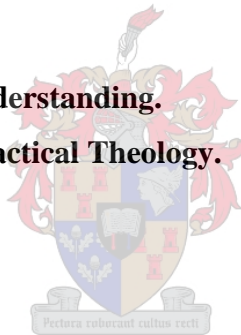


**Culture in ecclesiological self-understanding.
The core of Brian McLaren's Practical Theology.**

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Theology at the University of Stellenbosch

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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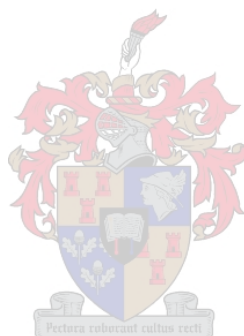


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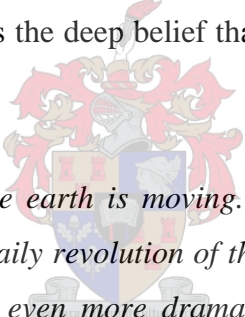
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1. Introduction

“You see, if we have a new world, we will need a new church. We won’t need a new religion per se, but a new framework for our theology. Not a new spirit, but a new spirituality. Not a new Christ, but a new Christian. Not a new denomination, but a new kind of church in every denomination.” (McLaren 1998: 14)

The above paragraph was written by Brian McLaren in his first book, *The church on the other side*, previously published under a different title called *Re-inventing your church*. All of McLaren’s work which follows is an attempt to discover and discuss what that above paragraph actually means - a new world, a new framework, a new spirituality, a new Christian and a new kind of church. Behind much of McLaren’s work is the deep belief that the world we find ourselves in is changing.



“Under our feet, the earth is moving. I am not speaking of the normal yearly rotation or daily revolution of the earth, as dramatic as both are. I am speaking of an even more dramatic, historic, unrepeatable kind of movement.” (McLaren 1998: 11)

These changes, which will be discussed in detail later, are requiring adaptations in both individuals and churches. These changes have already resulted in what has come to be known as *the emergent church* or as others prefer to call it “Emergent conversation.” For a detailed understanding of the emergent church phenomena, one must refer to the seminal work of Gibbs and Bolger entitled *Emerging Churches* (2006).

Brian McLaren for many is seen as one of the major contributors in the emergent discussion. Carson, in his critique of the emergent church, notes that McLaren is the most articulate speaker within emergent thinking (Carson 2005: 28) and that

many in the emergent movement regard him as their “preeminent thinker and writer” (Carson 2005: 157). Time Magazine in February 7, 2005 regarded Brian McLaren as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. It is important to note that McLaren’s work did not take place in a vacuum, as Gibbs and Bolger note (2006:49)

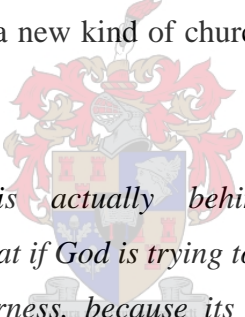
“Although the works of N.T.Wright, Dallas Willard, and Brian McLaren are great influences on emerging churches, their words were not written in isolation. They were delivered at a time when there was growing ferment that not only the methods but also the message needed to change.”

This work is an attempt to come to grips with the theological framework of Brian McLaren’s understanding of culture and ecclesiology by analyzing it through the grid of a practical theological framework. The motivations for this study are many and varied but perhaps the most striking is my personal existential experience of the present life and understanding of the Christian churches. It is the realization that the church’s present experience is one of being in a post-Christendom world (Guder 2000: xi), a post-industrial world (Castells 2000: 216) and a post-modern world (Grenz 1996: 2). The challenge I feel in this moment is perhaps like Guder, who notes that “we are like fish who are learning to analyze and criticize the water in which we swim” (Guder 2000: xi).

Despite the difficulty of this challenge, it is one the church ought to embrace and in fact from its earliest times has. David Bosch notes, when looking at paradigm changes in missiology, that each Christian era wrestles with its context and what Christian faith means for them (Bosch 1991: 182). A sustained attempt to do this and relate the Christian faith to the conditions and lifestyles of a new era was central to the reformation spirituality that emerged (McGrath 1991:17). Bosch (1991:21) notes that Jesus’ inspiration to the early Christian communities was to:

“prolong the logic of their own life and ministry in a creative way amid historical circumstances that were in many respects new and different. They handled the traditions about him with creative but responsible freedom, retaining those traditions while at the same time adapting them. That the first Christians proceeded in this way should not trouble us. If we take the incarnation seriously, the word had to become flesh in every new context.”

In light of the changing historical circumstances and our need to use our traditions creatively and responsibly, which is incumbent upon us who take the incarnation seriously, we need to understand McLaren’s thought and work as he is attempting to do this very thing. He believes that the historical situation and context of the church has changed so dramatically that we need to adapt and change. Hence a new kind of Christian and a new kind of church. He speaks of this new situation and places a challenge:



“What if God is actually behind these disillusionments and disembeddings? What if God is trying to move us out of Egypt, so to speak, and into the wilderness, because its time for the next chapter of our adventure? What if its time for a new phase in the unfolding mission God intends for his people (or at least some of the people) who seek to know, love, and serve God? What if our personal experiences of frustration are surface manifestations of a deeper movement of God’s spirit? In other words, what if this experience of frustration that feels so bad and destructive is actually a good thing, a needed thing, a constructive thing in God’s unfolding adventure with us.” (McLaren 2001: xi)

It is my belief that one should answer a tentative yes to all of the above questions and therefore the need to understand McLaren’s thought and practice becomes a much needed and valuable resource for the church in its present global context. The way I will attempt to do this is by beginning by exploring the importance of a

practical theological methodology as well as the specific one chosen and why. From there I will proceed to look at the eight areas that form part of a practical theological methodology and evaluate McLaren's work on that basis. I feel this approach the best as simply fusing both an understanding of a specific dimension and McLaren's perspective would blur a good evaluation.



2. A Practical theological methodology

A practical theological methodology is in many senses like a world-view. It is something that we often don't reflect on but is a part of defining our very reality. Many of us who are involved in the church and society inherently hold to certain beliefs which impact the way we practice our faith in the world which we are part of. Assumptions – about the nature of God, the church, the world we are a part of, how we understand that world, our view of scripture and church tradition, the nature of the Kingdom and how we transform our world – even if not reflected upon, have an incredibly powerful influence on our lives and the churches we are part of. Often as church practitioners we simply do not take the time to reflect on these various areas and see how they impact each other and how they interconnect and define our practice. Aristotle believed that the people most equipped to meet the challenges of governing the polis, or city state, are ones who are caught in the tension of what he calls “praxis,” that is, the tension between, and movement between, theory and practice. It is therefore vital that the church and her leaders seek to live in that tension between the practice of the faith and reflection upon it. Reflection upon these various areas will in turn lead us to a fuller participation in our practice. Indeed as Grenz (1993:79) argues:

“The contemporary situation demands that we as evangelicals not view theology merely as the restatement of a body of propositional truths, as important as doctrine is. Rather, theology is a practical discipline orientated primarily toward the believing community.”

To the extent that Brian McLaren has reflected on these various issues is not the point, although it will become obvious that he in fact has done so, as he naturally carries assumptions around all these areas which inevitably are reflected in his practice and viewpoints. It is with all this in mind that I have chosen to evaluate

Brian McLaren's work through a practical methodological framework as understood by Hendriks who notes that the methodology:

“is not a systematic ecclesiology, but rather a set of markers or beacons for orientation, such as those used on aeroplanes to fix the position and course. We believe that the tenets are interwoven and are to be implemented in the process of doing theology in a living faith community, where believers participate in God's missional praxis.” (Hendriks 2004: 24)

Therefore we will use this practical methodology to provide the necessary “beacons for orientation” to find our way into the core of McLaren's theological perspective with regard to ecclesiology and culture.

2.1 The Triune God as missional

The first area, or beacon, that one reflects on is about God. This is fundamentally a question of our identity and grounding in the triune God (Hendriks 2004:23). This identity is found and rooted in the concept of the *missio Dei* and the fact that the Triune God is missional in essence (Hendriks 2004:25). Frost and Hirsch (2003:18) put it as follows:

“Mission is not merely an activity of the church. It is the very heartbeat and work of God. It is in the very being of God that the basis for the missionary enterprise is found. God is a sending God, with a desire to see humankind and creation reconciled, redeemed and healed.”

After setting down what we understand by the triune God as missional we will evaluate to what extent McLaren has wrestled with this concept of God and the *missio Dei*.

2.2 The faith community

The second beacon will look at questions around the identity of the faith community (Hendriks 2004:23). Any local congregation should seek to move within the parameters of God's overall design for the church, whose identity is derived from the identity of the triune God (Hendriks 2004:26). Theological reflection in faith communities should not be dominated by clerical and propositional concerns but rather by the faith community as they are discussing their missional vocation. This will have a direct bearing on how one does theology (Hendriks 2004:26). The result should be constant reformation and openness to change structures.

“Authentic communal church structures constantly develop contextually as the faith community responds to the initiative or praxis of the living mission-driven God. The arguments of ecclesiastical hierarchies and authoritarian leaders who want to keep programs and institutional designs for the sake of good order, usually boil down to predictions of chaos or relativism should all congregations do as they please. The answer to this argument must be that the essential truth about faith communities is the dynamic relationship between the missional God and a responsive community, a relationship that implies action. Because God is the sustainer, chaotic relativism, in principle, is ruled out.” (Hendriks 2004:26-27)

The importance of faith communities is a major theme in the work of Brian McLaren and I will look at how he understands God's overall concern for the church and his understanding of the church's identity. This will include evaluating to what extent he seeks to contextually understand the church with regard to a missional God.

2.3 The contextual situation

The third beacon is the question of the faith community's broader context in the world and makes the assumption that the church's theology is contextual by its very nature (Hendriks 2004:27). Every new situation requires us to ask the question as to what God would do with us. Despite the uniqueness of each local and national situation in which the church finds herself, the broader global realities are still brought to bare on her politically, economically and socially and ought to be understood (Hendriks 2004:27).

Much of what McLaren speaks of is this need to understand the shifting sands and contextual realities in which the world finds itself. This has a direct bearing on the life of faith communities and individuals. I will examine to what degree he accurately understands the nature of the world which he describes.

2.4 Interpreting one's context

If the third beacon was an attempt to understand, although not exclusively, more of the global realities, then the fourth beacon looks more at some of the unique local realities of faith communities (Hendriks 2004:28). Here one seeks not to simply take theological propositions and apply them to congregational life from the "top down" but rather seeks to work out theology from the bottom up which allows one not to become:

"disconnected from daily experiences, questions, and challenges that confront members of a congregation. Consequently, a congregation and its members are unable to deal with change and transition; resulting in a slow spiritual and institutional decline." (Hendriks 2004:28)

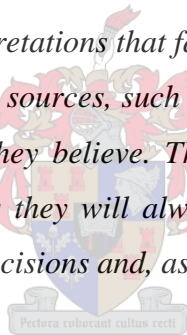
Obviously McLaren will not have insight into the many various local situations which faith communities find themselves in. The extent that he understands the

need to examine local realities and does so for his local reality will determine our evaluation of him in this area.

2.5 Scripture and tradition

The fifth beacon flows from an understanding of the questions that are being asked within the faith community and an attempted answer is framed in accordance with the normative role of scripture and tradition (Hendriks 2004:29). The faith community must take seriously the salvific activity of God in the history of Israel, Jesus and the infant church (Grenz 1993:93). Perhaps the most helpful role in embracing tradition is explicating meaning in ever changing historical contexts (Grenz 1993:95). Hendriks (2004:29) understands it as follows:

“It depends on interpretations that fallible people try to make of both their reality and normative sources, such as the Bible, creeds and the Christian traditions in which they believe. This should be an ongoing process in faith communities, as they will always be confronted with new realities that beg for ethical decisions and, as such, confessions.”



We will attempt to understand to what degree McLaren embraces the role of scripture and tradition while at the same time exploring his understanding of the nature of scripture and tradition. This will help us to comprehend the way in which he seeks to apply these areas within faith communities.

2.6 Discerning God’s action

The sixth beacon deals with the vital issue of discerning God’s missional praxis and the faith community’s ability to correlate interpretations with regard to the global and local contexts with the faith resources of scripture and tradition (Hendriks 2004:30). Hanson (as cited in Hendriks 2004:30) refers to this process as two-dimensional exegesis of world and word. It involves the faith community

in an incarnational reality being missional in practice and not simply abstract in academics (Hendriks 2004:31). It will be characterized by diversity, yet also a unity, as it embraces both past and present expressions of faith communities. It is in this sense ecumenical (Hendriks 2004:31). Discernment should be careful of embracing secondary concerns, which Hendriks (Hendriks 2004:32) refers to as:

“institutional structures, church law and regulations, national ideologies, as well as personal ambitions with regard to status, power, financial gain and physical issues.”

In a sense McLaren’s personal discernment will be unique to the faith community of which he forms part of. What we will do is seek to illustrate to what extent he understands the need and importance of discernment. How does he understand incarnational reality within various faith communities, its diversity and unity, its focus on praxis as well as the cautions around secondary concerns and institutional structures.



2.7 The kingdom of God

The seventh beacon speaks of the present and future kingdom of God and God’s missional praxis. The kingdom became flesh and blood in the life and teaching of Jesus (Hendriks 2004:32).

“Thus Jesus himself is the great signs of the times (cf.Lk.12:54-56; Mk.13:28 f.). His coming and his work are signs of the reign of God which has already begun; in him future perfection is already present.” (Kung 1967: 57)

Re-creation and salvation are now available to all - especially those we least expect. This reality implies that the Church embodies the coming of Jesus into the world, touching the very realities and struggles of the world (Hendriks 2004:33).

As will become clear, this is one of the areas to which McLaren pays most attention and sees as critical for the church's self-understanding and her work in the world. His recent book, *The secret message of Jesus*, attempts to explore this in some detail. We will seek to evaluate both how McLaren understands the kingdom of God and the many ways in which he believes this ought to be worked out.

2.8 Transformative action

We have been referring to these various areas of a practical methodology as beacons for direction (Hendriks 2004:22). This last beacon could be seen essentially as where the "rubber hits the road" or, staying with the aeroplane analogy, "the rubber hits the runway." Doing theology is now worked out and expressed in a variety of ways. There are personal dimensions, ecclesial dimensions, secular-public dimensions, a scientific academic dimension and an ecological dimension (Hendriks 2004:33). When looking at these areas, we will explore the ways in which McLaren works out his views in the multi-faceted way which transformative action calls for. We will also discuss to what extent he understands and argues for transformative action for the faith community in the political, economic, social and economic realm.

2.9 Conclusion

The intension of this discussion was to introduce us to the nature of a practical theological methodology as understood by Jurgens Hendriks. I believe that this methodology is not only sound theoretically in its ability to understand practical theology but is also well suited to provide the necessary framework to evaluate the work of Brian McLaren. No methodology is perfect and no evaluation of the work of another through any grid would capture the various complexities we face in complete fullness. That is perhaps the reason why Hendriks refers to the areas

of a practical theological methodology as beacons. They light our way, help us find the direction in which we should be moving and help us avoid the unfortunate possibility of a potential crash! I say crash intentionally – we are not simply involved in abstract realities or flying a flight simulator. In concluding, I will use an extended quote from Hendriks (2004:36) which summarizes and captures what we are attempting to achieve through a practical theological methodology.

“Instead of focusing only on scripture and tradition with the intension of making systematic comprehensive interpretations, a missional praxis theology does theology by first focusing on local and particular issues with the purpose of doing something about the reality and problems that confront the faith community, as well as society. It does this because, in his coming to us in and through Jesus Christ, God initiated something that changed people and formed them into a community who were called to love God and their neighbour. Therefore, after doing research and interviews in the present or contextual reality, a dialogue with or debate about the reality of the past and its normative content ensues. Theology tries to discern present and past realities hermeneutically in order to discern God’s will, so as to participate, vocationally, in his ongoing praxis towards an anticipated future eschatological reality. This active, reflective spiral leads to a new formulation of the truth and values that may be expressed systematically in new theological creeds but, above all, in the life and witness of the church. As such, aspects of the eschatological future are now realized, creating joy and hope”

3. The Triune Missional God

“Modern Christianity has (inadvertently, I think) tended to reduce God to a being containable by human concepts or propositions or logic. It has too often acted as though it had God bottled, labeled, and hermeneutically sealed, a commodity we own and distribute at will, logically proven, and theologically defined.” –in More Ready Than You Realize (McLaren 2002: 145)

Any discussion with regard to the nature of God today is fraught with difficulty. This is nowhere more obvious than in conversations with many of the world religions who worship “different Gods,” as well as with regard to the challenge of living in a pluralist society and its consequences for religious pluralism (Newbigin 1989:171). The questions around God are further complicated with regard to questions around globalization and the power of identity, which Castells believes results in the rise of fundamentalisms. Castells (2004:13) notes that:

“Religious fundamentalism has, of course, existed throughout the whole of human history, but it appears to be surprisingly strong and influential as a source of identity in this new millennium. Why so?”

He notes these problems as stemming from a combination of the failure of state-led modernization and economic modernization and the lack of ability to cope with global competition and technological revolution (Castells 2004:19). Castells claims Christian fundamentalism primarily has its roots in the crisis of patriarchy in the 1980s and 1990s (2004: 29). An incorrect portrayal of the nature of God in these circumstances can have frightening consequences where people are paralyzed by fear as they are told of:

“vast left wing conspiracies to ‘destroy the family’ or ‘stamp out religious freedom.’ They are then begged to help fight against ‘the homosexual

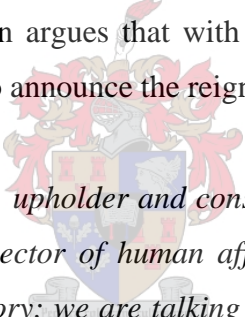
agenda’ or ‘secular humanism’ or ‘post-modernism’ or ‘terrorism’ or some other real or imagined bugaboo....when the fervent furnace of religion kindles sparks of fear in peoples hearts, a dangerous wildfire can rage out of control, and a lot of people can get hurt – especially the people who have been characterized as threats.” (McLaren 2004: 245-246)

Any question regarding the nature of God must take these realities into account. So what then do we speak of when we speak of God? Here again we encounter a problem as modernity has dictated our view and understanding of God. According to McLaren, this modern view sees God as uptight, conceptual, controlling and exclusive (McLaren 2002:63). McLaren (2002:64) comments:

“I may have also said again that the best place to get an image of God is by looking at Jesus, not at the wordy, windy, systematic explanations of God too often given by preachers like me. And I may have further said that a postmodern version of Christianity will be as different from the modern version as the varying views of God described above.”

Hendriks argues that a fundamental shift is taking place with regard to our theology of God. Where previously there was a systematizing and an analyzing of God, there is now a realization that we need to participate in God’s missional praxis when exploring our theology of God (Hendriks 2004: 24). This is similar to the discussion in *The Last Word and the Word After That*, where Neo comments, “I suppose there’s lots of doctrine hidden in each practice, but we’re more and more convinced that the best way to get to good doctrine is through good practice, instead of the other way round.” (McLaren 2005: 156). We do this by participating in God’s missional praxis – we join God in what he is doing in the world and realize with Bosch that God, who is triune, is also missional in his very nature (Hendriks 2004:25). Hendriks defines a theology of God in terms such as triune, missional, creator, sustainer and redeemer (Hendriks 2004:25).

