10:10, 12, 14; 7:25). And it is solely on the basis of this sacrifice that human beings can boldly draw near to God, confident that the crucified Christ has dealt once and for all with their guilt and shame (Hebrews 10:19-22; cp. 10:1). All of the spiritual disciplines draw their efficacy from this sacrificial death of Christ. Without rootedness in that death, the decisive event in the history of piety, they are merely human ritual.

Or consider the answer that the late second-century text *The Letter to Diognetus*—anonymous like Hebrews—gives to the question raised by Diognetus, a pagan deeply interested in Christianity, as to why Christians are a people marked by love.<sup>7</sup> The author has been arguing that God revealed his plan of salvation to none but his “beloved Son” until human beings came to the point of realizing their utter and complete inability to gain heaven by their own strength. Then, when men and women were conscious of their sin and impending judgment, God,

did not hate or reject us or bear us ill-

will. Rather, he was long-suffering, bore with us, and in mercy he took our sins upon himself. He himself gave his own Son as a ransom for us—the Holy One for the godless, the Innocent One for the wicked, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, the Incorruptible for the corruptible, the Immortal for the mortal. For what else was able to cover our sins except his righteousness? In whom could we, who were lawless and godless, have been justified, but in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange! O the inscrutable work of God! O blessings beyond all expectation!—that the wickedness of many should be hidden in the one Righteous Man, and the righteousness of the One should justify the many wicked!<sup>8</sup>

Here, as so often happens in Scripture, theology leads to doxology. In a marvelous, Pauline-like mini-meditation on the salvific work of God for sinful humanity, the author has laid out the heart of the Christian faith. Only then does he tackle the question as to why Christians are a people of love:

God loved humanity, for whose sake that he made the world, and to whom he subjected everything in the earth. He gave them reason and intelligence, and they alone have been allowed to look up to him. He formed them according to his own image. He sent his only-begotten Son to them and promised them the kingdom of heaven, and he will give it to those who have loved him. Once you have acquired this knowledge, with what joy do you suppose you will be filled? Or how will you love him who first loved you in such a way? Loving him you will imitate his goodness.<sup>9</sup>

At the heart of God’s love for humanity is the cross—and it is because God has so loved human beings to the point of delivering up his own Son for their sins and in their stead, that they now can love him and be imitators of God.

Numerous other examples about the vital importance of the cross for piety and life could be given from the experience and thought of the ancient church, but these two are sufficient to state that it is simply amazing that a cross-centered focus is absent from a book seeking to be a guidebook to the spiritual life.

### *Via Unitiva*

Three of the final chapters—entitled “Katharsis (Via Purgativa)” (151-58), “Fotosis (Via Illuminativa)” (159-68), “Theosis (Via Unitiva)” (169-79)—are deeply indebted to the systematization found in medieval Roman Catholic and Orthodox piety,<sup>10</sup> and are problematic from both the vantage-point of the New Testament and the thought of much of the ancient church. While McLaren believes that this three-fold path, which he argues leads to union with God, originates in figures from the ancient church (146), he does not give any sources for his assertion.

A casual reading of some of the fourth-century authors, like the Cappadocian Fathers, could leave a reader with the impression that they adhere to some of the elements of the schema McLaren lays out. Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379), for instance, can talk of the Spirit coming to believers when they “withdraw themselves from evil passions” that alienate them “from a close relationship with God.”<sup>11</sup> But in other Basilian texts, the bishop of Caesarea emphasizes that it is the Spirit who makes any movement towards God possible in the first place: “it is impossible for you to recognize Christ, the Image of the invisible God, unless the Spirit enlightens you.”<sup>12</sup> For Basil, salvation ultimately rests on a foundation of grace.<sup>13</sup>

What is also noteworthy about patristic authors is their theocentricity and

Christocentricity. They speak and act as if they were already in union with God and Christ, not laboring for it, which McLaren is claiming was a hallmark of ancient Christian piety. And, of course, the New Testament assumes that union with Christ is a given for any form of genuine Christian spirituality. The indwelling of the Spirit, the bedrock of spirituality, entails nothing less than union with Christ.<sup>14</sup> In this connection, it is noteworthy that Christ is not mentioned at all in these three chapters except in a quotation from the seventeenth-century French theologian Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) (172).

