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## GOD AND RELATIONSHIPS ON THE “NEW KIND” OF CHRISTIANITY: A DOCTRINAL UPDATE ON BRIAN MCLAREN AND OTHER EMERGENTS

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### SYNOPSIS

It may seem that the influences of Brian McLaren and other leaders in the “emerging church” movement have waned in recent years. But, in reality, that is far from true. Their influence has taken on new forms, and their impact may be greater than before. While earlier their theological questions prompted many discussions, now their views (and their implications) have become clearer. One view is their stress on orthopraxis (right action) and relationships, particularly with God. They react to “modern” evangelical views that suggest a separation from, or distance between, God and us. Instead, for them, we already are in God, apparently in a panentheistic way, such that we already are in a personal relationship with Him. While they make some key contributions, the shifts that result from their embrace of panentheism and a kind of monism about us and creation (namely, it is merely physical) will make interpersonal relationships with God and others impossible both philosophically and biblically.

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Though Emergent Village itself may no longer function, the influences of Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Tony Jones, and Rob Bell remain widespread. They may influence even more people now through their many publications, Web posts, broadcasts, conferences, and even academic positions. Their theological views have become clearer, too. Their goal to reconceive doctrine in terms of praxis (practice or behavior) has led them to rethink several evangelical doctrines, one of which is the relationship of humans to God. Instead of needing to be born again to come into a personal relationship with God, we already are in such a relationship with Him. But I will

show that their approach leads to a kind of panentheism, on which God and the world are “inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, humans are basically physical, without souls. So they lose what they value most: our abilities to have interpersonal relationships, including with God.

## PRAXIS AND THE PRIMACY OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

McLaren and others have stressed orthopraxis (right practice) as the point of orthodoxy (right belief), and even that praxis helps us rethink orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> This has helped them focus on the need for community, in part as a corrective against modern stresses on individual autonomy. Moreover, they rightly stress embodied living as key to good relationships. Along with others, they have identified a mistaken attitude that has much influence among evangelicals, that the point of the gospel is for our souls to go to heaven when we die.<sup>3</sup> The Christian life becomes sin management, keeping sin under control, rather than living for Christ now.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, Emergents desire relational intimacy with God. They see modernity’s effects on evangelicals in the way discipleship has been treated, as though the Christian life is a process of steps to perform. Pagitt sees the God of “modern” evangelicalism as being “up and out,” disconnected from humans and all creation. This God is so wholly other and separated that He cannot be intimate with us. Pagitt also expresses his and others’ heartfelt cry for a God who will be “down and in” with us, and comfort us.<sup>5</sup>

But why might God seem to be so distant in “modern” evangelicalism? Pagitt attributes this perception to Greco-Roman influences, such that God is perfect and removed, yet loves us, but only conditionally, for the right kind of follower. This God is unmovable, against most people, and mainly wants obedience.<sup>6</sup> Such a God could never forget our sins.<sup>7</sup> For McLaren, the Greco-Roman influence has distorted the gospel story. He thinks the fall of humanity came to be understood as a fall from Platonic perfection to Aristotelian change and becoming, including a shift from state to story.

Also, God’s character becomes like Zeus. God would be perfect and Platonic, loving spirit and perfection, but wanting utterly to destroy matter and what changes. God’s perfection requires Him “to punish all imperfect beings with eternal conscious torment in hell...God’s response to anything that is less than absolutely perfect must be absolute and infinite hostility.”<sup>8</sup> So, God is dangerously violent and can explode with unquenchable rage.<sup>9</sup> Salvation means being forgiven, so souls are restored to a plane of perfection and God can love them again.

Similarly, for Bell, the God who has been taught to many Christians is unlovable, “terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable.”<sup>10</sup> A God who can be loving one moment but cruel and terrifying the next is schizophrenic. Bell writes that “if something is wrong with your God...if your God will punish people for all eternity for sins committed in a few short years, [then nothing]...will be able to disguise that one, true, glaring, untenable, unacceptable, awful reality” (insert and emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

These considerations all teach that sin separates us from God. But for Pagitt, if sin causes distance between God and us, that implies sin is more powerful than God. Plus, God is not active in the lives of both saints and sinners, even though Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Instead, Pagitt reconceives sin not as separation but as disintegration. So Pagitt describes his conversion as a “new connection with God.”<sup>12</sup> For him, the inherited “Greek” view of God is devastating. While evangelical theology might help bridge the gap by the cross, we still have to be perfect for this God. But that won’t happen until after death.<sup>13</sup> These positions leave us with an “afterlife-focused faith,” with little motivation to live for Him now. Instead, we are left to “bide our time in this miserable life until God decides it’s time for us to escape to heaven.”<sup>14</sup>

But if our received view of God is mistaken, and we are to live in close, intimate relationships with God and others, what kind of “connection” do these relationships imply?