Hendriks noted that Karl Barth was one of the first theologians to root mission in the context and understanding of the doctrine of the trinity (Hendriks 2004:25). This influence of Barth led to the Willingen Conference of the IMC in 1952 placing mission firmly within the doctrine of the trinity (Bosch 1991: 390). Mission now became participating in the sending of God and being rooted in the very nature of God and the trinity (Bosch 1991: 390). Newbigin, on whom McLaren draws extensively, has developed this in quite some detail in his book *The Open Secret: An introduction to the theology of mission*. Newbigin roots mission in the understanding of the triune God as seen in the person of Jesus whose mission is to announce the reign of God, who is acknowledged as the son of God and is anointed by the spirit of God (Newbigin 1978:21). The trinity is not to be understood as some passionless monad beyond knowing but is revealed as Father, Son and Spirit, which is demonstrated through revelation in the life-work of the son (:26). Newbigin argues that with regards to the Father, we need to understand what it means to announce the reign of God (:30)



“God is the creator, upholder and consummator of all that is. We are not talking about one sector of human affairs, one strand out of the whole fabric of world history; we are talking about the reign and sovereignty of God over all that is, and therefore we are talking about the origin, meaning and end of the universe and all of human history within the history of the universe. We are not dealing with local and temporary disturbance in the current cosmic happenings, but with the source and goal of the cosmos.”

The reign of this cosmic God is seen as a blessing to all nations (Newbigin 1978:34; 1989: 84). This is seen early in Israel’s history where the election of Israel is conditional upon this broader vision and compassion to the nations (Bosch 1991:18). The arrival of God’s reign and the accomplishment of God’s cosmic purposes for the world should never simply be relegated simply to the realm of the human heart. God’s reign is not concerned simply with the “escape

of the redeemed soul out of history, but with the action of God to bring history to its true end.” (Newbigin 1978:34). This fact is vitally important as both those in the Protestant and Catholic traditions have succumbed to just such a reduction of the gospel (Guder 2000: 120).

Newbigin further argues that the reign of God is primarily revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ (Newbigin 1978:37) and therefore its demonstration in the world is often one of suffering and tribulation yet eventual domination of evil (:39). This rooting in the cross of Christ and the present suffering one endures, with its eventual eschatological end, is ultimately rooted in the reality of the trinity where one experiences “full life in the trinitarian situation of God.” (Moltmann 1974: 277).

Stott notes that for many it is a surprise that even in the Old Testament, which is a missionary book, we find a God who is a missionary God (1992:325). In the New Testament, however, we are not just concerned with the proclamation of the reign of God and his kingdom but also with the presence of the kingdom in Jesus (Newbigin 1978:40). When Jesus spoke of the kingdom presence being in your midst in Mark 10:15, it is most likely that it was a reference to himself being in some sense the presence of the kingdom (Ladd 1974: 68). This presence is one of blessing, judgment and peace (Newbigin 1978:48) and is now hidden and revealed in the life of the community which bears witness to this kingdom (: 52).

In understanding God as triune and missional we also need to understand the prevenience of the kingdom. This means understanding the work of the spirit who is the witness to the Kingdom and in fact brings about the changes in the world and church. The spirit always goes ahead and before in the church’s missionary journey (Newbigin 1978:56) and as Kung notes “blows when and where s/he wills.” (Kung 1992:156). The spirit propels the church on its mission (Newbigin 1978:62) as well as leading the church (:61) and consummating the kingdom (:63). Newbigin concludes (:64-65)

“It is the proclamation of the kingdom, the presence of the kingdom, and the provenience of the kingdom. By proclaiming the reign of God over all things the church acts out its faith that the Father of Jesus is indeed ruler over all. The church, by inviting all humankind to share in the mystery of the presence of the kingdom hidden in its life through its union with the crucified and risen life of Jesus, acts out the love of Jesus that took him to the cross. By obediently following where the spirit leads, often in ways neither planned, known, nor understood, the church acts out the hope that it is given by the presence of the spirit who is the living foretaste of the kingdom. This threefold way of understanding the church’s mission is rooted in the triune nature of God himself. If any one of these is taken in isolation as the clue to the understanding of mission, distortion follows.”

This concept of the *missio Dei* helps us to realize that humans should not and cannot ever again consider themselves as the authors and bearers of mission. Mission is ultimately the mission of the triune God as “creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate.” (Bosch 1991: 392).

Both Kung, who argues for the need to re-interpret the traditional formulations of the trinity (Kung 1974:477), and Newbigin, who calls for new ways of stating the essential trinitarian faith (Newbigin 1978:27), agree that the trinity needs to be rediscovered and re-interpreted for today. McLaren, while discussing the trinity and noting that for the early Christians there was not such thing as the doctrine of the trinity, calls for the need to re-root that doctrine, as well as doctrine in general, in the Christian story (McLaren 2002:33).

Evaluating McLaren

McLaren constantly resists getting involved in detailed discussions of the trinity which have little meaning for people's everyday lives. He resists getting caught up in propositions and details. One of the most important things he mentions that he learned from the Eastern Orthodox family was how they celebrated the trinity and didn't get bogged down in abstract views and constant hairsplitting. Rather they embrace a view of the trinity which held a powerful and dynamic view of God (2004:55). This is important in the world we find ourselves in today. The world today is not interested in heady formulations and propositions but rather a view of God and the trinity which is dynamic. To the extent that McLaren attempts to redefine the definitions of the trinity for today's world, he is doing what both Kung and Newbigin have called for. A dynamic missional view of God is just such a view for our world today.

McLaren believes that our understanding of the nature of God and his mission will have a radical impact on our mission into the world. Concepts and understandings of God which we've inherited from the past can often be unhelpful in this regard. He notes the famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards called, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" and quotes a recent saying that demonstrates the problem, "Sinners in the hands of angry Christians." He goes on to say that love should be our motivating force because God loved the world so much that he sent his son into it (McLaren 1998:33). He resists the view of God which these sorts of sermons illustrate, which shows a God who loves people but will torture them forever in unimaginable ways if they don't love and cooperate in the prescribed way (2005:xii). Is this a view of God who has suffered as part of his very missional nature? I would agree that McLaren's view of a God who is seeking to include and not exclude people, and in fact is on just such a mission, is faithful to a missional God seeking to bring people into the area of God's blessing. McLaren picks up on this important theme of the nature of this triune missional God when he says the following:

“God’s people are blessed instrumentally – blessed to be a blessing to others. The way God blesses everyone is by blessing some and giving them the role of servants to bless everyone else.” (2002:41)

When discussing the triune God earlier we noted that at the heart of God is not an exclusivism but a desire to bless all nations. McLaren moves in this direction with his comment of being blessed to be a blessing. He discusses God’s attempts to bring just such blessing to the world by seeking to centre all our stories in the great story of God and what He is seeking to do on the planet, beginning with creation and ending with recreation (2003:24). God’s missional role as creator is profound for our understanding of mission in our world. We play a creative role because God created and is still creating (2003:40). McLaren describes God’s missional agenda in the following way, with Neo speaking to Kerry in *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003:73)

“You’re here for God’s agenda. You want to be part of God’s ongoing creation of the world – against all the forces that are working against that creative process. You want the world to become the kind of world God dreams for it to be.”

We mentioned that part of God’s agenda and role in the world is that of creator, redeemer and sanctifier. We see McLaren strongly emphasizing just such a creative role for the triune God – Both in the past, present and the future. The redemptive role of God is not solely linked to the role of Jesus but in many senses we are able to witness to the presence of the kingdom uniquely in him. McLaren states that Jesus in many ways came on our terms, speaking our language and crossing the bridge to meet us where we are (2002:23). He notes that the early Christians had no doctrine of the trinity, yet simply this character of Jesus whose “message was compelling and whose presence was radiant with the goodness and glory of God.” (2002:33). By looking at Jesus, we can get the best image of God

and avoid systematic explanations (2002:64). This Jesus is not trying to destroy culture or even acquiesce to it but is rather seeking to redeem culture for God's higher agenda (2001:74). Jesus comes to demonstrate that God's redemption is about forgiveness, which is the mission of God's kingdom. He enters the thunderstorm of humanity's evil and takes the full shock (2004:97). The wisdom of this kingdom is about sacrifice and not violence. "It's about accepting suffering and transforming it into reconciliation, not avenging suffering through retaliation." (McLaren 2003:105).

Often, however, our picture of God seems disinterested in suffering and aloof from our pain. McLaren argues that God is in those who suffer and in some sense is dying with them (McLaren 1999:184). Although he does a good job of showing that God identifies with those who suffer, he misses out on the powerful dimensions of suffering which Moltmann mentions took place in the trinity. The triune missional God suffered and was changed by the very nature of the suffering in the cross of Christ – our God is the crucified God. In a world marked today by such extreme suffering and difficulty, we must move beyond simply stating that God is with those who suffered to acknowledging that the triune God as part of his very mission to a suffering world encountered such depth of anguish which defines God's very identity.

Not only do we need a God who identifies and understands suffering but McLaren argues that in our post-modern world we don't need a safe God but rather one who is a wild non-conformist (McLaren 1998:111). This God is also not some great male patriarch and transcends our human gender categories (McLaren 1999:135). He notes the fact that it is no great surprise that our image of God today gradually conforms to our own tastes and desires, conquering all and sundry with logical argument and verbal intimidation (2002:53). We have a modern version of God who is uptight and conceptual, encountered through abstractions, propositions and terminology. He is controlling and analytical, bent on excluding everyone (2002:63). This is why I would argue that McLaren's attempt at

redefining the trinity and discarding the very modern views about God and his nature is so critical. Our theological pontifications have crystallized a view of God which is so moulded by modern conceptions that God remains distant if not ugly.

One of the most important points McLaren deals with is the role of the Holy Spirit's work in the world. In *The Church on the other side* he tasks the church to remember that the Holy Spirit is already out there at work in the world – sometimes in ways and places that we would not ordinarily recognize (McLaren 1998:182). He mentions the story of his wife in a conversation with a business CEO.

“There’s a lot of spirituality going on out here. It’s just that we’re doing it without you guys’ – meaning without the church. Maybe we need simply to relax, open our eyes to see what God is doing out there and then try to co-operate.” (1998:183)

What is important is that McLaren is rooting God's mission in the world first and foremost with the mission of God. God is the initiator of all mission and is in fact at work already in the world. The church therefore seeks to understand what the missional God is doing in the world and then joins God and that mission. The prevenience of the Holy Spirit's role within the mission of God is picked up on. We mentioned earlier that the Holy Spirit leads the church and blows where as Kung says “he/she wills” and that it is the Spirit which brings about the necessary changes in the world and society. This encounter is a mysterious one of which McLaren believes we are privileged to be part of (2002:141). God is the initiator of mission in this world which is his creation. The whole world is in the orbit of God's reign and mission and we do well to place all our interests and activities under his reign. We don't own this world and it simply does not belong to us. “Everything we encounter belongs to God and matters to God.” (2002:95). The

story of God at work in the world is a story that we ought to embrace, for it is the very thing which God is into (2005:15).

Conclusion

In dealing with the role of God as triune and missional, I believe McLaren has touched on important points. He has called for a redefinition of the trinity for today's world while noting that our view of God is often of our own constructions. He resists the modern version of God for a more dynamic one. This I believe is consistent with the idea of God as creator, redeemer and sanctifier. McLaren covers the role of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as well as noting the reign of God. He could however spend more time and be more explicit with regard to the fact that the triune God is missional in very being and nature. He often alludes to it but never quite states it directly. A deeper understanding of this area would enrich much of his theological reflection and give it a deeper grounding. The fact that he identifies a God who embraces suffering is commendable. Again a deeper exploration of the Crucified God would aid these attempts.



4. The faith community

“I have often wondered about the church, “God, couldn’t you have done a better job than this? Couldn’t you have suppressed hypocrisy more, allowed division less, edited (or prohibited) late-night religious television more, inspired better music and shorter sermons?” And the answer comes to mind: “Yes, but there would be no room for people like you.” – Finding Faith (McLaren 1999: 227)

The church surely is one of the anomalies of all time. An early professor of mine, Eric Waugh, defined the Christian dilemma as being born in the flesh yet having eternity set in the heart. I believe this to be the church’s dilemma too: being the locus of God’s activity yet with real faults and weaknesses.

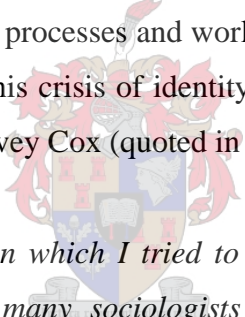
“The Christian does not believe ‘in’ the church (in the sense of credere in), as he believes in God, in his threefold reality as Father, Son and Spirit. But he acknowledges the church in spite of its faults and deficiencies: he acknowledges the church as the field of activity of the Spirit of Christ.” (Pannenburg 1972:145)

The difficulty of defining the church’s identity is perhaps the topic of many volumes and not simply a paragraph and excursion as part of this present work. Yet the question is of such importance that it must be addressed in some measure. After a preliminary discussion around what we believe the church’s identity to be, we will discuss Brian McLaren’s perspective.

To begin with we must acknowledge that the church’s identity is in some senses crippled and her timeless self-confidence shattered. This is not a cause for hopelessness, however, but rather one of potential life and new opportunities (Kung 1967:3). This crisis has many roots and causes of which it is not the task to describe here, but it has resulted largely in the church finding herself in a post-

Christendom world (Guder 2000:xxi). Shenk argues that this legacy of Christendom still affects the modern church today, which is an extension of Christendom (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:71). Bosch, along with Kung, argues that crisis in itself actually provides potential opportunity and life and the possibility of the church to truly be herself (Bosch 1991:3).

Newbigin argues that the church today has found itself in a position it hasn't been in since its early days, by discovering what it means to be a missionary or missional church (1978:5). The church in many ways has been thrust out of the public life and society in which she found her identity for so long and now lives in a separate religious realm outside of the secular one. Christopher Kaiser believes that this is not so much a decline in religion (as represented by the church) but rather a redefinition of its role (and identity), in which her beliefs are disassociated from "secular processes and world structuring." (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:82). Despite this crisis of identity, there has been no final crowning of secularism either, as Harvey Cox (quoted in Louw 1998:9) explains:



“The secular city, in which I tried to work out a theology for the post-religious age that many sociologists had confidently assured us was coming. Since then, however, religion – or at least some religions – seems to have gained a new lease on life. Today it is secularity, not spirituality, that may be headed for extinction.”

That said, the church is still in the process of carving out this new identity; longing for a return to its previous state of Christendom, while at the same time seeing the potential of the future with its new horizons. This is sometimes demonstrated by an attempt to recover lost ground and reassert control over life and over country (Castells 2004:29). The truth, as Hunsberger notes, is that we cannot return to the world of Christendom (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:17), despite the fact that Constantine still remains for many “the emperor of our

imaginations.” (Frost & Hirsch 2003:9). The opposite danger of settling for its own place under the secular sun is also not an option (Newbigin 1989:221).

The problem of cultural accommodation, however, has not left just yet, and modern secularism remains a constant threat for our identity as faith communities. This potential for cultural compromise calls for a continual conversion of the church (Guder 2000:72). Moltmann notes that this crisis of identity is related equally to the church’s crisis of relevance and that it is no easy tension.

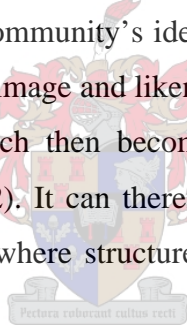
“The Christian life of theologians, churches and human beings is faced more than ever today with a double crisis: the crisis of relevance and the crisis of identity. These two crises are complementary. The more theology and the church attempt to become relevant to the problems of the present day, the more deeply they are drawn into the crisis of their own Christian identity. The more they attempt to assert their identity in traditional dogmas, rights and moral notions, the more irrelevant and unbelievable they become.” (Moltmann 1974:7).

This attempt to assert the church’s identity often results in a return to the clerical paradigm and results in a minister dominating realities with great focus on the cognitive dimensions of faith as well as an increase in hierarchical and authoritarian leaders (Hendriks 2004:26).

So how do we understand the church’s identity and continue to allow her mission to be shaped in some measure from the bottom-up? The faith community must allow herself to be continually converted in alignment with God’s missional praxis as being sent ones. If the church cultivates its identity as those who are sent it will “neither desire nor be able to petrify in any of its own functions, to be the church for its own sake.” (Barth 1966:146). The faith community’s identity stems from its identity with the Triune God, who is missional by nature. Guder (2000:186) argues strongly:

“The common conviction of all forms of New Testament community was that they were missional. They knew that the reason for their existence was their sentness, the calling to be the witness to Jesus Christ.”

The church should realize that it is not the sender but indeed the sent one and the overarching concept ought to be the *missio Dei* (Bosch 1991:370). We must constantly remember, as Newbigin urges us, that it is His mission and must remain so (Newbigin 1989:117). The faith community does not live by its own story but rather re-enacts the great story “of the self emptying of God in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” (Newbigin 1989:120). The centre core of the *missio Dei* is therefore the witness to this story and the arrival of the gospel of the kingdom (Guder 2000:49). What we are saying is that the very presupposition of the faith community’s identity is located in the identity of God as we were created in God’s image and likeness (Hendriks 2004:26). Since God is a missionary God, the church then becomes by its very nature a missionary community (Bosch 1991:372). It can therefore not be a top-down reality where the minister dominates and where structures and traditions overwhelm, exclude and frustrate, rather:



“The missionary dimension of a local church’s life manifests itself, among other ways, when it is truly a worshipping community; it is able to welcome outsiders and to make them feel at home; it is a church in which the pastor does not have a monopoly and the members are not merely objects of pastoral care; its members are equipped for their calling in society; it is structurally pliable and innovative; and it does not defend the privileges of a select group. However, the church’s missionary dimension evokes intentional, that is direct involvement in society; it actually moves beyond the walls of the church and engages in missionary points of concentration.” (Bosch 1991:373).

The faith community's identity then is found in the *missio Dei* and in being the sent ones. The faith community is to bare witness to the story of the mission of God and the arrival of God's kingdom. It is not clerically dominated and equips its members, whom Guder labels "local missionaries" (Guder 2000:179), for missionary activity at all levels of society.

Evaluating McLaren

A general reading of McLaren's work leaves one feeling that he cares deeply about the church and its witness in the world.

"The root of our challenge is to see the church as a life-and-death matter for individuals and for our world – as something truly worth the suffering invested to save it and lead it and love it." (1998:117).

If McLaren brings criticism to bear on much of the modern day church it is out of a deep sense of his own failings and not a "we are better than you" approach. He does not own only the failings of the church but also its successes throughout the centuries. He believes strongly that the church will never be able to live up to its high ideals but should try nonetheless (1999:215) and that those joining from the outside should keep their expectations low and maintain a sense of humour (1999:225). He points out that people need God and a place to seek him in a context which encourages their spiritual journey (2002:45). We need to apprentice ourselves to a community that can help us understand what we are looking for (2002:77).