### **The Importance of Studying History**

Along with these problems with McLaren’s argument is a shoddy use of historical data. He argues at one point that what he longs to see are churches becoming “schools of practice that make history”—“breathless, history-changing learning” communities—rather than simply writing history and arguing about it (145). Although he is quick to add that he is not denigrating “the importance of studying history” (146), that concern was often contradicted by the way history was used in the book.

There is some confusion regarding dates and events.<sup>15</sup> McLaren appears to adopt a liberal reading of the dating of the Gospels (145). His reading of the battle to abolish the slave trade highlights Margaret Middleton (d. 1792), the wife of an important British admiral, Sir Charles Middleton (1726-1813), as the centerpiece of the abolitionist movement (134). No doubt Margaret is “an undervalued hero,” but there is also little doubt that William Wilberforce (1759-1833) is the key figure.<sup>16</sup> He asserts that Methodism was expelled

from the Church of England, when, in fact, the key impetus for schism came from the side of the Methodists (129).

Most importantly, McLaren keeps referring to “the ancient practices” in his book, but, at the end of it, I was no wiser as to what exact period he is thinking of. I suspect that he would like the reader to think of the ancient church, which is usually dated from around 100 A.D. to 500 A.D., although some would like to extend that period to include John of Damascus, mentioned above, and the Venerable Bede (c. 673-735). The truth of the matter is that much of what he said regarding these ancient practices is no older than the late Middle Ages.

Lest one think that this reader found nothing of value in the book, I must hasten to note that in a number of places I found McLaren’s argument very illuminating. For example, his discussion of hospitality is both helpful in understanding certain New Testament passages and their larger social and cultural background (103). His emphasis on the importance of humility and of being teachable is also commendable (137). Yet, overall, I cannot recommend this book as a helpful guide to either the spirituality of the ancient church or that of the Scriptures. McLaren emphasizes that he wished to provide his readers with something more than a “mushy, amorphous spirituality” (5). But that, in the opinion of this reader, is exactly what he has served up for his readers.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 7. For the most com-

prehensive recent study of the life and theology of John, see Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>John of Damascus, *Concerning Heresy* 101 (PG 94:763-773). For an online version of this paragraph, see “St. John of Damascus’ Critique of Islam,” n.p. [cited 2 May 2008]. Online: [http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/stjohn\\_islam.aspx](http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/stjohn_islam.aspx).

<sup>4</sup>Qur’an 4.157-158. Yet, there are two other texts, Qur’an 3.54-55 and 19.29-34, which imply that Christ died.

<sup>5</sup>Greg Gilbert, “Brian McLaren and the Gospel of Here & Now,” n.p. [cited 11 May 2008]. Online: [http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID314526%7CCCHID598014%7CCIID2340066,00.html](http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID314526%7CCCHID598014%7CCIID2340066,00.html).

<sup>6</sup>This statement ignores the early Christian insistence that their faith was a religion—the true one—see, for example, James 1:27 and *The Letter to Diognetus* 1. At a later point in his book, McLaren asserts that the goal of the spiritual disciplines is not “to make us more religious.” Rather, they are designed to make us “more alive” to God and other human beings (182).

<sup>7</sup>This question is raised in *The Letter to Diognetus* 1.

<sup>8</sup>*The Letter to Diognetus* 9.2-5. Translation mine.

<sup>9</sup>*The Letter to Diognetus* 10.2-3 in *Early Christian Writings* (trans. Maxwell Staniforth; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 142, altered.

<sup>10</sup>It is noteworthy that, in the final chapter, McLaren admits that the Christian hero of the past he would most like to meet is Saint Francis (191).

<sup>11</sup>Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23 (trans. David Anderson; Crestwood,

New York: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1980), 44.

<sup>12</sup>*On the Holy Spirit* 26.64, *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>13</sup>For a similar emphasis in another great spiritual master of the fourth century, Macarius-Symeon, see David Roach, "Macarius the Augustinian: Grace and Salvation in the Spiritual Homilies of Macarius-Symeon," *Eusebeia*, 8 (Fall 2007): 75-96.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, the Pauline use of the phrase "in Christ"; John 14:17-18, 23; Romans 8:9, 11; Galatians 2:20; 2 Peter 1:3-4; 1 John 1:3.

<sup>15</sup>For example: Michael Polanyi was born in 1891, not 1871 (124); the splits within the American Baptist community and American Presbyterianism did not take place after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, but in 1845 and 1857 respectively (135).

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008).