### **THE TURN TO “RELATIONALITY”**

Some have called this emphasis on relationships the turn to relationality. For LeRon Shults, this is a turn away from a focus on humans as a body-soul duality, in which the soul (or spirit) is our immaterial essence (which makes me the kind of thing I am),<sup>15</sup> to a form of monism, in which we are a merely material or physical kind of thing. Being human now is understood in terms of our relationships with ourselves, the world, God, and others.<sup>16</sup> On this view, to be real, one must stand in actual, existing relations. Essentially, we are beings-in-relation. We are completely embedded in creation and God.<sup>17</sup> For Shults, this leads to a form of panentheism, in which the world is in God.

Now, Shults rejects body-soul dualism in part because he thinks of essences<sup>18</sup> as static: “Human being is not a static substance but a becoming—a dynamic, historically configured movement in search of a secure reality.”<sup>19</sup> McLaren echoes this view when he criticizes the Greco-Roman view as affirming that essences are perfect, immutable, and incapable of being subjects of stories, or in relationships.<sup>20</sup> How can a story be told about a static essence? For this kind of reason, Shults and the late Stanley Grenz have thought we also should shift in our view of God, from an essentialist to a relational one, denying that God has essential attributes or properties.<sup>21</sup>

While McLaren does not rule out our having a soul, it is not one’s essential nature. It seems to be a higher, emergent reality but never disassociated from the mind-body complex. So a human seems to be a body with emergent properties that depend on the body for their existence.<sup>22</sup> Yet he clearly rejects Cartesian body-soul dualism, tying it to the dualism in the Greco-Roman worldview.<sup>23</sup>

Jones also seems to have embraced a monistic view of humans. He rejects the penal substitutionary view of the atonement (PSA) because of what must be real for inherited depravity. Jones rightly sees that the PSA fits with humans being a body-soul unity. Instead, he references our physicality and how he understands the fall: “Nothing in the biblical narrative indicates that Adam and Eve were changed at the genetic level that would infect subsequent generations.”<sup>24</sup> Jones seems so focused on a lack of physical change in Adam and Eve after their

sin that he dismisses the PSA.<sup>25</sup> Pagitt, too, seems to be embracing panentheism. He tends to see modern thought often as dualistic,<sup>26</sup> such as earthly or spiritual; orthodox or heretical; flesh versus spirit; “God separate from creation.”<sup>27</sup> He had assumed his body was one thing and his spirit another, that he is “a collection of distinct parts.”<sup>28</sup> To Pagitt, this dualistic mindset is Greek, which disconnected spirit from flesh and treated them respectively as good and bad. He claims this kind of Gnosticism had been adopted by Christians and that its influence continues today.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Pagitt questions “the idea that there is a necessary distinction of matter from spirit, or creation from creator” and instead pursues a theology of “integrated holism.”<sup>30</sup> On this view, he tends to see that “everything [including the spiritual and material] is made of the same stuff” (insert added).<sup>31</sup> Humans are interconnected wholes, in contrast to body-soul dualism, which he thinks fosters a deep, multifaceted separation.

Pagitt claims “holism is the goal of God for the world.”<sup>32</sup> Whereas sin is disintegration, God’s design is for integration.<sup>33</sup> While rejecting pantheism, Pagitt posits God is connected to His creation, including our planet and its mountains, oceans, and so forth. On his holism, “The good news of Christianity is that we are integrated with God, not separated from God.”<sup>34</sup> Pagitt seems to be moving from a monotheistic conception of God as distinct from His creation to a panentheistic one, for “all that exists is In [sic] God.”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, themes of integration and connection abound in Bell’s *Love Wins*. He describes eternal life as being “a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection with God.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, “people, according to the scriptures, are inextricably intertwined with God.”<sup>37</sup> Also, the scriptural authors “consistently affirm that we’re all part of the same family.”<sup>38</sup> Since God wants all to be saved, “history is about the kind of love a parent has for a child, the kind of love that pursues, searches, creates, connects, and bonds...and always works to be reconciled with, regardless of the cost.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Bell claims that biblically “God will be united and reconciled with all people,” and “God does not fail.”<sup>40</sup> But this connection with God is for more than just humanity. Bell appeals, for instance, to Colossians 1 as support that in Jesus’ resurrection, God will “renew, restore, and reconcile ‘everything on earth or in heaven.’”<sup>41</sup> Jesus is “everywhere,” he asserts, and He is “a spark, an electricity that everything is plugged into.”<sup>42</sup>