Because of this need for faith communities, one of McLaren's most important arguments is that the world that needs God has changed and therefore the church needs to change as well (McLaren 1998:14). He argues that churches need major changes, "revolution, rebirth, reinvention, and not just once, but repeatedly for the foreseeable future." (:19). Central to this task is a change of attitude and style,

which accepts change and the need to change as constant realities (:22). He argues that the church should seek new and re-invented churches rather than renewing old and restored ones (:25). I feel McLaren is right in his call for the continual conversion of the church and the need for faith communities to adapt to the surrounding contexts. The one concern I have is that we need to be careful in simply adapting the church to surrounding conditions and need to take the caution Moltmann offers with regard to the church's identity seriously. This crisis of identity means we either become irrelevant or we accommodate so much to the world that we lose our identity. My personal opinion is that I think McLaren's perspective has definitely developed over time from his first writings. In his first book, *The church on the other side*, he seemed more insistent on the church needing to change radically in accordance with the changing post-modern views. He has, however, despite Carson's objections to the contrary, never embraced post-modernism in all its epistemological conclusions. His later works, specifically a *Generous Orthodoxy*, went a long way to rooting the church's need to change in the tradition of the church and her identity. This I believe has helped to alleviate the crisis of identity which Moltmann speaks of.

Central to the changes that he speaks of is the need for the church to redefine her mission. He believes that this calls for authentic missional communities (1998:28) and, in referring to the gospel and our culture network, notes the following:

“The vision they articulate suggests both “mission through community” and “community through mission.” The church they assert, is by nature a missional community – a community that exists by, in, and for mission. But community is not merely utilitarian, a tool for mission. No, the mission itself leads to the creation of authentic community (aka the kingdom of God), in the spirit of Jesus.” (1998:36).

Global mission will become the heartbeat of the church and church planting a prime goal for the church (McLaren 1998:141). He argues that every church

ought to be a mission organization and every Christian a missionary. His desire is that Christianity would be as inseparable from mission as burning is from fire, as churches become defined by their missional orientation (:142). Evangelists must take hold of this missional factor and see themselves as recruiting people for God's mission on earth (2002:141). The church doesn't exist for the benefit of itself but rather the world (2001:155). In McLaren's novel, *A new kind of a Christian*, an email from Neo to Dan understands the churches missional dimension like this:

“Both spirituality and community flow into mission. Mission is the 'apostolic dimension of the church' – 'mission' and 'apostolic' simply being Latin and Greek ways of saying we are sent.” (McLaren 2001:155)

Further in the email, Neo mentions that we find our identity in the same way the apostles found theirs, as sent ones (2001:156). For McLaren, this idea of being sent ones and missional is also linked to being made in the image of God and therefore becoming “junior apprentices” in the mission of God (2003:40). We become part of God's missional agenda in the world (:73) and faith communities are seen as missional by their very nature (2005:156). He believes it is helpful to get rid of certain terms such as “missionary” and “mission field” as “now everyone is a missionary and every place a mission field.” (2004:109).

In discussing mission in these terms, I believe McLaren has embraced much that must be central when we understand the nature and life of faith communities. We spoke earlier, when laying a foundation for our understanding of faith communities, that they are by nature missional and that this is rooted in the image of God. McLaren has spoken to both of these dynamics. He has also elaborated on the fact that the church's mission is that of being sent by God, which emphasizes God's initiation and commissioning of the church's mission. When he discusses

the church's mission, he also reaffirms that it is not the church's agenda that must be central but God's agenda in which the church participates.

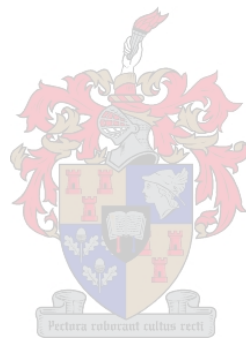
The church must realize in all this that her message will never be perfect (1998:68). He argues that the church needs to develop a new rhetoric that won't be dominated by doctrinal statement but where one's deeds are taken as seriously as one's words (:89). I believe this links well with the emphasis on the church as a missional community which is at work in the world and not simply making statements about who God is and what the church believes.

Organisation will always be a reality for faith communities and is something that you simply can't do without (1998:96). He proposes an ecclesiology that does not offer structural blueprints but rather general principles for church structure where one realizes that "you fit the shoes to fit the feet" (:101). He argues decisively that one needs creativity in order that the church doesn't drift into, "gerontocracy, nostalgia, irrelevance, arthritic inflexibility, senility, and death." (:103). This creativity should not be thwarted by hierarchical and authoritarian leaders who seek to clamp down on the church's mission. Creativity will always spring into being when the church affirms and constantly re-affirms her missionary nature.

Conclusion

In dealing with the role and nature of faith communities, I think McLaren has taken the core issues into account. He has focused on the church's missionary nature and how that is rooted in God's missionary nature. McLaren has also spoken of the need for the church to change as the world has changed. If there is any weakness in McLaren's understanding it might have been in this. However, in much of his later work he has constantly sought to place the church's identity in its varied and hence ecumenical history, which has helped avoid certain dangers. The church must change but should not lose her core identity, even if it must be

redefined. He has also spoken of the need for creativity and cautioned against leaders seeking to preserve the status quo and hamstringing the church's mission.



5. The contextual situation

“The uncharted world ahead of us is what we will call “the new world on the other side”: the other side of two world wars and one cold war, the other side of communism, the other side of theological liberalism, the other side of the second millennium , the other side of modernism. There used to be an Old World, then a New World, then a Third World, but now all three are being swept up in a new world. Or on a slightly grander scale, there used to be a pre-historic world, a medieval world, and a modern world, but now all four are being swept up in a post-modern world.” – In The Church on the Other Side (McLaren 1998:12).

In the previous two sections we looked at two areas of a practical theological methodology and the question of identity – that of God and the faith community. We concluded that God is a triune missional God by nature and that the church’s identity is grounded in God’s identity and is therefore missional in its very nature. We now begin to move into the next section where we look at the broader contextual situation in which the church finds herself. After our preliminary remarks, we then turn to Brian McLaren’s understanding of these issues.

What is happening in our world and how do we understand it? Should philosophical, economic, social and other realities form part of our contextual reality? This is made even more difficult by the realization that all these areas are increasingly interrelated and connected (Hendriks 2004:27).

There seems to be much disagreement as to what exactly our present contextual reality is. Some argue that in terms of analyzing the world we are a part of today, we should refer to it as “late modernism,” while when talking about changes in epistemology we should refer to it as “post-modernism.” (Carson 2005:26). Hiebert notes that the outcome is uncertain as to whether post-modernity will replace modernism or whether it is a rear-guard action that is destined to be

overcome by modernism's relentless march (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:143). Van Gelder argues that the emerging landscape certainly is changing and increasingly being referred to as the post-modern condition, although its direction and future shape is largely uncertain (:114). I believe Grenz (1996:2) offers a good sense of where we find ourselves:

“Many social observers agree that the Western world is in the midst of change. In fact, we are apparently experiencing a cultural shift that rivals the innovations that marked the birth of modernity out of the decay of the middle ages: we are in the midst of a transition from the modern to the post-modern era. Of course, transitional periods are exceedingly difficult to describe and access. Nor is it fully evident what will characterize the emerging epoch. Nevertheless, we see signs that monumental changes are engulfing all aspects of contemporary culture.”

Within the church, this very term - post-modernism - has become (unfortunately) a catch phrase for understanding anything that happens in our world and anything new that happens in the church as a response to it. Sire notes this difficulty as well, *“It is used by so many different facets of cultural and intellectual life that its meaning is often fuzzy, not just around the edges but at the centre as well.”* (Sire 2004:212). This is regretful as I think a correct understanding of the post-modern reality is helpful as it does reflect in many ways the world we find ourselves in.

I cannot in such a short space of time give a history of the development of post-modernism and how we got to the place we are in today – which is also influenced by the very understanding one has of post-modernism. For if one argues it is simply an extension or part of modernism, then we have to trace its roots right back to early renaissance days, finding real fruition in the enlightenment era and then ultimately in our modern world today. If we argue that it is in fact a whole new understanding of our world, and in complete antithesis to modernism, we might trace it back to early Nietzsche but gaining momentum in

the 60s and 70s with the work of Rorty, Foucault and Derrida (Grenz 1996:6). Van Gelder notes that many see the student revolutions in the 1960s and a rejection of the knowledge industry as seminal in post-modernism (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:127).

In what ways is post-modernism different from modernism and what does this mean for our global context? What are its consequences? Louw (1998:11) poses a similar question while describing its present dynamic:

“It should be borne in mind that relativism and pluralism are part of our contemporary situation and philosophical stance. Many researchers refer to our age as postmodern. While modernity is viewed as the absolute claim for rationalistic truth and the autonomy of reason, post-modernity is regarded as the critique on the certitude of rationalism. Hence the process of deconstruction of any fixed meaning and emphasis on fragmentation, relativity and plurality. The processes of democratization and contextualization contribute to what can be called ‘a crisis of certitudes.’ This then raises the question: if certitude is lost in a dynamic world, what happens to norms and values?”

What does this fragmentation, relativity and plurality look like and is it all bad? In one sense it calls into question any view of the world which claims to be true and all-encompassing. World views and personal views now become relative to the many competing views (Grenz 1996:40). It rejects at its very core the possibility of objective knowledge of our world.

“They contend that we have no fixed vantage point beyond our own structuring of the world from which to gain a purely objective view of whatever reality may be out there.” (Grenz 1996:41)

Post-modernity rejects a realist in favour of a non-realist or what some call a constructivist view of the world. Language is seen as a human construction to achieve meaning and cannot provide an accurate reflection of reality (Grenz 1996:41). Questions around propositions and language are now not regarded on the basis of whether they are true but rather on their outcome and practical value. Because of all these things, we cannot step outside our view of the world and our constructions of reality and achieve objective truth (:43). It involves a rejection of any meta-narrative or overarching story which claims to provide meaning (:45).

“Those who hang on to their meta-narrative as if it really were the master story, encompassing or explaining all other stories, are under an illusion. We can have meaning, for all these stories are more or less meaningful, but we cannot have truth.” (Sire 2004:221).

The loss of an understanding of the world and of an overarching meta-narrative also applies to the realm of science, where post-modernism questions the scientific attempt to dispel all myth from the realm of knowledge through scientific inquiry. Scientific enquiry with the advent of quantum physics and other developments has led to the admission of relative objectivity and the awareness of the complexity of the universe (Grenz 1996:53). The nature of scientific truth has been replaced with the acknowledgement that scientific truth is social in nature and development. Scientific truth does not proceed linearly but rather develops according to changing paradigms as well as according to prevailing conditions (:55). Missiologist Paul Hiebert describes this scientific and philosophical scenario as follows (1994:35)

The current epistemological crisis in science and philosophy has significant implications for Western theology. It also affects the integration of theology and science, and our understanding of the missionary task. How we contextualize theology, how we respond to the theological pluralism now emerging in non-Western churches, and how

we relate to non-Christian religions as systems of thought and to non-Christians as persons are all determined to a great extent by our epistemological premises. At the core is the question of how we interrelate two or more differing systems of knowledge.”

Much of the conflict within the church and world today is found between these two differing systems of knowledge that are defining our context. Hiebert explains the situation that has arisen as a result of these various changes, where two views have come to dominate - critical realism and naïve idealism (Hiebert 1994:43). Critical realists argue that some measure of understanding of the world is possible and do not adhere to the belief that some post-moderns argue for with regards to the impossibility of knowing and truth. Critical realists have taken into account though the epistemological shifts that have taken place and the post-modern critique of modernism by realizing the partial nature of our knowledge. Naïve idealism on the other hand believes that our knowledge can accurately represent the world as it really is (:26). Bosch believes that the two world wars were instrumental in shattering this view's dominance (Bosch 1991:350).

The post-modern influence, however, does not simply impact the thought areas of human life but many of its cultural forms as well. It touches a variety of areas – architecture, painting, music, poetry, fiction (Honderich 1995:708).

These issues we are dealing with here are far more complex and difficult than I have made out. Nonetheless, they are critical if we are to describe our global situation in which the church moves, for as Van Gelder has noted, “The air we now breath has changed.” (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:113). Bosch (1991:361), while describing the emergence of a post-modern paradigm, notes that:

Since we now know that no so-called facts are really neutral or value-free, and that the line that used to divide facts from values has worn thin, we

stand much more exposed than we used to. We also know, better than before, that while the future remains open and invites us to freedom, we are cautioned against new tyrannies and are facing new anxieties. At the same time, we are conscious of the fact that it was precisely the prolonged attacks on religion made by rationalists that forced us to renew the grounds of the Christian faith. This awareness is of critical importance for the Christian mission's and missionary's attitude to people of other faiths."

The challenge of understanding the global changes and thought forms that we are a part of today is critical for a practical theological methodology. We now proceed to see to what extent Brian McLaren has taken cognizance of these issues.

Evaluating McLaren

Much of McLaren's work revolves around the fact that the world we live in has changed and therefore both the individual Christian (*A New Kind of a Christian*) and the church (*The Church on the Other Side*) are required. In evaluating Brian McLaren, we will look at how he understands these global changes and realities which we face today. The overriding epistemological concern of post-modernism dominates his view of the world and how we understand it.

His first book, *The Church on the Other Side*, was written, according to him, to help churches understand what it means to do ministry in just such a post-modern matrix and how the church will transition and emerge within it (McLaren 1998:8). As Christians, he feels that those of us who want to live and love on the other side must get a feel for post-modernity from the inside, as post-modernity is defining the morality of more and more people (:159). He calls us to live in it but not become of it (:167). He believes that understanding the post-modern transition helps make sense of the chaotic experience many Christians and faith

communities have experienced in recent years. (:9) McLaren places the rise of post-modernism within the many technological tremors that have consumed our planet.

“These technological tremors have helped bring to an end the old world that created them. Think of the automobile and its effects upon the environment, the economy, the family unit, and even courtship and sexuality (especially when the car is being equipped with a back seat). Think of radio, air travel, birthcontrol pills, antibiotics, and the cathode ray tube – and we’re barely past the mid-century mark. Then came the tidal wave of social change set in motion during the sixties. No wonder the old maps don’t fit the new world.” (McLaren 1998:12).

He believes that often people experience depression and grief in times of such global changes (2001:x). He describes the post-modern world with terms such as, “post-conquest, post-mechanistic, post-analytical, post-secular, post-objective, post-critical, post-organisational, post-individualistic, post-protestant, post-consumerist.” (:19). In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he adds the term post-Christian (2004:92).

McLaren believes the effects of these changes to be profound. As post-modernism brings one’s view of truth into question, one’s confidence to know the truth in an objective way is revolutionized. This affects both the content and categories of theology as well as the person learning and doing theology. This changes everything (McLaren 1998:70). Post-modernism is critical of certainty and due to the fragmentary nature of knowledge is sensitive to context. (:163) Post-modernism does not assume too much authority for itself and believes knowledge to be largely subjective in nature and puts much emphasis on experience (1998:164). Neo, speaking to Dan in *A New Kind of a Christian*, says it like this, “You begin to see that what seemed like pure, objective certainty really depends

heavily on a subjective preference for your personal viewpoint.” (McLaren 2001:35).

This subjective nature is contrary to the enlightenment hope and ideal that one can build a truth tower on an absolutely certain foundation as the basis of rational knowledge (2002:128). This is called foundationalism, “where everything is settled, questions are answered, doubts are removed, knowledge is known.” (:129). What he proposes as the best option in light of these changes is what is known as critical realism, where one can know truth but still affirm that one can only know truth partially (2005:72).

These changes in the nature of truth and knowledge are paralleled by the concept of pluralism, which challenges us to live with diversity and affects the nature of religious debate (McLaren 1998:82). However, McLaren takes on post-modernism’s belief in absolute relativism, as it offers no standard for stopping those bent on doing harm as well as trivializing the very beliefs that it relativizes (:83). According to McLaren, radical post-modernism is self-defeating as it rejects the truthfulness of all other beliefs while assuming its own position to be the universally true one (:165).

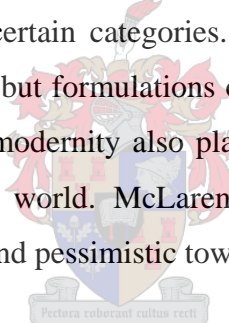
Post-modernism, McLaren says, does not reject absolute truth as much as it rejects absolute knowledge.

“What postmodern people tend to reject is not absolute truth, but absolute knowledge. And to the degree we seek to defend absolute knowledge, we show ourselves to be defenders not of biblical faith (which repeatedly affirms that we know in part) but of modern rationalism (which displays an overconfidence about its autonomous powers of knowledge that is hard to over-exaggerate.) Having a universe full of absolute truth but a world full of people incapable of grasping and conveying it with absolute

accuracy is almost – but not exactly – the same as having no absolute truth at all.” (McLaren 1998:166).

McLaren does believe, however, that the term absolute truth has outlived its relevance (McLaren 1998:167). He recommends that we do not affirm what is an absolute relativism, which is a logical absurdity, but rather an honest limited relativism (:174). Elsewhere McLaren mentions that we ought to function in relative certainty, which will also require of us to face a relative uncertainty (McLaren 1999:32), but at the same time rejects absolute relativism and radical postmodernism (:56).

As we mentioned in our introductory discussion in this chapter, post-modernism believes that language can often be a hindrance in understanding truth and that one needs to deconstruct certain categories. As McLaren notes, deconstruction does not mean destruction, but formulations often get in the way of meaning and learning (2005:xvii). Post-modernity also places question marks over the notion of progress in our global world. McLaren believes that post-modernity will emerge as both optimistic and pessimistic toward progress (2003:252).



McLaren further argues that in order to understand a local faith community properly, one needs to understand the many historical, cultural, political and educational wholes that the church participates in (1998:49). It is here, however, where I feel he is most weak. He often affirms these realities and their influence, but rarely discusses them in much detail. His main focus remains the dynamic of post-modernism. I will be evaluating his understanding of these areas in much further detail in the chapter on transforming action.

There definitely has been a shift and progression in his work to a deeper appreciation of various other global issues which are affecting the church, from his first book, *The Church on the Other Side*, where every page would contain a reference to post-modernism, to *A Generous Orthodoxy*, where the term is less

frequently used, to *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, where he notes his growing ambivalence toward the term (2003: xii). He also mentions that he has become sick of the term and all the stupid arguments around it (McLaren & Campolo 2003: 250). It is of interest that of late he has added terms such as post-colonial and post-industrial to his discussion of global realities (McLaren 2006). He has also been dealing with economic and specifically more of the political realities in his writings (McLaren 2006:10). Questions of the environment and the poor are interspersed through all his writings, yet are becoming more prominent in his later writings, where he speaks of Jesus confronting corrupt leaders and favouring the poor (McLaren 2005). His understanding of the political, social, economic and environmental realities will be evaluated in the last chapter.

Conclusion

McLaren has come to grips with the global and epistemological reality of post-modernism. His work clearly demonstrates both a clear sense of the history and development of both modernism and post-modernism. He realizes both the weaknesses and strengths of post-modernism and represents them fairly. He also has a good understanding of how these realities impact both the practice and theology of the church. I believe that his greatest weakness has been his lack of discussion with regard to economic, political and global realities affecting the church.

6. Interpreting one's context

The previous section looked at more of the global realities that provide the context for faith communities while this section attempts to illustrate the need for each faith community to understand its local needs and questions (Hendriks 2004:28). This reflection in faith communities should be done from the bottom up in order to understand these very local realities and not simply download irrelevant propositions onto the community (:28). De Gruchy (1994:2) comments that what happens when this is done is that the faith community:

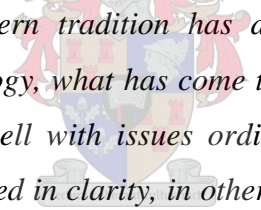
“begins to analyse what is going on in their community and the way in which their church is responding from the perspective of the reign of God.”

De Gruchy further argues that theology should be central and at the core of the whole people of God (1994:3). Each local context faces its own challenges and ethical concerns, all of which need to be spoken about and heard. If they are not it eventually will lead to a continual decline in both the community's institutional and spiritual dimensions (Hendriks 2004:32). For theology to have any relevance to humanity it must “arise out of the community responsible for its reason for being.” (Cone 1986:36). It is incumbent upon us therefore to interpret the gospel in the local context in which one finds oneself and conduct a careful analysis of this context (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994:10). Cochrane notes that this doing theology in context often leaves us feeling uncomfortable, as we come into contact with the local ideas, experiences and practices that confront us (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994:28). He further notes with regard to understanding indigenous theologies that:

“Our context demands of us new theological responses to the questions posed by life. Yet, as I have indicated, some questions posed by life in our

context are directed at Christian faith itself. This forces us to rethink what theology is and how we 'do theology.'" (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994:29).

Cochrane argues that the result might not necessarily be orthodox theology but it certainly will be real theology (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994:28). To analyze this context, which Cochrane urges us to do, can draw on many different disciplines including film, literature or art (Hendriks 2004:28). This can result in a theology that is formed among the people in the context of their real lives and the questions which these mediums portray. Hiebert argues that the right of every church to develop its theology has only gradually come to be recognized – especially as theology has been dominated by Western society and concerns (1994:84). A vigorous theology is taking place in today's world and must not be ignored.



“Though the Western tradition has developed great sophistication in issues of methodology, what has come to be broadly called hermeneutics, it has done less well with issues ordinary lay Christians wrestle with. What we have gained in clarity, in other words, we have sometimes lost in immediacy and emotional depth – the theoretical knowledge we have gained has sometimes become estranged from everyday life.” (Dyrness 1992: 22).

In these various mediums and disciplines which Hendriks referred to earlier, we can begin to see the community's framework emerge. This is important, for as Dyrness notes, the community's implicit theology can then emerge as it is often found not simply in the dominant ideas which it espouses but in its very practice (Dyrness 1992:32). He argues that theological reflection must not simply take into account verbal and written statements but must include the practice of the Christian communities (:33). One's theological critique of theological practice moves to more internal dimensions (:34).

This practice and analysis within the local faith communities has perhaps been best expressed in many of the base community's in Latin America and within the development of liberation theology. Germond argues that one of the areas from which it emerged was from faithful people who were grappling and working with the meaning of their faith in resistance to oppression (Villa-Vicencio 1987:217). He quotes the Latin American theologian Segundo with regard to academic theologians:

“Instead of teaching they should learn...from common people...and give up the chronic suspicion among intellectuals that common people are always wrong.” (Villa-Vicencio 1987:217).

In doing theology in our local context, we must be aware of the truth to which Segundo speaks. We must also affirm that our greatest theological reflections to which we often appeal were often formed in specific historical and contextual situations with a myriad of local realities having been brought to bear on them (Shaul 1991:54). Millard Erickson, although retaining strong objections with regard to liberation theology, notes that one of its more positive aspects is its ability to identify with the values of a particular or local society (Erickson 1991:160). By interpreting the local context and allowing it to shape one's theology and practice we become aware of things that would otherwise be, “obscure, have gone unnoticed or have just not been realized or considered, because they are only too familiar.” (Hendriks 2004:29). Bosch (1991:427) summarizes nicely what we are trying to say with regards to interpreting one's context:

“Contextualisation, on the other hand, suggests the experimental and contingent nature of all theology. Contextual theologians therefore, rightly, refrain from writing “systematic theologies” where everything fits into an all-encompassing and eternally valid system. We need an

experimental theology in which an ongoing dialogue is taking place between text and context, a theology which, in the nature of the case, remains provisional and hypothetical.”

Evaluating McLaren

How does McLaren understand the nature of understanding local contexts and the theologies which emerge from them? In his book, *The church on the other side*, he affirms quite directly that we must “realize that each local church must respond to its own local environment.” (1998:44). He continues that external changes in the community will result in the need for changes to take place in the local faith community. He mentions a host of local realities which could affect the local community from commuting patterns due to energy realities and real estate prices (1998:44). Of course, there could be many more challenges which affect local faith communities and their identity, but the important thing is rather that McLaren (2003:192) affirms that local factors affect local communities:

“Each of these challenges and opportunities requires Christian leaders to create new forms, new methods, new structures – and it requires them to find new content, new ideas, new truths, new meaning to bring to bear on the new challenges.”

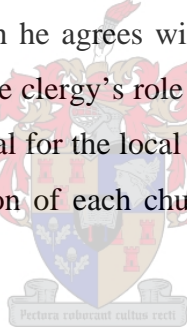
The church’s local mission must first be clarified in accordance with the local realities it faces. Only then should programmes be changed, adapted or newly developed (1998:44). If one is wanting to change the world, you have to begin by working out that vision locally (2002:175).

What is important for interpreting one’s local questions is to be open to those in the local environment to dialogue with us and ask us the difficult questions. This is important, for McLaren notes that we become too satisfied with the

interpretations of our local communities (2002:78). One must give attention to common questions (2003:94).

We need to live out the gospel within this local environment and culture in the same way that Paul lived out the gospel within the framework of Corinthian culture (McLaren & Campolo 2003:77). The emerging approach which McLaren speaks of requires that it be contextual by being sensitive to its cultural and historical situation (2005:152). This contextual nature of theology means that mission within its local context will always remain dynamic.

Interpreting one's local context would require that theology comes back to life and is no longer dictated by technicians and theologians. As one theologically incarnates in the local community, the theologian becomes a learner, seeker and explorer (1998:68). Although he agrees with the renewed emphasis on the laity and the de-emphasizing of the clergy's role in the local context, he maintains that leadership still remains crucial for the local faith communities (:114). Interpreting local realities and the mission of each church should be done communally and spiritually:



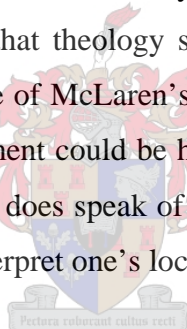
“So we read the Bible as a community, always listening for the insights and inputs of others. We pray as a community, our individual prayers merging with those of our brothers and sisters. We fast and study and celebrate and worship and rest together.” (McLaren 2001:155)

Conclusion

It is obvious from reading the work of McLaren that he is far more concerned with many of the global challenges that are affecting the church today – most notably the reality of post-modernism and its effect on the church's mission and practice. However, it is far more difficult to give attention to the local challenges that various faith communities face, as it is simply impossible to be cognizant of

the many and various life situations of the worldwide churches. The best one can do is to affirm that local realities are influential in determining the faith community's mission. The danger though on focusing too strongly on the global dynamic is that people can end up ignoring the issues on their doorstep. One could be so interested in post-modernism and miss out on the fact that many in your church have lost their jobs due to the local supermarket closing down.

In his discussion, McLaren often blurs the relationship between global and local contexts. The difficulty with this is that often questions of contextualization can be both local and global. However, he does note the importance of theology taking place within the context of local faith communities, as well as the common questions and realities being taken into account. He affirms the fact that the questions of local programmes should only be discerned after the local realities are taken into account and that theology should be formed and lived out from within the community. If one of McLaren's strengths is understanding the global context, an area of improvement could be helping local congregations work with and adapt to local issues. He does speak of its importance but doesn't give much guidance on how one can interpret one's local context.



7. Scripture and tradition

“The protestant reformation separated the two brothers: Scripture and Tradition. The older brother tells the story that leads up to and through Christ, and the younger brother remembers what has happened since. These brothers aren’t the same, but neither should they be enemies.” – A Generous Orthodoxy (McLaren 2004: 227).

When looking at scripture and tradition, we are entering into a field that so much has been written about that the ancient library of Alexandria could not contain its volumes perhaps ten times over. In our discussion we will simply provide some preliminary remarks that will enable us to evaluate McLaren. Questions will be raised with regard to the nature of scripture and tradition, as well as to what extent they form part of a practical theological methodology.

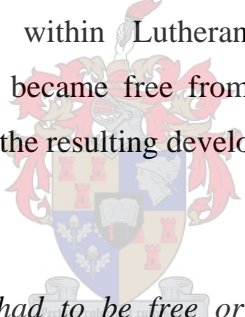
The various questions that arise from within our faith communities and our global contexts need to be answered and addressed in the light of both scripture and tradition. The church, due to its nature in being an interpretive community, ought to be engaged in an ongoing way with the remembering of God’s praxis in the world (2004:19). It is imperative in acknowledging and remembering God’s praxis that we recognize certain norms which function as specific sources for this task (Grenz 1993:89). Two of the norms that Grenz argues for are the biblical message (scripture) and the theological heritage of the church (tradition) (:94). Many see the two areas as potential clash points with different churches and people falling into different camps.

7.1 Understanding Scripture

For many Protestants, much of the church’s witness and ecclesiastical structure and tradition ought to be measured against the norm of scripture (Dulles 1987:184). Although it is a gross oversimplification, one could say that Luther’s

Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) cry during the Reformation represents those wanting to root their views and practice in scripture and not in tradition. This was an approach typical of Protestantism, where Luther and others stressed the primacy of the word of God in the scriptures, which would result in anyone being able to interpret the scriptures. Roman Catholics, although valuing the scriptures, had been far more cautious in their approach for fear of unauthorized interpretation (Latourette 1975:719).

The church had always understood the scriptures to be in some sense inspired. As Greek scholar Metzger notes, its inspiration did not come from its inherent authority. They were rather seen as inspired as they bore witness to the apostolic witness on which the church would depend (Metzger 1987:256). With the reformation, however, a conception of inspiration took place which was “rigorously systematized” within Lutheran and Reformed circles (Kung 1974:464). The bible now became free from errors, faults and contradictions. Kung (1974:464) describes the resulting developments,



“The whole Bible had to be free or be kept free by interpreters (by harmonizing, allegorizing or mystification) from contradictions, faults and errors. Everything therefore was inspired, right down to the last word (‘verbal inspiration’). Consequently every word had to be accepted. All of which was bound to lead to serious and yet unnecessary conflicts both with the natural sciences (after the Copernican turning point) and with history (after the ‘enlightenment’).”

However, after the development of liberal theology in the nineteenth century and the development of textual criticism, questions were placed around the authority of the bible – especially with regard to inerrancy and inspiration (Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991:212-213). In America, this led to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the early twentieth century and the publishing of the

Fundamentals: A testimony to truth, in which inerrancy and the propositional truths of the bible were re-affirmed (Grenz 1993:25). Neo-Orthodoxy in the twentieth century sought to move away from propositional knowledge of God to personal knowledge and was a strong reaction against the liberalizing tendencies with regard to scripture (:70). For people like Francis Schaeffer, this approach was not good enough and not sufficient for biblical realists and downright dangerous (Schaeffer 1968:52-54). The bible for Schaeffer and others must be seen as without error in any area of life to which it speaks (:142). Of course, this is not the view of all Christians everywhere, especially those within the liberal tradition, but it still dominates much of the evangelical and protestant landscape.

However, in recent times there has been a new biblical theology which seeks to move away from such strong propositional revelation (Carson & Woodbridge 1986:54-56). Vanhoozer notes the work of Barr where Barr accuses evangelicals as doing “interpretive violence to scripture whereby holding to inerrancy they read narrative as history while trying to preserve the truth of every proposition.” (: 56).

This debate becomes an ivory tower bloodbath and a whole host of complicated systematizing and rationalizing takes place, as seen with Erickson and terms such as absolute, full and limited inerrancy being developed (Erickson 1992:72). With all this going on, it is not surprising that many people don’t wonder whether we have missed the point (McLaren & Campolo 2003:68) while leaving others with a crisis with regard to the bible, as this extended quote from Tomlinson reveals (2003:107)

“I think it’s fair to say that post-evangelicals have mixed feelings about the Bible. On the one hand they have immense respect for the Bible and are keen to rediscover its relevance for their lives and the world. On the other hand they have a backlog of negative feelings about the way they have seen the bible used. Much of what others tell them the bible teaches

suggests it may oppose values they hold dear... Evangelicals tend to assume that the bible is a repository of absolute truth, that all you have to do to “get it” is read it – and do not take kindly to suggestions otherwise. Evangelicals accuse those who question their interpretations of scripture, or their standard for what counts as biblical truth, with 'going liberal' or 'playing fast and loose' with God's word. Are they right? Can the Bible still be the word of God for post-evangelicals, or has modern critical insight made that impossible?”

In light of all these challenges how do we then understand the bible as a source of doing theology? We must first acknowledge its human and divine authorship (Grenz 1993:111). The bible's primary goal is the spiritual formation of the believer and it can be understood only within the context of the spiritual community (:113). The bible functions as a norm for the faith community in the same way it functions when it was being formed into the canon – that is it functions to illuminate the life of the believing community as it helps them struggle with the issues they face in unique changing contexts (:120). Its collection took place slowly over many years as the result of “pressure of various kinds of circumstances and influences, some external and others internal to the life of congregations.” (Metzger 1987:7). It was formed in the believing community which has consequences for how it is understood.

“The goal of the narrative does not lie simply in the recounting of the story. Rather, through the retelling of the narrative, the Spirit re-creates the past within the present life of the community. And the texts thus provide paradigms and categories by means of which the community under the direction of the Spirit can come to understand and respond to the challenges of the present.” (Grenz 1993:127).

The Scriptures help us understand ourselves and organize our narratives (Grenz 1993:136). Perhaps the most important reason for understanding the nature of

scripture is not the most obvious, or at least it does not appear obvious at first. That is that the very documents themselves were missional from beginning to end (Guder 2000:1). This missional document forms what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza refers to as the community's ongoing constitution (Quoted by Grenz 1993:125) and provides the ground floor for the church, because everything that follows is built on them (:125). As a source and norm for exploring the church, scripture will play a central role as a narrative that is missional in nature and provides the ground level for any discussion with regard to life and faith. Propositions with regard to inerrancy and inspiration will be seen as unnecessary to the very nature and task of these documents in the "hands" of a triune missional God. Admitting that the bible is in some measure shaped by the various biblical writer's perspectives and interpretations should not overwhelm us either. They are records of the revelation and not the revelation itself (Newbigin 1989:76).

Evaluating McLaren

The question of the role and nature of scripture is something which dominates throughout all of Brian McLaren's work. His love for scripture remains undiminished throughout, yet a constant desire to re-interpret its role in matters of faith and practice is evident. In his book, *Finding Faith*, McLaren asks some of the difficult questions with regard to scripture. Couldn't God have made it less controversial, more universal, less vulnerable to cultural irrelevancy?

"Couldn't God have anticipated every heresy, schism, problem, and controversy and made clear, unarguable, foolproof, preemptive strikes through some inspired chapter of a divine textbook? What could God possibly think we gain by having a collection of holy scriptures in this seemingly disorganized, patchwork form, if indeed they come from God at all? (McLaren 1999:231)

McLaren believes that for people today, who do not assume the bible to be authoritative, it seems pointless using it as an apologetic tool. Far more helpful would be the bible in some sense becoming part of the very message we share with people and not its underpinning all our dialogue (1998:75). The bible should be understood and worked out as part of the larger Christian community which includes its “scholars, teachers, mystics and mentors.” (2002:70).

Many Christians seek to simply apply the bible haphazardly from its original context into today’s reality. McLaren believes however that the bible does not offer perfect structures with regard to certain areas such as patriarchy and polygamy (representing much of its original context) but rather serves to present a variety of structures that are formed at various times in accordance with the needs of the moment (1998:101). Admitting this comes with acknowledging the many moral ambiguities of the bible (:175), as well as taking into account its “cultural, political, social, geographical, economic and philosophical realities.” (McLaren 2002:70). We mustn’t seek to simply transplant ethical dimensions from these realities, but rather we should affirm that some of the ethical decisions were necessary to survive at that point in time (McLaren 2005:167).



McLaren points to the narrative trajectory with regard to certain ethical questions, which is useful in understanding the various ethical challenges that the bible poses (:170). The bible’s stories are filled with very human authors with all their messy variables (McLaren & Campolo 2003:238). We shouldn’t allow the difficult parts of the bible, which are part of these realities, to bother us, for these are the parts which often have the most to teach us (McLaren 2001:79). We ought especially to be careful of simply lifting biblical statements out of their historical and narrative context (McLaren 2005:44). We should not just ask what the authors are saying but also what they are doing (:81). We also need not accept everything we read in them at face value. Often legend can creep in and exaggeration with regard to certain stories, for instance in some of the miracle stories Jesus performed (McLaren 2003:123). Even if one doesn’t except the literal validity of many of the

stories about Jesus, its message and meaning McLaren believes is still God-given and can impact us and our world (2005:60). McLaren shows his view of what the bible is in the following succinct statement (McLaren & Campolo 2003:69-70)

“The bible is an inspired gift from God – a unique collection of literary artifacts that together support the telling of an amazing and essential story. The artifacts include poetry, letters, short histories, and other genres that we don’t have labels for. Even a familiar category like history needs to be used carefully, because we must avoid imposing modern biases and tastes on these ancient documents: they need to be taken and appreciated on their own terms.”

McLaren further believes that the bible, or any document for that matter, does not provide certainty on everything (1999:47). He also challenges us as to whether we can answer honestly the question whether we believe with absolute certainty that the bible is a direct revelation from God (:56) and whether we can know with equal certainty that it is absolutely complete and accurate. What is the point of having an infallible text if our interpretations are fallible (2001:50), especially when scripture can’t self-interpret? (2005:42). What is so frustrating for McLaren is that errant interpretations of apparently infallible scripture keep multiplying (:134).

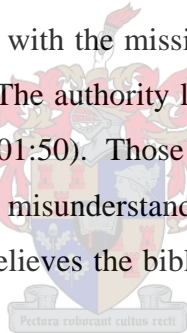
In spite of all these questions, he does believe that the bible is of immense value in our search for faith and God (2001:57). Perhaps in response to criticism he gets with regard to the bible, he notes in *A Generous Orthodoxy* that his regard for the bible is higher than ever (2004:159). The point to understanding the bible as Neo reminds us is that instead of reading the bible we ought to let the bible read us (2001:56). We should avoid a “stripmine” approach to the bible and rather become a “lover of its landscapes.” (McLaren & Campolo 2003:75).

McLaren (2004:159) also connects the bible directly to the mission of God with the following words:

“I believe it is a gift from God, inspired by God, to benefit us in the most important way possible: equipping us so that we can benefit others, so that we can play our part in the ongoing mission of God.”

He believes that we are most likely to make mistakes with our understanding of scripture when we are not moving in the direction of mission. Scripture functions best while doing what it was intended to help do – being integral to the church’s mission (2005:163-164). Scripture’s intention is to equip us for good works in a needy world (:166).

If the bible is directly linked with the mission of God it is also witness to God’s authority and not the text’s. The authority lies in what God says and not in what the text says (McLaren 2001:50). Those who seek to make the bible their foundation and not God are misunderstanding what the bible in fact says. The only foundations McLaren believes the bible speaks of are the church, Jesus and Peter (:53).



Any discussion with regard to the bible seems to have been shaped by the confrontation between liberals and literalists. He believes that perhaps neither of them take the bible seriously enough (2001:55). McLaren calls for us to practice good faith in the bible without denying our contemporary experience (liberal) and our respect and need for the bible (literalist) (1999:243). In *A New Kind of Christian*, Neo speaks with Dan and says, “I’ve found that liberals can be fundamentalists too. Liberals are often just fundamentalists with a different set of beliefs.” (2001:9). Often a liberal approach to scripture can result in the gospel being rewritten in one’s own image (2005:39). The debate between liberals and fundamentalists is often framed in either/or concepts where the bible is either God’s authoritative word or simply human words (2003:6). In McLaren’s

fictional book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, Neo discusses some of these issues, saying:

“The fact is that no serious theologian today holds to what used to be called the dictation theory, that God dictated the words of the bible to the writers. No, it’s clear that their own personalities and styles of writing were expressed, not overridden, in their production of the texts that today make up our bible. In whatever sense the Bible is God’s book, it never stops being a human book either, full of human personality and artistry and culture.” (McLaren 2004:81).

McLaren believes that many protestants read the bible today through modern lenses (2001:22). Often evangelicals are not so much defending the authority of the bible as they are defending the traditional grid through which they read and interpret the bible (:49) - this being the modern framework. He believes we need to let go of this modern framework, which also sees the bible as an answer book, and discover what it really is. In *A New Kind of Christian*, Neo says:

“We get to rediscover it for what it really is: an ancient book of incredible spiritual value for us, a kind of universal and cosmic history, a book that tells us who we are and what story we find ourselves in so that we know what to do and how to live. That letting go is going to be hard for you evangelicals.” (McLaren 2001:52)

Our modern age is limiting in the ways it allows us to read the text. It’s about forensic science and analysis, an aggressive conquest of the text (McLaren 2001:57). Often this modern approach calls for an objective reading of the text when an intersubjective, post-objective approach should be required (McLaren & Campolo 2003:244). McLaren describes our modern approach to scripture as a “sliced and diced” approach “strained” through a variety of conservative filters (:72). Modern individualism has also contributed to an individualism of the bible

and taken away the sacred role of scripture that gathers the community of faith (:71). One of the beauties of a communal approach to scripture is that it is worked out in the daily course of life with all its challenges and issues (:76). One of the best ways McLaren believes (McLaren & Campolo 2003:80) we should understand scripture is by valuing marginalized readings of scripture:

“If you are privileged, find people who are not, and listen to their readings of scripture. Value where their readings differ from yours and from each other, and expect new insight to spring from those differences. Value dynamic tensions on the text itself.”

Conclusion

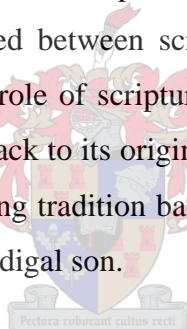
Without a doubt the role and nature of scripture for McLaren is of vital importance. He rejects what he believes to be a modern reading of scripture which leads to a specific framework being applied to understanding scripture. He rejects both a liberal and fundamentalist reading of scripture, which is modern in nature and foundationalist in origin. He calls for a more experiential reading of scripture where scripture reads us as well as appreciating its beauty, acknowledging its ethical faults, taking it in context and living within its story. He also calls for a return to a communal reading of scripture that is safeguarded by being read and understood within the context of the church’s mission. He also values highly a reading of scripture that is done by the marginalized.

In many ways I believe McLaren has been brave to attempt to move beyond the pointless (although some wouldn’t see it as pointless) debate between liberal and conservative. The best way to do this is by accepting a critical realist approach to scripture which McLaren goes to great lengths to demonstrate. He spends the majority of his time speaking about how modernism has affected our reading of scripture and how a contextual and post-modern approach to scripture should change our understanding of the nature and role of scripture. However, the points

of scripture's communal role and a marginalized reading of scripture, as well as its missional role, are given too little limelight. Although he does mention these three areas he simply does not delve deeper into the rich treasures such an approach would lead to. His discussions of scripture do go a long way though in helping faith communities, who see scripture as one of their norms, move into the future without hindering themselves through a misunderstanding and hence misappropriation of scripture.

7.2 Understanding Tradition

In the quote that started this chapter, Brian McLaren referred to tradition as the younger brother and scripture as the older brother. One can't help but think of the story of the prodigal son that Jesus speaks of. In some ways the church today, which has often been divided between scripture and tradition, is recovering a healthy respect for both the role of scripture and tradition. Yet in spite of those attempting to root tradition back to its original context (as testified to in scripture) many churches resist accepting tradition back into the fold – much like the other brother in the story of the prodigal son.



When we speak of tradition in the classic sense we are referring to churches who believe that the practices and more specifically the beliefs of the church that have been handed down are true and of equal weight to scripture. When we think of the Catholic and Orthodox communities we are thinking of churches that give such importance to tradition. At the council of Trent in 1546 it was affirmed that scripture and tradition are received with equal “affection and reverence” and that tradition has “been given either from the lips of Christ or by dictation of the Holy Spirit and preserved by unbroken succession in the Catholic Church.” (Comby & MacCulloch 1989:27). However it seems that in many circles today, when one uses the term tradition, one is not thinking so much about belief but rather about certain practices and liturgy that has been part of the church's history.

Stanley Grenz (1993:94) cautions Christians to jump from scripture to the present context and urges us to take tradition, which he calls theological heritage, seriously:

“The theologian dare not immediately jump from listening to the apostles and prophets to speaking in the present context. Rather, the theological task demands that we look to an intermediate, mediating source that carries secondary importance: the theological heritage of the church.”

Grenz argues that the tradition of the church and its role today ought to be nuanced as it was influenced by the linguistic and philosophical frameworks within a given culture (Grenz 1993:95). Tradition provides a reference point for the church as well as providing formulations that have “stood the test of time” and continue to have significance (:96). Hans Kung also believes that tradition should be carefully dealt with and that it must always be evaluated by returning to the church’s original constitution. He believes that this approach can be liberating where certain traditions have become prisons (Kung 1967:414). John Stott shows that even those who give priority to scripture often defend their traditions (which they believe are consonant with scripture) when the two should be separated. He believes this would aid the unity of the church if this distinction were made for those who value scripture (Stott 1992:182). Robert Webber notes that the differences among us are not so much intrinsic as embedded in certain cultural styles (1999:14). David Bosch believes that Christians must give “epistemological priority” to scripture (1991:187). This does not mean we do away with our inherited traditions. Like Grenz, he doesn’t believe we can simply jump from scripture to our present context. When discussing the various missionary traditions within the church he notes:

“The magnitude of today’s challenge can really only be appreciated if viewed against the backdrop of almost twenty centuries of church history. In addition, we need the perspectives of the past in order to appreciate the

scope of the present challenge and to be able really to understand the world today and the Christian response to its predicament...We reflect on the past not just for the past's sake; rather, we look upon it as a compass – and who would use a compass only to ascertain from where he or she has come?” (Grenz 1993:189).

Many of the emerging churches today are those seeking to return to many of the practices of the church throughout the centuries, practices which have attempted to remember the story of Christ in a variety of different and expressive ways. Liturgies that are authentic and culturally acceptable are being welcomed and explored (Gibbs & Bolger 2006: 224). Webber believes that churches today need to recover not just the practices of the past but rather as much as possible our connection with the entire visible church (:84). No one expression of the church should be normative and we need to affirm all the church's tradition in the many paradigms in which it appears (:85).

Webber affirms the need for the church to bring the traditions of worship together in creative ways, so that we receive a variety of different treasures which can aid us in our contemporary relevance (:99). Many churches today are in fact doing just that.

“Emerging churches reach into the past for many of their spiritual practices. But they do not simply reach back for anything ancient. Instead they select highly participative practices that integrate body and spirit. Certain ancient spiritual practices find their origins in the early church fathers and medieval saints.” (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:220).

It is a sad thing that the battle between scripture and tradition played a part in the separation between Protestants and Catholics (Comby and MacCulloch 1989:27) and has remained so much of a difficulty. The rediscovery of the proper role of tradition can go a long way to healing the divisions of the past. A rediscovery of

the liturgies of various traditions might be one of the openings to healing some of the traditional theological difficulties. A rediscovery of tradition would go a long way to healing schism and cultivating a more ecumenical sense within churches. This quote by Robert Webber captures the benefits of just such a position (1999:73)

“When I turned away from a sectarian view of the church to embrace the whole church with all its triumphs and failures, I sensed a belongingness to this vast community of people. I also experienced a connectedness to history that broke the arrogance of my sectarian attitude and created humility that allowed me to be defined by the church as the worldwide community of people to which I belonged. This means that I am able to affirm the whole church in all the various paradigms of history.”

Evaluating McLaren

It would be fair to say that although McLaren spends the majority of time wrestling with questions around scripture, he wants faith communities to rediscover both the theological heritage of the church as well as many of the wonderful practices of the past. The reason he spends so much time on scripture and re-adjusting assumptions around it is partly due to the audience for which he writes for. Yet his embracing of tradition is partly influenced by his appreciation for the whole church as well as the influence of post-modernity, which is far more open than the modern either/or options. However, McLaren is not calling for a blender approach to tradition but rather one which appreciates the unique gifts within the various traditions (2004:66). I believe that a fresh appreciation for the church’s traditions and beliefs is vital in restoring a holistic and non-polarized faith. We often get so caught up fighting battles of the past that we can forget to fight the battles of the present. By engaging the church’s history and seeking a

more ecumenical approach we in fact go a long way to fighting today's unique battles.

He touches on the role of tradition throughout his work, yet his book *Generous Orthodoxy* is devoted essentially to tradition and the various groups within the church's history and the value they add for the faith today. He discusses the variety of traditions and denominations and spotlights the beautiful things that they can offer from their treasure chest. When discussing the role of tradition though, we are urged not to paint the church's past in rosy terms, but also to accept two thousand years of deep pain and atrocities to which the church has been an accomplice (2004:269). The honesty and humility that McLaren achieves in *A Generous Orthodoxy* is both refreshing and challenging. It is of great surprise that many such as Carson have responded with such vehemence to it. For those who are wanting a deeper and more holistic Christian faith a generous orthodoxy helps us embrace the traditions of the church in fresh and dynamic ways.

McLaren sees tradition in its broadest sense involving "doctrines, history, heroes, disciplines, moral codes, and art accumulated." (1998:55). McLaren (:54) also notes the growing interest in the role of different traditions.

"In my lifetime I have seen signs of remarkable trend toward breaking down denominational barriers among Christians. The gene pool is being enriched, the gardens are being cross-pollinated, and everyone stands to benefit much."

He emphatically believes that when we try to hold on only to our small tradition we often end up losing it and that we should embrace the bigger Christian tradition, which forms a sort of mutual fund of traditions or a common bank account of essential beliefs (McLaren 1998:56). This will involve embracing the historical churches from Roman, Orthodox and Protestant backgrounds (:57). He notes an openness within much of Catholicism and a deep humility which should

cause protestants to come out from their defensive and protesting stance (2004:127). He also encourages us to learn from the Anglican tradition in how to hold certain beliefs and practices in tension (:210). Neo reminds Dan in *A New Kind of Christian* that there are “good Catholics, good Orthodox, good Pentecostals, and good Episcopalians” (2001:73). He notes that this embracing of various church traditions is referred to as “deep ecclesiology.” (2005:141). This approach is what McLaren describes as post-critical, where one seeks to integrate the good of various streams yielding a new approach that is far greater than the sum of its parts (2004:18). What should be resisted though is making this new approach *the* approach in some sort of restorationist or puritan fashion (:19). I think the difference between the new approach that McLaren is proposing, which again I must reiterate is not a blended approach, is that it is not claiming to be the new tradition that supersedes all others. It is an approach which appreciates diversity but seeks to allow that diversity to become its strengths.

McLaren calls for a rediscovery of traditional spiritualities, as well as traditional hero's and church history's spiritualities (1998:57-58). There will also be a deeper interest in mysticism and a desire to reclaim the mystical approaches of the faith that have come down to us through the ages (:195). When discussing theology and spirituality, he describes the current reality of cross-pollination:

“By the end of the century, one feels the new theology moving in Roman Catholics such as Brennan Manning, Romano Guardini, Henry Nouwen, and Pope John Paul II, and in Protestants such as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Leonard Sweet, Lesslie Newbigin, and the later Billy Graham.”
(McLaren 1998:67).

Understanding the past is critical for moving into and discerning the future which results in the church being adequately resourced for its horizons (2004:22). This requires an affirming of the Apostles and Nicene creeds yet realizing that all creeds should be tweaked and adapted according to scripture (:28). A generous

orthodoxy approach to tradition will affirm the amazing unity that underlies all our traditions and not so much on where we differ (:222). This seeking for unity instead of diversity is admittedly difficult for those of us who believe that our truth which we have “discovered” needs to be replicated for the good of the world. It is of interest that McLaren calls for the need to tweak tradition with scripture, which he admittedly calls “very protestant.” No matter how highly one values tradition, I feel like Kung that we need always to return to the original constitution of the church.

One of the things McLaren believes ought to be central for us is to resist labeling those who have differed from us in the past, which has been the result of much of the writing of church history.

“Where there has been diversity of opinion in the past, the winners label previous divergences as heretical and unorthodox and unchristian, leaving the impression for their descendents that everyone everywhere under the banner of orthodoxy has always agreed with them. In that light orthodoxy might seem to follow those who fight the hardest and perhaps the dirtiest. Not a pleasant thought.” (McLaren 2004:29).

An approach to understanding tradition should have a healthy dose of “courage, humility, charity and diligence.” (:30). McLaren notes that often when we think of compromise we think of a dirty word, but it can be a beautiful word if it brings us into community with others (:211). We need to learn to love those whose practices and theology we have so strongly opposed. Having this approach helps us to learn insights we might never have come across otherwise. McLaren found this to happen when discovering the Eastern Orthodox position with regard to the trinity, which was both powerful and dynamic (:55).

Conclusion

McLaren has sought to recover a space and role for tradition for many faith communities that have in the past been exclusive within their tradition while at the same time denigrating the traditions of others. Obviously he has highlighted the big difference between the Catholics and Protestants but he has at the same time shown how tradition divides even Protestants.

He has called for an opening up to both the theology and practice of various traditions which is both good for ecumenism which in turn is good for evangelism within our present context. In discussing the role of tradition he has called for a humility and gentleness in dealing with others while also affirming the need for our traditions to be evaluated by scripture.



8. Discerning Gods action

*“Most of your peers live in a different world from you. They have already crossed the line into a post-modern world. But few of you have. Why? Because you want to be faithful to the Christian upbringing you have received, which is so thoroughly enmeshed with modernity. One of the most important choices you will make in your whole lives will be made in these few years at this university. Will you continue to live loyally in the fading world, in the waning light of the setting sun of modernity? Or will you venture ahead in faith and devotion to Christ in the new emerging culture of post-modernity? I don’t think you’ll hear many people my age urging you to do what I’m about to urge you to do. But I will say it boldly: I want you to invest your lives not in keeping the old ship afloat but in designing and building and sailing a new ship for new adventures in a new time in history, as intrepid followers of Jesus Christ.” – Neo giving a campus lecture in *A New kind of Christian* (McLaren 2001: 38)*



How do we build this new ship McLaren speaks of and discern God’s direction? This is the question of how one discerns God’s missional praxis, within the faith community, taking into account both global and local contexts in dialogue with scripture and tradition. Hanson, as quoted in Hendriks, notes that this requires a two-dimensional exegesis of the world and the word (Hendriks 2004:30). Where the interpreted social reality and the two normative sources meet, they are able to provide guidance for the future and the allowance for what Brueggemann calls prophetic imagination (Hendriks 2004:30). Hendriks describes this reality (2004:30)

“Memory, eschatology, imagination and action play important roles in finding new answers to new situations, when leading people from sin’s

many forms of bondage to freedom in Christ. As such, this involves music, art, narratives, the ability to dream, waiting upon God, using ritual and image-elements through which God can reveal his word, his answers, and a new vision. This is also the field of ethics.”

When discerning the question of ethical decision-making, Kretzschmar also argues that the teachings of the bible must be understood in their context as well as the various contexts of the modern world (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:5). She calls for an interaction of the various theological disciplines as they work out their understanding of scripture and tradition within the various contexts (:5). Working out ethics as part of the discernment process results in practical (transformative) action and “a commitment to thinking about, speaking about and doing the will of God in the world.” (:17). Scripture is in fact not only important in discerning the ethical dilemma but must take a vital part in the whole discernment process. Arguments for the importance of scripture as a theological norm were already argued in the previous section.

In Hendriks’ earlier quote, he referred to the fact that the discernment process and its imaginative role will involve the use of music, art and narrative, as well as ritual and image elements. It is both interesting and exciting that much of the emerging church and their desire for the church to discern her local contexts are using just such elements. Often as these areas are lay driven, which results in a local theology of life and worship which accurately reflects the world-views and daily questions of the church.

“The discernment needed for a faith community’s participation in God’s missional praxis is integrally linked with worship. In their worship and participation in the sacraments, a faith community directs its focus to God from whom all goodness flows. The whole liturgy endeavors to help this focus on God to be finely tuned. Worship is active participation in a correlational hermeneutical event in which the triune God’s mysterious,

guiding presence is active. This is where vocation is received and a sense of destiny is born.” (Hendriks 2004:31-32).

Where the faith community are working out the discerning process in worship, and where vocation is being received and destiny born, this should result in more public celebrations of calling and commissioning (Guder 2000:179). Worship should be indigenous and reflect the lived environment of its worshippers for they cannot stand outside the culture of which they are part of (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:229). Worship practices also help with how the church discerns the way forward.

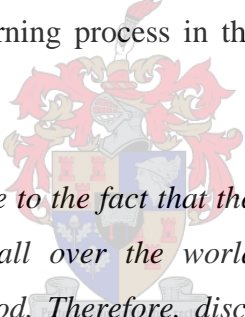
“Spiritual exercises are not privatized and internalized. They relate to the life of the corporate community of faithful people and provide the values, spiritual stamina, and sense of calling for their mission in the world. They provide the discipline of learning to listen corporately to God for a clear sense of his leading.” (Guder 2006:223)

Part of the discerning process and presuppositions must acknowledge that not only is it linked with worship but also with the triune God who takes the initiative. Tom Sine remarks that we will need foresight in determining where God seems to be at work in his inbreaking of history. It is God who is the initiative maker and is creatively at work within human history (Sine 1999:43). Any discerning process must acknowledge the missionary character of God and realize that we need to honor God as initiative taker and missional director.

Flowing from this understanding of God’s role in the discernment process, we are also to acknowledge that discernment must take place within the faith community. The challenge of this is that everyone, in some way, ought to be brought into the process of discernment (Hendriks 2004:31). This allows us, as we noted when interpreting a faith community’s local situation, to get in touch with the questions and realities of their lives. This enables us to understand their narrative, their

story. What can take place in this discernment process is a “collision of narratives” as the discernment is pursued from within the local faith community (Grenz & Olson 1992:284).

Linked to this discernment process is the affirmation that we should allow ourselves to be influenced by the faith communities both past and present (Hendriks 2004:31). We should not however allow the battles of the past to define the opportunities of the future. It is incumbent upon the church and her mission to learn from others of different theological positions (Watson 1978:302). Much progress has been made in recent decades and even Kung writing in the early 1970s believed that it was not so much the theological problems that hindered cooperation and learning but rather basic attitudes between diverse faith communities (Kung 1974:502-503). By embracing the faith communities both past and present our discerning process in the present is characterized by both diversity and unity.



“The diversity is due to the fact that there are, and have been, many local faith communities all over the world. They find their unity in their communion with God. Therefore, discernment should take place with a realization of this unity and of being one family sharing a common vocation and destiny. This is the ecumenical dimension of discernment.”

(Hendriks 2004:31).

Discernment ought not to take into account what Hendriks defines as penultimate or secondary concerns. These concerns are anything that will distract from God’s missional praxis – institutional structures, church law, status, power or financial issues (Hendriks 2004:32). Often in trying to discern God’s missional praxis, we allow the institutional and other issues to dominate to such an extent that we miss out on God’s missional intention and creativity and life is stifled. Kung believes this to be the case as they remain in former paradigms “spiritually, theologically and organizationally,” which results in propping up authoritarian and totalitarian

structures (Kung 1992:134). To subvert these potential dangers and pitfalls, the church must herself realize that she is the object of God's *missio Dei* and in need of repentance and conversion (Bosch 1991:387). All traditions today should adhere to the call *ecclesia semper reformanda est*.

A discerning faith community, caught between the word and the world, ought to take all these various concerns we have discussed into account. It must never forget in the process that our primary human purpose is to praise, worship and glorify God (Hendriks 2004:32). As the Westminster Catechism tells us – our chief aim is to worship God and enjoy him forever.

Evaluating McLaren

This is also an area in which it is difficult in evaluating McLaren, at least at first glance. It is further complicated by the fact that we are not so much analyzing how McLaren works out his discerning practice but rather what he believes about how the discerning practice works out. After deeper reflection though, one realizes that we can cover in some senses both the how and the what of discernment. For the three fictional novels that he produced are in a sense just such an attempt to embrace a discerning process. In a unique sense, they capture how the discerning process would work out for McLaren. The three stories are rooted in the mission of God and how that works out in faith communities. They are also a great example of how secondary concerns and issues which we mentioned earlier get in the way of the creative discernment process when Dan is confronted with opposition. Throughout all three books Neo and Dan are discussing scripture and tradition and what that means for their life and church. In a sense they are doing correlational hermeneutics as they interact with their global and local contexts while in dialogue with scripture and tradition. The five areas in which we have already evaluated McLaren are in many senses brought together in these stories.

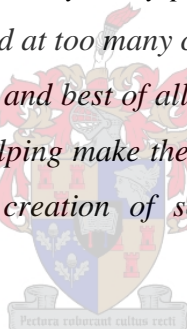
I believe the narratives are a powerful demonstration of how the discerning process works itself out in real life. McLaren has succeeded in showing the complications of mission within faith communities and how global dynamics are affecting life and faith communities. By rooting the story in local realities we also get unique insights into how one interprets the local reality and responds accordingly. As we've mentioned already, the discerning process that takes place in the novels demonstrates how one can dialogue with the norms of the faith with regard to scripture and tradition. Despite the power of these narratives in directly demonstrating how the discernment process works itself out, in what other ways does McLaren understand the discernment process?

McLaren believes that the New Testament shows a great case study in the way that the church can move forward and adapt and evolve according to change and new challenges (1998:23). As we mentioned earlier when discussing McLaren's understanding of the nature of scripture, we saw that he felt we should reject sanitized readings of scripture and the story of God. He calls for us to accept the story as it comes from those various settings and cultures, which in turn allows us the freedom and the "job of interpretation and application for our myriad of settings up to us." (1999:232). This provides us with a way in which we do correlational hermeneutics and allow for the powerful clash of narratives which can take place.

He speaks of the forming role that norms, such as scripture and tradition, which reveal the story of God and his dealings with us, plays in our faith communities (:233). In *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, Neo asks the following questions which illustrates how one should work out the discernment process when confronted with changing contexts, "I hope that friends like you will consider what I say, and see how it squares up with scripture, and common sense, and church tradition, and internal discernment from God's spirit." (2003:164).

We mentioned earlier the role that worship plays in the discernment process and how images and symbols become powerful public and communal tools in inspiring and discerning a way forward. The importance of this being that local art forms capture one's imagination, help us to think incarnationally, as well as indirectly linking us with the local questions and realities of faith communities. The use of worship and art should be experienced publicly. McLaren (1999:169) discusses the role of art in the following way:

“I must put worship and art together, because in a real way, public worship is an experience of art, involving well-chosen words, music, architecture, perhaps sculpture, painting, film, drama, and dance as well. Sadly, too often public worship displays poor art, sloppy art, fake art – which may account for why many people find more distraction than help in their search for God at too many churches. But then again, often there's beauty, and sincerity, and best of all, in the best churches each attender is also a participant, helping make the music and say the words and use his or her gifts in the creation of something beautiful to celebrate the goodness of God.”



It is vitally important for McLaren that, when discussing the role of worship, we find contemporary language and imagery (McLaren & Campolo 2003:209). He also mentions that it is of critical value that when worship takes on a discerning role for the future it must engage with eschatology - “the dream of God's kingdom coming in justice and compassion and liberation and peace.” (:206). We need songs that celebrate this missional dimension, songs that focus outward (:207).

McLaren believes that seminarians should from an early stage in their theological journey learn how this discernment process has taken place throughout history. They should learn how “art, architecture, liturgy, spiritual disciplines, economics, science, forms of community, and family life” has been understood and has

influenced faith communities and theology throughout the centuries (2001:162). Understanding how it was done in the past encourages us to do it in the present, and do it well.

The discerning process is never easy and requires a boldness and imagination if we are to plot a way forward.

“Each of these new challenges and opportunities requires Christian leaders to create new forms, new methods, new structures – and it requires them to find new content, new ideas, new truths, new meaning to bring to bear on the new challenges.” (McLaren 2005:192)

Conclusion

McLaren has done well in the discerning process and how one can plot a way forward. He has spoken of the need for scripture and tradition to be brought to bear on the faith community when it is attempting to discern a way forward. He has also spoken of the powerful role of worship and how it relates to mission. By encouraging seminaries to focus on how the discerning process has worked out in the church's history, McLaren provides a fresh angle to the discerning process. The most powerful thing by far that McLaren has offered us with regard to the discerning process has been the three-part fictional series exploring the relationship of Dan and Neo. In these books we get a direct insight into how discerning God's missional praxis for a given situation can actually be lived out.

9. A View of the kingdom

“The church exists, he said, to be a catalyst of the kingdom. In other words, it doesn’t exist for its own aggrandizement. It exists for the benefit of the kingdom of God, something bigger than itself. Of course the church must grow, numerically and spiritually, but that growth matters so the church can become more and more catalytic for the kingdom of God, for the good of the world. This means the world doesn’t exist for the benefit of the church, as if the world were a mountain that we strip-mine to get ore to process our spiritual factory, for the church’s enhancement. No, the church exists for the world – to be God’s catalyst so that the world can receive and enter God’s kingdom more and more.” – Neo speaking to Dan in A New Kind of Christian (McLaren 2001: 84).

The topic of the kingdom has been in many ways the defining reality for much of the theological development in the last century (Grenz 1993:139). However, perspectives within the church are still many and varied on what one really understands by the nature of the kingdom. Hendriks (2004:32) refers to the kingdom in the following terms:

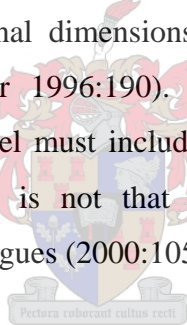
“The present and eschatological kingdom of God reflects God’s missional praxis. The kingdom of God derives from the eschatological perspective. It points to the belief in a triune God who created the world and acts for the benefit of its people.”

The correct understanding of eschatology for the kingdom becomes crucial for how one understands the church’s relation to the world and the very nature of salvation. In more recent times we have seen the popularization of the *Left Behind* series which received such a welcome in many faith communities around the world. Content and helpfulness aside, it does indicate for me a widening interest

in eschatology and its consequences for daily life. Unfortunately it re-enforces a “personal salvation only” and an escapist mentality.

We are now widely aware of the battle between the “social gossellers” and “the personal salvationers,” both of which have their roots in a particular understanding of the nature of the kingdom. Newbigin argues that these two ways of understanding the church’s mission are hampering the church’s witness in the world. They both hold onto an important truth, yet both fall into the trap of seeing it as their work and not God’s, which should be their central concern (Newbigin 1989:136). We should always approach cautiously when anyone says that there are only two options in any given issue (Guder 2000:99).

David Lowes Watson argues that these issues must be addressed hermeneutically, where the social and personal dimensions to mission are fused at the outset (Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:190). A comprehensive understanding of salvation and a holistic model must include not only the human soul but all of creation (Louw 1998:6). It is not that the personal dimension to faith is unimportant, but, as Guder argues (2000:105), it is a reduction of the gospel:



“From the perspective of missiology, the most fateful of these early reductionisms for our understanding of evangelistic ministry concerned the gospel itself, the meaning of salvation. In very subtle ways, salvation became more and more focused on the individual, and the cosmic thrust of the gospel shifted into a concern for the person’s life after death. This would have wide-reaching implications for the church in every dimension of its mission, implications that shape the church today. Although this separation was already present in the church’s gospel proclamation before Constantine, the process was solidified when the Christian church became the formal, legally established and protected religion in the Roman empire. The continuing conversion of the church must deal, thus, with the legacy of Constantine.”

In discussing any details around the kingdom we must affirm that in Jesus the kingdom was uniquely present. In Jesus' life, death and re-creation the kingdom becomes flesh and blood (Hendriks 2004:32). As Jesus comes bearing God's claim to rulership it is in him that the kingdom becomes present (Grenz 1993:147). God confirms the rulership of Christ and his claims to the kingdom through the resurrection of Christ. He acts for the confirmation of his glory and honor (Barth 1966:121). The prophets and John had proclaimed the kingdom; with the arrival of Jesus, this presence of the kingdom is demonstrated. Jesus spoke of the kingdom, the early church spoke of Jesus – for Jesus is uniquely representing the kingdom (Newbigin 1978:40). When Jesus spoke of the kingdom being at hand his listeners would have known that God's rule was effectively present through him (Willard 1998:27).

In discussing the kingdom being present in Jesus we must resist two errors that our discussion might lead to. The first being that God's kingdom did not exist prior to the arrival of Jesus. We must rather say that before the kingdom comes, it first is and was. The second potential error is stating that the work of the kingdom is simply that of Jesus. The establishment of the kingdom is rather the very work of God himself (Dodd 1970:68-69). Our role is to receive it, enter it and respond to it (Guder 2000:125). In avoiding these potential pitfalls we must still affirm the presence of the kingdom in Jesus and its uniqueness.

“It was that the kingdom, or kingship, of God was no longer a distant hope or a faceless concept. It had now a name and a face – the name and face of the man from Nazareth. In the New Testament we are dealing not just with the proclamation of the kingdom but also with the presence of the kingdom.” (Newbigin 1978:40).

When looking at the presence of the kingdom of Jesus and the new day he inaugurated we must not fail to take into account its cosmic proportions. For

God's reign and his kingdom includes the broad sweep of history and its eventual culmination in a new heavens and a new earth. This reign of God is a reign over all things and includes the history of nations and nature (1978:31). A non-cosmic understanding of the reign of God and his kingdom is weak in its application and scope. As Guder says, "The world of the principalities and powers is little challenged by a private and personal, vertical-relationship gospel. And that suits the powers and principalities just fine." (Guder 2000:190).

The story of the kingdom is not one that is otherworldly or divorced from history. It is an unfolding of God's kingdom within space-time history as part of the flow of the human story. Campolo reminds us that the new society that God is wanting to create is in this world and human history (McLaren & Campolo 2003:43). For Christianity, the eternal God is in fact revealed in history (Dodd 1938:23). Dodd was criticized for his emphasis on the historical dimension here and now and a later third mediating position, emphasizing the present and future dimensions, emerged (Grenz 1993:143). The key emphasis on the present dimension in history with regards to the kingdom should however never be lost, for if God doesn't act in history to what extent does he act at all? If we cannot speak of God's acting in history, the difficulty arises as to what we actually mean when we speak of God (Newbigin 1989:69). A fair reading of the teaching of Jesus with regard to the kingdom must affirm both a fulfillment and acting in history as well as a future consummation (Ladd 1974:91). We must be careful to remember that the building of God's kingdom can however never come in fullness without Christ's return, but we are still urged to build towards it (McLaren & Campolo 2003:47).

When we speak of God acting in history though, we are not saying that we need to accept the worldview and thinking of the people who recorded these events – as in the three decker universe of much of the New Testament (Robinson 1963:15). The important point was that God was acting in history. Taking this all into account, the fact that God acts in history results in us being able to make certain

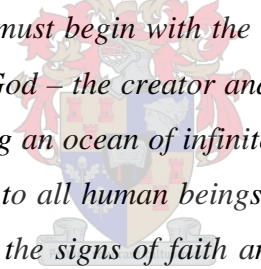
statements with regard to the understanding of the kingdom and the goal and direction of the cosmos.

“What is affirmed here is that a particular community in history, that community which bears the name of Jesus, will be given, through the active work of the spirit of God, a true understanding of history – the ongoing history that continues through the centuries after Jesus, and understanding which is based on the particular events of whose memory they are custodians. But this privileged position is not for their own sake but for the sake of the world into which they are sent as witnesses to Jesus in whom God’s entire creation has been disclosed.” (Newbigin 1989:78).

The kingdom of God is open to all and was designed from its earliest stages, in the life and election of Israel, to be a blessing to the whole world (Newbigin 1989:84). The arrival of God’s kingdom is not an exclusive one for Israel to which God then punishes all others, it is an inclusive one. Bosch demonstrates this remarkable reality in Luke 4:16-30. In this section we find Jesus broadening the net of salvation for those who are outside the orbit, of what to his listeners, is seen as God’s kingdom. In the passage Jesus is seen as one who does not want to visit wrath and vengeance on his enemies but to include them. For his Jewish audience in nationalistic Galilee this is inconceivable (Bosch 1991:109-110).

The challenge of who participates in God’s kingdom today is a hot topic within Christian circles. Can you participate in kingdom life if you do not believe in the king? Are all relating to and seeking the same God? Is Hans Kung right when he believes we are all participating in the same reality, the same God? (Kung 2005:22) Is it true to say that the various experiential roots of the various religions are in contact with the same spiritual reality and it is only over the centuries of development that differences have emerged? (Hick 1973:126-127). Or is Berkouwer right when he argues that God’s reality can only be accessed through the Christian faith decision and that universal salvation is not available to all?

(Berkhouwer 1965:293). Of course these are not the only authors to comment on these realities and there are a myriad of positions to which modern scholars adhere. Newbigin believes that deeper issues are at stake in understanding the relationship between the world religions and that these issues will not be resolved if the questions are framed around what will happen to non-Christians after death (1989:177). He argues that as Christians we should not aim to know God's destiny for others in advance and should take as our starting point for interaction the fact that we are fellow human beings (Newbigin 1989:174). Authentic and true dialogue is not one that assumes the lowest common denominator but rather one in which commitment is presupposed. This must be so in order to avoid the dialogue becoming "mere chatter" (Bosch 1991:484). Newbigin concludes with what I believe to be the reality of who God would include as part of his kingdom mission (1989:175)



"I believe that we must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, that God – the creator and sustainer of all that exists – is in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to all his works in all creation and to all human beings. I believe that when we see Jesus eagerly welcoming the signs of faith among men and women outside the house of Israel; when we see him lovingly welcoming those whom others cast out; when we see him on the cross with arms outstretched to embrace the whole world and when we hear his whispered words, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do," we are seeing the most fundamental of all realities, namely a grace and mercy and loving kindness which reaches out to every creature. I believe that no person, of whatever kind or creed, is without some witness of God's grace in heart and conscience and reason, and none in whom that grace does not evoke some response – however feeble, fitful, and flawed."

If it is true that through Jesus' death and resurrection a new reality had dawned and is now available, it is not long before questions of atonement and hell

dominate the discussion. Although we cannot enter into vast amount of details it remains an important discussion for many Christians today with regard to how they understand the kingdom work of God. It is linked in some ways with regard to how one understands God's approach to other religions and what this means for our understanding of God. The question now tends to focus not so much on the nature and goal of salvation but rather its means (Culpepper 1966:12). For many today it is affirmed that many of the theories with regard to the atonement are historically and culturally conditioned, even if biblically informed. The important thing for us then is to get to the heart of the atonement which is that God in Christ has:

“Incorporated into himself not simply an individual person, but all human nature, indeed all mankind. We have been included in him in this way so that we can now allow ourselves to become involved in what he has done.” (Wallace 1997:109).

When discussing questions around the kingdom we therefore need to hold in tension both the future and present dimensions of eschatology, while at the same time emphasizing the personal and cosmic proportions of God's kingdom. It must hold in “creative and redemptive tension” the already and the not yet (Bosch 1991:508). We must also affirm that it is a kingdom that is initiated and consummated by God – and it is his kingdom (Ladd 1974:81). This kingdom is not the church and exists for the benefit of the whole world and has been such from the beginning. God's kingdom is not about vengeance (Guder 2000:35). People can choose not to participate in God's kingdom (2000:37) but whether God will ultimately exclude them is not for us to decide. By focusing not on life after death but life now we will avoid much of the confusion around the issues.

Evaluating McLaren

The kingdom of God has been a concern for McLaren from his earliest work but has become over time a more dominating reality. His latest book *The secret message of Jesus* is a case in point as it essentially is a book about Jesus message regarding the kingdom of God. McLaren describes the need for the church to move away from seeing itself as the locus of Gods kingdom and move to seeing itself as participating in Gods kingdom in the world (1998:37). It is therefore important in this matter to distinguish between the church and the kingdom (2001:83). The emphasis here is not on the individual but the whole world including the “family, community, church, ecosystem, planet, or universe.” (1998:34). Here McLaren also seeks to convey the fact that the world is in fact Gods private property and that everything we encounter matters and means something to God (2002:94-95). He actively resists an approach to the world which seeks to see the world as raw materials to be consumed by the church. He describes this incorrect approach in the following way:

“Its okay to tear people out of their neighbourhoods as long as we get them involved in church work more. Its okay to withdraw all our energies from the arts and culture “out there” as long as we have a good choir and nice sanctuary “in here”. Its okay, after all, we’re about salvaging individuals from a sinking ship; neighborhoods, economies, cultures, and all but human souls will sink, so who cares?” (McLaren 1998:37)

McLaren believes that this was Jesus approach and that it was radical. His approach was to infiltrate culture subversively with the kingdom of God and redeem it for Gods higher agenda (2001:74) and not seek to avoid the world’s craziness and pain (2003:164). We become agents of Gods kingdom as we focus on Gods mission (:150) and the more successful the church is in her mission the more expansive the kingdom will become (:156). This comprehensive mission results not in a withdrawal but one where we are sent into “a classroom, a factory,

an office building, a highway, a jungle, whatever-to be an agent of Christ, an agent of the kingdom.” (:156) He notes that the message of the kingdom is one in which the word is not used by Jesus to refer only to the religious but is inclusive of a whole host of differing professions and responsibilities (2006:81). All people, of all different persuasions, should find their identity in being participants and agents of Gods kingdom (:82).

When discussing the nature of eschatology McLaren notes that its study has often resulted in the church being too short sighted with regard to the future of the world. Pre-millennial attempts at explaining the arrival of Gods kingdom has led to the belief that the whole world will soon be obliterated and only the realm of the individual soul remain. This approach believes that being concerned with the world would be like re-arranging the deck chairs on the titanic (1998:151). Post-millennial approaches on the other hand have often led to an over exaggeration of the church’s role in society and its ability to bring the kingdom of God about in ones own strength. (:151) McLaren’s approach could best be described as A-millennial which he describes with these words,

“the best days are ahead of us, not behind; acknowledging that in this world we have no shortage of tribulation, but will rejoice that God has an unspeakably wonderful future awaiting us.” (McLaren 1998:152)

McLaren resists the need for constant speculation about end time realities and believes an eschatology of mystery would be appropriate in understanding these questions (1998:153). We should embrace patience and urgency in our understanding of Gods kingdom and hold these two in a dynamic tension (1998:155). This eschatology is also one of ultimatum in which people are urged to participate in the kingdom or face the consequences (:155). He believes that this understanding of eschatology would result in people doing more good in the world (:156). He holds that the historic here and now dimensions are important when discussing eschatology, along with the future and ultimate dimensions of

the kingdom. Both were important to Jesus and should be important to us as well (2002:142).

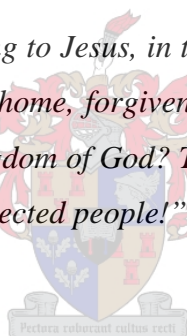
Any discussion of eschatology often leads directly to a discussion on life after death, questions of heaven and hell. This, like an incorrect view on eschatology, has often led to Christians being unconcerned about issues of justice and mercy here on earth (2002:42)

McLaren tends to avoid committing himself on the issues of hell and heaven. He does this because he believes modern Christianity has been so fixated with these questions and has made them more important than they should be (2002:142). McLaren devotes a whole book *The last word and the word after that* to the questions of hell and heaven. In the book he discusses questions regarding the various Christian positions on hell from inclusivism, exclusivism and conditionalism (2005:7). He also discusses questions regarding the nature of predestination and whether God has fore-ordained some for blessing and others for destruction (2005:9). His perspective on hell involves acknowledging that for Israel it did not exist and how through Zoroastrian, Babylonian, Egyptian and Greek thought the idea of hell entered Jewish thought. The most important aspect, however, is that Jesus did not use the language of hell in the way that the Pharisees used it. It seemed that Jesus always used it for the religious establishment who were themselves using it for those people whom Jesus sought to embrace. Neo puts it like this:

“The Pharisees need a scapegoat – the tax collectors and prostitutes and such – and so the rhetoric of hell gives them a powerful stick with which to threaten the sinners into better behaviour. Maybe it works kind of like a death penalty, as a deterrent...So whether or not Jesus endorses the idea of hell, when the Pharisees use hell to threaten sinners to fly right, Jesus takes it and kind of turns it back on them, doesn’t he?” (McLaren 2005:62-63)

It might seem strange to be entering into such a detailed discussion of hell when discussing the kingdom of God. I think though that McLaren does it for very good reasons. The first being that discussions around hell and heaven often leave people wanting to escape responsibility for the kingdom of God coming on. The second reason is hell is often used in a way that seeks to exclude people from the Kingdom where in its original context it was used in a more inclusive sense. Salvation for McLaren is focused on being rescued from “fruitless ways of life here and now, to share in God’s saving love for all creation, in an adventure called the kingdom of God, the point of which you definitely don’t want to miss.” (McLaren & Campolo 2003:25) With regard to those who are excluded from the kingdom McLaren has the following to say (2006:22)

“Amazingly, according to Jesus, in the kingdom of God, notorious sinners are loved, welcomed home, forgiven, and reconciled - not rejected. Who is rejected in the Kingdom of God? Those who are heartless and merciless toward these often rejected people!”



He resists the over emphasis on original sin as its focus of getting people into heaven as it also turns people away from their present realities and cultures and minimizes the kingdom message of God given to us in the gospels. (2005:149)

McLaren often refers to the message of the kingdom as the message of Gods story and that those who participate in the story participate in the kingdom. That leaves us with the question of those who have not heard of the story. McLaren, through Neo, addresses this question in words that only fiction can do:

“God will do whats right and just and compassionate in the end. The last thing we need is for folks like you and me to make premature pronouncements on other eternal destiny, one way or the other,

condemning or condoning. What we need to do is what Jesus told us to do, what Jesus showed us by his own example: to identify those human actions and attitudes that spoil the story, that turn Gods dream into a nightmare, that destroy and waste and pollute and degrade and profane God's sacred creation-in-process." (McLaren 2003:171)

As we noted earlier one cannot avoid questions around the atoning work of Christ when discussing questions around the kingdom - and neither can McLaren. He describes the reconciliation that Christ achieved for us in the following way:

"God is not holding their sins against them because Jesus somehow achieved a kind of reversal, where he suffered for our sins and passed on his goodness to us. Now we are reconciled to God, righteous in God's eyes with 'the righteousness of Christ'" (McLaren 2002:154)

God purges us through grace and the suffering of Christ (2003:166). McLaren believes that when discussing the atonement we involve ourselves too much in questions of sin and forgiveness, and in the process move things that would be in the centre of discussions regarding the atonement to the outskirts. The central things that we tend to discard are issues of spiritual formation, mission and justice (2003:166).

The kingdom for Brian McLaren is not about a lack of commitment but in fact a broadening of it. It moves one away from the domain of the heart to the domain of the world. It is a commitment that places demands on family and money and can't be fitted around the periphery of ones life. For McLaren Jesus would say the following, "The kingdom I am here to proclaim is a revolutionary matter calling for extraordinary commitment." (2002:73-74). Extraordinary commitment does not result in coercion and force but is worked out through self sacrifice and vulnerability (2003:106). This commitment seeks to live outside of oneself for the

benefit of others and the world. We are chosen by God for service not for privilege (2001:83).

The fact that we are called to bless and be a blessing to others directs much of the thought around the kingdom and those who participate in it. When discussing the kingdom we are encouraged to focus on the inclusivity and not the exclusivity of the message. McLaren's fictional character Neo puts it in the following manner (2003:64)

“When religions assume that their adherents are chosen only to be blessed, and forget that they are blessed to be a blessing, they distort their identity and they drift away from God's calling for them. When they assume that they are blessed exclusively rather than instrumentally, when they see themselves as blessed to the exclusion of others rather than for the benefit of others, they become part of the problem instead of part of the solution.”



Conclusion

McLaren has wrestled with the questions around the kingdom in great detail and covered the relevant issues which a discussion of the kingdom should entail. With regard to eschatology he has shown the negative sides that would result in a misinformed view of the kingdom. He believes that we should hold in tension the now and not yet dimensions of God's kingdom. He further resists making questions of heaven and hell so important as it leads to the same effect of a bad eschatology in separating people from here and now concerns. He believes Jesus' message regarding the kingdom is an inclusive one and not exclusive and that Christians are blessed so that they might bless others.

10. Transformative action

“The horsemen I see on the horizon are of our own making, the wages of our own sin, if you will, humanity reaping what we’ve sown: overpopulation, racial or ethnic or religious hatred leading to nuclear or biochemical war or some other desperate act of global terrorism that unleashes God knows what, plus good-old fashioned pollution that eventually clicks the biosphere into self-destruct mode.” – Neo to Dan in *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (McLaren 2003:172)

If the above “horsemen” are those areas which we will be facing on the horizon of the not too distant future, the church will need to focus on her call to transforming action within society. The faith communities that we are part of must not simply end up with “systematic comprehensive interpretations” but rather to do something about the issues which confront her (Hendriks 2004:33). Transforming action is the very heartbeat of Jesus who is working in the world today to save the world from what it is and make it a place where people can live alongside one another with dignity and respect (McLaren & Campolo 2003:105).



In his critique of liberation theology, Millard Erickson has been an important corrective to spiritualized conceptions of faith and of the church’s mission. If Jesus gave attention and concerns to basic human needs within society, it should also be our concern (1991:160). John Stott finds it “exceedingly strange that anyone who calls themselves a Christian should ever need to ask the question whether God is wanting them to be involved in social responsibility.” (1999:3). God’s work in the faith community has brought about such a change that we are called to love both God and our neighbour (Hendriks 2004:33). The faith community, which had its identity rooted in the triune God, takes local and global contexts into account while dialoging with her normative sources, in a discerning process which leads to a kingdom view of life and ultimately a transforming action.

“This active, reflective spiral leads to new formulations of the truth and values that may be expressed systematically in new theological creeds but, above all, in the life and witness of the church. As such, aspects of the eschatological future are now realized, creating joy and hope.” (Hendriks 2004:33).

In many senses, when we speak about transforming action we are entering into the domain of ethics. This involves analysis, liberation and action. The realm of action, according to Kretzschmar, must dominate, for we are now concerned with “thinking about, speaking about and doing the will of God in the world.” (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:17). Committed Christians need to develop strategies for the various transforming actions required and adopt a world-transforming rather than a world-escaping approach (1994:21). World transforming mission is therefore a participation in the liberating activity of God in the world which seeks both human and environmental liberation (Saayman 1991:7). Mission that is politically, socially and economically naïve falls short of what is required from the living God (Newbigin 1989:209). Often we find that Christians (due in large part to a misunderstanding of the nature of God’s reign and kingdom) seek to maintain an ambivalent attitude with regard to social, political, economic and environmental concerns, which in most cases simply means an endorsement of the status quo (Saayman 1991:4). What this does not mean however is that we become social revolutionaries seeking to overturn everything and set up our “Christian utopia.” We are prevented from these dangers by the eschatological dimension in which God arrives unexpectedly and definitively allowing a special hope for the future (1991:16). Newbigin (1989:209) describes this reality as follows:

“We are rather patient revolutionaries who know that the whole of creation, with all its given structures, is groaning in the travail of a new birth, and that we share this groaning and travail, this struggling and

wrestling, but do so in hope because we have already received, in the spirit, the firstfruit of the new world (Rom 8:19-25)”

The reality of our eschatological hope enables us to ground ourselves as we seek Gods transforming action in the world. We must be wary of equating Jesus wholly with the causes we are involved in, as Jesus never fitted into any ones categories. Kung puts this reality beautifully with the following words (1974:212)

“Jesus apparently cannot be fitted in anywhere: neither with the rulers nor with the rebels, neither with the moralizers nor with the silent ascetics. He turns out to be provocative, both to right and left. Backed by no party, challenging on all sides: ‘The man who fits no formula.’”

Just because Jesus constantly avoided many of these categories does not mean that we cannot find ourselves perhaps in some of these categories from time to time. It must mean however that we approach these areas with deep humility and cautiousness in discerning what transforming action is appropriate within a given context. This also allows us the freedom to see that different approaches in different contexts are both possible and needed. Mission by its nature is contextual (Saayman 1991:8).

There are various levels and areas of action in which transforming action might be worked out. Hendriks proposes five of these levels or areas of action. They are the personal dimension, ecclesiastical level, the secular level, the theological scientific dimension and the ecological level (Hendriks 2004:33). By interacting and moving in these various dimensions, we find ourselves wrestling on broad yet interlinked fronts in questions of political, economic, social and environmental justice. We allow ourselves to be personally transformed by our engagement with Christ in our approach to these areas. As a faith community we move out and into the world and these various domains. We speak into the public realm which is constantly debating and legislating. We interact with various disciplines which are

also seeking to bring their influence to bear on social issues. We partner with them in what we believe can become kingdom initiatives. Questions in the political, social and economic realm must of course be understood in light of the deep ecological concerns which are at present dominating our planet. What follows is an attempt at addressing the political, economic, social and environmental domains which effect the various levels which Hendriks spoke of. Of course there is much overlap in these areas but a Christian transforming approach will seek to be involved and in dialogue with them.

10.1 Transforming Politics

The word politics I once heard described etymologically as follows: ‘poly’ refers to many and ‘tics’ to blood sucking animals – hence politics refers to “many blood sucking animals!” Despite the obvious humour of the above comment the approach is not far off from many Christians in the world today. They see it as a necessary evil which should be avoided at all costs. We can pray for our leaders but should not get too involved in the decisions that they are making, since religion shouldn’t be involved in politics. One could almost reconfigure Tertullian’s famous maxim as follows, “What does Rome have to do with Washington?” Perhaps these concerns are valid as we have seen Christianity time and again causing both bloodshed and confusion when it steps into the political arena (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:184). We have seen the devastation in Europe with regards to the Thirty Years War and even earlier in the Crusades. Christianity time and again endorses oppressive regimes and systems and justifies this on the basis of non-involvement and resulting ambivalence (Cone 1990: 9; Villa-Vicencio 1987:28).

The idea of a secular society which simply allows the church to “get on with its concerns” has appealed to Christians with the resultant effect that there has been no clash between religious views and secular ones. Here an enlightened bunch can carry on the business of state without interference (Newbigin 1989:215).

Newbiggin (1989:219) cautions us about just such a severing between ethics and politics:

“If society is not to pass judgment on the aim of citizens, this must also mean that citizens have no right to pass judgment on the performance of these institutions of society. We are driven inevitably to the tyranny of institutions: the state is no longer a moral subject which can be held responsible for doing right or wrong. There is a final divorce between politics and ethics.”

John Stott, an Anglican, argues that Christians ought to be involved in the political dimension in various ways, from personal awareness and participation, to direct involvement and to taking moral stands on important issues (Stott 1999:17). Saayman argues that the way the church ought to respond should be dictated by the kind of society that is attempting to be created and the ideology that is underpinning it (Saayman 1991:8). It should put forward ideas which move toward a society which conducts itself in a “just, orderly and free manner.” (1991:14). However, it should not simply attempt to give each and everyone their due but seek actively to restore power to those who are weak through the sacrifice of those who are powerful. The privileged have the obligation to extend that privilege to those less privileged (Van der Walt 2003:319). The context which Saayman has spoken of becomes vital for the church to discern the direction in which transformation should take in the political arena. National ideologies should often be confronted and tyrannies frustrated. In emerging nations where war has ravaged the country, one’s focus should be on the creation of a “culture of national unity, one given to tolerance, compromise and moderation.” (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:185). Villa-Vicencio (:186) agrees with Van der Walt in the emphasis on the poor in politics where a:

“constructive political theology has to do with Christians being prepared to soil their hands while sharing with others in constructing political,

socio-economic and other initiatives that better serve the poor – to whom the scriptures require us to show a preferential option for the poor.”

In a world today where politics is highly polarized and those with much power wield it against those with little it is incumbent on Christians to discover afresh what a transforming presence of God’s reign would require of them. We need to understand the issues not only locally but globally. We need to realize our personal faith can have political outworkings and that our faith communities can bring influence to bear on public life. Theologically we must work with those who are seeking political renewal and not escape the ethical dimension to politics. Any political considerations should always include perspectives and potential consequences of decisions affecting both the poor and the ecological sphere.

10.2 Transforming Economics

Perhaps it would be fair to say that the economy is the most powerful factor in any discussion with regard to transforming action. Jesus in fact spoke more about money than anything else and the prophets in the Old Testament constantly railed against the economic injustices which were constantly the lot of the poor. And our world today is marked not by a decrease in economic inequality but in fact a heightening of inequality and polarization with regard to the distribution of wealth (Castells 2000:78). What is unique about the modern world with regard to the economy is that humankind is attempting to bend the future to conform to a reality which conforms to its desires (Giddens 1971:xi). This inequality is not only between certain countries in the world but intra country (Castells 2000:78). Castells has the following to say about the growing economic injustice which characterizes our planet (2000:80)

“If the evolution of intra-country inequality varies, what appears a global phenomenon (albeit with some important exceptions, particularly China) is the growth of poverty, a particularly extreme poverty. Indeed, the

acceleration of uneven development, and the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of people in the growth process, which I consider to be a feature of informational capitalism, translates into polarization, and the spread of misery among a growing number of people.”

What is so tragic of this globalizing capitalism is its exclusion of certain economies and societies which are not part of the space flow of wealth and power (Castells 2000:165).

Christian positions with regard to the economy are not unlike that of politics where often one finds oneself on either the left or the right, largely dependent on one's circumstances or ideological stance. With the collapse in large measure of communism as represented by the USSR, capitalism seems the only option which all unwittingly embrace. However there have been strong reactions against globalization all over the world with people seeking control back over their lives and environment (Castells 2004:2). Cochrane notes that the question of economic justice affects so many people today that Christians and faith communities need to take economics seriously (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:198). Other Christians such as David Krueger see no real point in swimming against the tide of globalization but rather seek to reform the global business corporations that are at the forefront of globalization (Krueger, Shriver & Nash 1997:18). The question for Krueger is not so much which economic system one adheres to but rather looks at the larger moral purposes, visions and values that can evaluate and direct the global market economy (1997:22). However, the issues of economics in the bible provide little guidance however in dealing with complexity of issues and economic realities today. What the bible does illustrate is that broader issues of love and justice are taught and a concern for all humanity (De Vries 1998:176). We find the preferential option for the poor, I believe, rooted in the scriptures. The preferential option for the poor means that any economic decision-making must be rooted in God's love for and concern for the poor. We sometimes find Jesus' injunction against the rich young ruler to give all he had to the poor as hard

to swallow and seek as best we can to over-spiritualize it. We recoil at Jesus' statement that those that did not feed the hungry were destined for hell even though they called Jesus Lord. We resist the fact that Cornelius, who was not yet a Christian, moved God's heart through his gifts to the poor. We can no longer turn away from this.

“Once we recognize the identification of Jesus with the poor, we cannot any longer consider our own relation to the poor as a social ethics question. Or, to put it in the words of Nicholas Berdyaev: While the problem of my own bread is a material issue, the problem of my neighbor's bread is a spiritual issue.” (Bosch 1991:437).

Of course the question of economic justice touches on a host of various yet interrelated issues, two of the most pertinent being the questions of unemployment and debt relief. Barend De Vries, who was a chief economist for the World Bank, mentions that debt relief for poorer countries must be seen in an ethical dimension and that the religious community was on strong grounds when it pointed to the social affects of the debt crisis (De Vries 1998:161). He notes that, in God's kingdom and world, indebtedness has no place and that love of neighbour extends to countries around us (1998:162). Rock singer Bono who has been instrumental in the Make Poverty History campaign roots the desire to see economic justice and debt relief in an understanding of God and the scriptures and that God has a special place for the poor and in fact that is where God lives.

“The drop the debt campaign was a justice issue. Holding the children to ransom for the debts of their grandparents, that's a justice issue. Or not letting the poorest of the poor put their products on our shelves whilst advertising the free market, that's a justice issue to me. These things are rooted in my study of the scriptures.” (Assayas 2005:123).

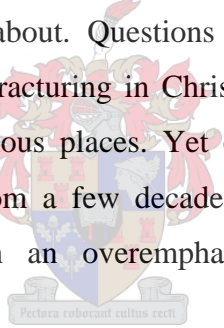
A world transforming approach to debt relief is one that both supports and encourages the debt relief of the world's poor countries but also seeks to alleviate unemployment wherever it is found. John Stott asks the pertinent question as to whether Christians, who believe that God created work as part of his original intention, should give in to the reality of large scale unemployment and believe it to be insoluble (Stott 1999:208). Questions of unemployment and development are complex but the issue of human dignity is important. True transformation for the unemployed must be linked with the people's dignity and self respect. Bragg notes that when society is changing at the rapid pace that it is today people need self-esteem to be fully human (Samuel & Sugden 1987:42). Unemployment often leads to a break up of families and communities as people leave in search of work to urban environs where support and community structures are lacking. A theology of humanness and self-esteem is often directly linked to these community structures and when they are broken questions of identity and action become compromised (Augsberger 1986:108). One must be careful in linking work too strongly with identity, for our modern world places so much stress on success and achievement and the optimistic future, that the result is often severe stress and depression (Louw 1998:140). Optimism can be dangerous and unrealistic as Bosch notes in his discussion of liberation theology. He speaks of liberation for the unemployed and the poor and the work of Segundo in the following manner,

“Segundo is pioneering a new course within liberation theology. The Christian can triumph, even when circumstances do not change, even when liberation does not come. Liberation and salvation overlap with each other to a significant degree, but they do not overlap totally. We should not deceive ourselves into believing that everything lies in our grasp and that we can bring it about, now.” (Bosch 1991:446)

We might not be able to bring it about now in the areas of economic justice, debt relief and unemployment but we must do as Jesus instructs us and work until he comes.

10.3 Transforming Social dimensions

In a sense, the previous two areas in the realms of politics and economics might for some be defined as discussing social dimensions, and in a sense this is true. We have also touched on unemployment and debt relief as important social concerns. The questions we now turn to are also interrelating with one another and involve the realm of ethical decision making. Questions of the poor, abortion, AIDS, war and violence, human rights and homosexuality now become the social dimensions that we speak about. Questions of social action always result in apparent disagreement and fracturing in Christian circles, which we have made comment on already in various places. Yet even an author from conservative evangelical circles, even from a few decades ago, believed evangelicals have resisted social action with an overemphasis on the spiritual dimensions (Christenson 1974:13).



When we speak of a transforming action with regard to the poor we must resist the temptation to define the poor simply in monetary terms but rather include those politically and racially oppressed (Bosch 1991:437). Bosch (:437) defines the poor as the following:

“The poor are the marginalized, those who lack every active or even passive participation in society; it is a marginality that comprises all spheres of life and is often so extensive that people feel that they have no resources to do anything about it.”

Bosch is bold to say that Christians who reject the poor are not God's people at all, no matter how frequent their religious rituals are (:438). John Stott maybe takes a more narrow view of poverty but agrees that a preferential option for the poor is demanded due to the serious imbalances and inequalities in the world (Stott 1999:271). Christians cannot avoid a commitment to transforming action amongst the poor of the world.

Unfortunately the poor take the biggest hit in many of the other social dimensions which arise, most specifically in the area of AIDS. Saayman quotes Schoeman in noting that poverty in fact is the most important co-factor in the spread of the virus (Villa Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:174). Having a few paragraphs on the reality of AIDS as part of a discussion of the church's mission almost seems trite in the light of the magnitude of the issue and the effect the disease is having. Besides the obvious commission for Christians to be involved in trying to find a cure and alleviate the suffering of AIDS victims through many means (including anti-retrovirals), the issue of AIDS orphans becomes critical. Castells refers to this as a major social crisis resulting from the epidemic (Castells 2000:120). As Christians we must remember that scripture teaches that true and pure religion before God our Father requires that we look after orphans in need.

In a world of war and violence how are Christians to be involved in transforming society? Here again Christians differ vastly on how we ought to be involved in these areas. The truth is, in a world of global terrorism and wars on various fronts, we simply must understand the correct response. Do we go with the tradition handed down through the AnaBaptists where pacifism becomes the norm? Estep describes their position with regard to violence,

“How can one take the word to kill and still follow Christ, whose teachings on the sword were so clear? From the formative stages of the movement, non-resistance was seen as a mark of the true church. The

church must be prepared to suffer. It could never be a party to inflict suffering on any man for any reason.” (Estep 1975:192).

Are there other alternatives to pacifism? Villa-Vicencio believes that although the Christian position should normally be pacifism, there are times when violence can be ordained if it prevents a greater evil from taking place (Villa-Vicencio 1994:190). Christians who are seeking to transform their world will have to ask difficult questions around war and violence.

Homosexuality and abortion are other areas where Christians will need to ask the difficult questions and seek the appropriate measures for transforming action. Abortion involves complex questions with regard to overpopulation and poverty, while homosexuality involves questions of prejudice and biochemistry. We cannot address all the issues here and many other areas from restitution and medical ethics could also be spoken about. The important point is that the social dimensions of our lives cannot remain untouched when issues of the kingdom are at stake and we are attempting a world-transforming mission.

10.4 Transforming the Environment

I have chosen to highlight the environment as it simply is one of the most critical areas in transforming mission today. If we have no world to live in much of what I have written and spoken about becomes largely irrelevant as life itself ceases to exist for the human race. Hendriks argues that we ought to take the environment seriously and be custodians of it (Hendriks 2004:33). Louw also notes that a comprehensive understanding of salvation must include ecological concerns as well (1998:6). All the areas of God’s planet are affected by environmental issues.

“there is nowhere that is not affected to some extent by changes in the chemical makeup of the atmosphere and associated changes in climate and pollution levels. Likewise, the nature of relatively unaffected parts of

the planet also has an impact on those regions that are directly used by human populations, through their effects on global climate and biogeochemical cycles.” (Middleton 1999:310).

Christians have in the past rather been accomplices to the destruction of the environment rather than those seeking to preserve it. The many factors that have been at work at destroying the environment, from the ideology of progress and certain technologies, have often been supported by Christians (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:203).


When taking the stewardship of our natural environment into account we are again stepping out of the traditional Christian fixation with the personal and moving into a Kingdom mentality. Traditional Christian approaches to the environment have concerned themselves with the origin of creation and more specifically with its final destination. The belief that creation will eventually be destroyed and only “souls” survive has led to a disinterest and abuse of creation (Van der Walt 2003:419).

Campolo believes that Christians have also allowed the environmentalist movement to be hijacked by the new age movement (McLaren & Campolo 2003:167). It is important for Christians to accept responsibility for creation as we have been given stewardship for this creation. Campolo also links the need to care for creation as an abnegation of this duty is to impede the worship of God through creation (:167). Further we must confess that the salvation of humanity is linked to the liberation of creation (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:206). John Stott mentions four reasons that we ought to be concerned about the environmental crisis. The reality of population growth, resource depletion and biodiversity, waste disposal and a damaged atmosphere. (Stott 1999:127)

Despite much growth in the environmental movement and a general concern for the environment the problems are still manifold:

“most of our fundamental problems concerning the environment remain, since their treatment requires a transformation of modes of production and consumption, as well as of our social organization and personal lives. Global warming looms as a lethal threat, the rainforest still burns, toxic chemicals are deeply into the food chain, a sea of poverty denies life, and governments play games with peoples lives.” (Castells 2004:169).

Castells has picked up the complications of the environmental crisis in the fact that changes would have to be effected in modes of production and consumption and that would affect our personal lives. De Vries argues in a similar vein when noting that the ecological problem will not be resolved until we take a serious look at our lifestyles (De Vries 1998:117). Basney in his book entitled *An earth careful way of life: Christian stewardship and the environmental crisis* entitles his introduction “Small turnings” and places the onus to do something on individuals in the environmental crisis:

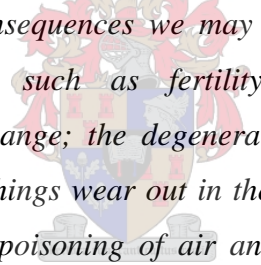


“To think responsibly about the environmental crisis, then, means to think about the image of a desirable human life to which we want to make our everyday lives conform. To think responsibly, as Christians, we will have to judge this image by Christian standards. The danger is not that we will fail to profess the right options. The danger is that we will fail, or refuse, to look clearly at our practical lives. The values incarnate there are the ones that guide us; they are in fact the ones that we believe.” (Basney 1994:52).

Basney also links the environmental crisis to questions of progress and culture and the omnipresent and omniscient belief that technology will solve all our problems (:41). The ecological problem is indeed a complex one and involves questions of land degradation, global warming and world food production (De Vries 1998:102-107). Environmental degradation has the worst effect amongst the

poor when it is in fact the richer countries who are the biggest producers of pollution (:113).

Campolo believes we can learn from our Christian heritage through people like St. Francis of Assisi in how to value creation. People who say that he was crazy are not so much making an accusation as a confession (McLaren & Campolo 2003:172). He rejects outright though the worship of nature (:173). Christians should seek to affirm that in fact this world simply does not belong to them but rather to God (De Vries 1998:119) as well as putting environmental concerns alongside issues of justice and peace (:119). Churches should get their house in order with regard to the environment and take up a prophetic call to culture and society (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1994:208). Another quote by Basney (1994:160-161) illustrates the possible scenarios for non-involvement:



“What are the consequences we may have to face? The exhaustion of usable resources, such as fertility; mass famine and epidemic disease; climatic change; the degeneration of our present technological infrastructure, as things wear out in the absence of energy and money to replace them; the poisoning of air and water beyond our capacity to tolerate it; the withering of financial resources based on cheap energy, as the energy ceases to be cheap and then to be available; the peril of political stability based on such structures.”

The truth is that we have not been good caretakers of the earth which God gave us to look after as stewards. It is time now to own up to our abuse and pick up our mandate to care, steward and grow creation.

Evaluating McLaren

Evaluating McLaren with regard to transforming action is not as straight forward as first appears. It is an area where there appears to have been much development

and growth in his work over time. His first book *The church on the other side* was dominated by questions of culture and ecclesiology and the nature and function of the church within that tension. His other works as well as the three fictional novels have not been overly concerned with transformative action in society with regard to the areas we have discussed. This of course does not mean that these areas were not important to McLaren, however they certainly were not emphasized and discussed to the extent that they should have been. One could however pick up a deep concern both for the poor and the environment from certain comments he would make throughout his works. To demonstrate my point it is interesting in the book *Adventures in missing the point*, that he co-authored with Tony Campolo, in seeing what McLaren was asked to write on and what Campolo was. Campolo was given the questions around the kingdom of God, the end times, social action, environmentalism and homosexuality. Some of McLaren's areas were salvation, the bible, evangelism, culture, leadership, sin, worship, doubt, truth and postmodernism. What is noteworthy however is to see in the various responses McLaren gave, showed that he in fact has thought about these areas and that they are a concern to him. With a generous orthodoxy, considering the nature of the book, it is interesting to see how much these areas come up for discussion. His latest book *The secret message of Jesus* in fact deals on many fronts with certain of these concerns. In the introduction he comes out with the following powerful statement with regard to transforming action which is lengthy but powerful.

“What if Jesus secret message reveals a secret plan? What if he didn't come to start a new religion – but rather came to start a political, social, religious, artistic, economic, intellectual, and spiritual revolution that would give birth to a new world? What if his secret message had practical implications for such issues as how you live your daily life, how you earn and spend money, how you treat other people of other races and religions, and how the nations of the world conduct their foreign policy? What if his message directly or indirectly addressed issues like advertising,

environmentalism, terrorism, economics, sexuality, marriage, parenting, the quest for happiness and peace, and racial reconciliation.” (2006:4).

Many of his personal interviews and talks in recent times have also paid far more attention to the various dynamics of political, economic, social and environmental concerns.

McLaren in fact notes that we have not been good in our transforming dimensions in many areas around the world and have often been part of the very problem (1998:29). He is tired of a focus on spirituality that hones in on spiritual realities and not racial healing, a better ecology as well as caring for urban refugees (:31-32). He calls us to enjoy all that’s good and seek to transform all that’s not (McLaren & Campolo 2003:122). Perhaps his strongest comment in his earlier works, which I believe needed far more discussion, but at least paved the way for it in his later works, was the following:

“ask many Christians today what the biggest problems facing our world are, and you will probably hear a triage of issues such as abortion, the breakdown of families, and homosexuality. Ask people with a long term focus, and you will hear a completely different set of issues: overpopulation, increasing nationalism and ethnic tribalism (including religious fundamentalism), systemic poverty, urbanization, and ecology.”(McLaren & Campolo 2003:147).

It is noteworthy that similar issues come up in his book on evangelism *More ready than you realize* where both ecology and manufacturing are mentioned (2002:95). McLaren believe that some of the questions God will ask us after we die will be to what extent we enriched the story we found ourselves in, whether we visited prisoners, shared our bread and helped the lonely (2003:166). He thinks that with regard to the poor we have a lot to learn from the Catholics who

demonstrate amazing care toward the “poor, the blind, the stumbling, the crippled.” (2004:225).

One of the overriding areas in transforming action is on the political front where the question of non-violence with regard to war and revolution is discussed. He believes that pacifism should be taken as what should be the standard Christian response to violence (2003:123). We ought to suffer violence not inflict it (2006:153). In a chapter of *A generous orthodoxy*, entitled *The seven Jesuses I have known*, he refers to the Jesus of the oppressed and discusses Liberation theology and puts emphasis on a liberation theology which is non-violent (2004:63). He does temper this by saying that not everyone needs to be a pacifist:

“While a generous orthodoxy does not assume that everyone will become a strict pacifist, it does assume that every follower of Christ will at least be a pacifist sympathizer and will agree that if pacifism is not required of all followers of Christ just yet, it should be as soon as possible.”
(McLaren 2004:207).

As part of discussing the political dimension McLaren notes that to confess Jesus as Lord has profound political concerns. We ought to resist “baptizing” people or regimes with the language of Jesus lordship (2003:82). Jesus is Lord, not the president or government. His message though affects both “public policy and international affairs.” (2006:181).

McLaren’s personal love for the environment permeates all his writings and his desire for us to take ecological concerns seriously. He notes regarding animals that we ought to care for them as fellow creatures - protecting them and not abusing them, interested in them for what they are and not what they only offer us. (2003:187) He does not believe that nature is God but does hold that nature is linked to God as a sculpture to its artist – yet more (McLaren & Campolo 2003:174). He further believes we ought to emphasize humanity as part of and not

above creation and that salvation of humanity is bound up in the salvation of the planet (:175). He asks, “What justifies such an extravagant ongoing indulgence of one self-centered species at the expense of God’s beautiful planet?” (:175). Often the criticism of Christians McLaren says is that they are perceived to care about the military and family while discarding environmental concerns (2004:233). This neglect of creation is often due to an over exaggeration of the fall where creation loses its sacredness (:234).

God’s justice and vengeance McLaren believes will come against those who have oppressed justice and goodness on the earth and have worked against Gods transforming power (2005:70). He notes Martin Luther King’s faith which was about, “seeking justice and welcoming justice, not evading it so we can go to heaven (:153). He believes that many times in the bible when one uses the word righteousness we should actually be using the word justice (:165). Justice in the economic area is important and McLaren asks whether Babylon’s nationalism and consumerism have not neutered the gospel’s concern for transforming action in the economic realm and that Marx was right in his criticism of Christianity in this area (McLaren & Campolo 2003:65). McLaren (:113) describes the how population growth and consumerism interact in causing future problems.

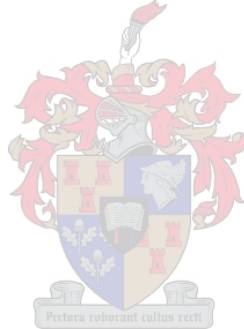
“Even without population growth – if the whole world aims to consume resources at even a fraction of the rate Americans do, the world is in deep trouble. Jesus words, “A persons life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” – or consumables – now seem less like limitation and more like salvation.”

I mentioned homosexuality as being a concern for many people today, to the extent that it becomes a dominating concern to the neglect of all other concerns. McLaren addresses the issues of homosexuality but argues that marital infidelity is a far greater and more pervasive problem (2005:112). This is an important area

of discussion for McLaren but space does not permit giving it to much attention here.

Conclusion

McLaren has made a concerted attempt to show that our faith is not personal but has social implications and ramifications beyond that realm. As his work has progressed it has called into question many of the personal and spiritual perspectives which underwrite economic, social, political and environmental concerns. In his earlier work he neglected much discussion of these areas while in his later work giving it more prominence. It would be my opinion that this is one area which McLaren should spend more time and effort in moving the Christian community towards transforming action.



11. Conclusion

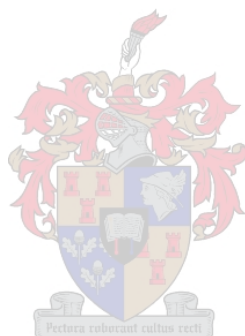
Everyone of us who call ourselves Christians are faced with the perplexing questions with regard to the church's self understanding and how that is interconnected and related to culture. We either ignore these questions, or we seek to work out what that means in an ever changing and dynamic world. McLaren has sought to do this and for this he must be commended. Although throughout this work one might feel that in my evaluation I have been too generous, or that I have tempered my criticism where others would have felt I could have been more critical, I am still convinced that anyone who is at least asking these questions is worthy of respect and only tempered criticism. My bias of course is obvious as McLaren's work has helped me make sense of my world and the nature of church.

Despite this I have shown throughout where I believe McLaren might be lacking or where he could be placing more focus. I have also shown where I believe much of his early work was skewed in certain directions and how over time his perspectives have become more rounded and holistic. Of course I have been liberal in my praise for many of the areas where I believe he is doing well.

I have attempted to capture the core of McLaren's practical theology by utilizing Hendrick's practical theological methodology. This has helped us get to grips with his view of God and Church, the nature and interpretation of global and local cultural contexts and how we discern our practice in tension with tradition and scripture. We have also been able to explore McLaren's views of the kingdom and transforming action within society.

The future of the Church has demanded such a discussion and will always require such a conversation into the future. My hope has been that by understanding the core of McLaren's theology the benefit would be both personal and corporate.

Personal in the sense that I would be challenged and informed in my own praxis as I wrestle with personal concerns around culture and ecclesiology. Corporate in that others who are facing similar challenges would be able to dialogue with McLaren in a way that will be helpful and informative for those dealing with the same questions I am. I believe that McLaren's work is vital for this process and for the health of the church and the world.



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