So, Jesus is “saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody.”<sup>43</sup> Jesus even contains “every single particle of creation,”<sup>44</sup> and He is “the mystery present in all of creation.”<sup>45</sup> Though I do not see Bell use the term “panentheism,” it seems he too has moved in this direction.<sup>46</sup>

So, McLaren and others’ appeal to holistic connection leads to a rejection of body-soul dualism. Instead, we are one, integrated, embodied being—we are our bodies. And, while sin disintegrates, it does not separate us from already being in close, intimate relationship with God.

## WHAT SHOULD WE THINK?

McLaren, Bell, and Pagitt are right that, too often, evangelicals have tended to emphasize preparing people to die rather than to live. That flows from a focus on needing to be forgiven by

Christ's atoning work so we will go to heaven when we die, sans a comparable emphasis on living now as Christ's disciples and participants in His kingdom. As noted, they are not the only ones to have pointed out this shortcoming. Moreover, insofar as any well-meaning believers have implied that the body is bad and we should flee it, that view is not Christian but Gnostic. They also are right to emphasize living out our faith in personal relationships with one another in the body of Christ and with the Lord. The Christian life is not designed by God to be that of the autonomous individual, but a body of believers who together embody the living Christ.

If we do not do this, we will not show the living Christ to a watching world. I also resonate with Pagitt's desire for intimacy with God. Scripture sets the expectation that God wants to be intimate with His people (e.g., Exod. 29:46; Lev. 26:12; John 14:21; Rev. 21:3). So, views of God and our relationship with Him that serve to undermine that expectation are not biblical. But, ironically, embracing the turn to "relationality" actually makes intimacy with God, or any interpersonal relationships, impossible.

How so? On their view, basically humans are just bodies. Now, what kinds of qualities are needed to have interpersonal relationships? To know my wife well involves listening closely to what she says and how she says it: observing her facial and other bodily expressions. I need to form thoughts about her; for instance, what her character is like and what she likes, so that I can form beliefs that if I do such-and-such, most likely it would please her.

It seems that, at least, we need to be able to have various experiences that we use to make observations, along with thoughts, beliefs, and more such things that often are called mental states. Now, these mental states have an interesting quality: they always are of or about something. (Try having a thought that is not about anything.) My thought now is about how to edit this sentence. I have a thought about when my daughter will return from school. I also am experiencing the taste of key lime yogurt. We call this common quality intentionality.

Moreover, these mental states seem to have this quality essentially. My thought about that sentence could not be about something else and still be that thought. But I could have a different thought (say, about the weather). Given, however, our authors' stress on our being just physical, can intentionality exist? According to the atheist Daniel Dennett, the answer is no. Intentionality is just a way of interpreting, or conceiving of, behavior made by physical systems (such as humans or computers).<sup>47</sup> Why? Dennett draws the consistent, Darwinian conclusion that no essences really exist if everything is physical, for essences would be immaterial. But without them, there are no "deeper facts" that define what something is, as opposed to something else.<sup>48</sup> So, there would not be a fact to what I mean in this sentence; nor is there room for my thought really to be about it instead of something else. Literally, everything becomes interpretation. Others come to similar conclusions, including the Christian philosopher Nancey Murphy, who also holds that humans are physical beings. For her, what someone was really thinking about amounts to ways of conceiving of and talking about physical reality.<sup>49</sup>

But we already have observed that mental states with intentionality have essences. Moreover, the Emergents' view presupposes what it denies—to conceive of such things requires intentionality. Additionally, if our mental states and their intentionality are not real, but just interpretations of physical stuff, how do we get started in knowing anything? For

interpretations also are of something; otherwise, what are we interpreting? But without a way actually to have real intentionality, it seems (at best) we are left with just interpretations.

The same applies to interpersonal relationships. If there are no real mental states and no intentionality, there are no thoughts, concepts, beliefs, or experiences used to make observations. We could not know anything or anyone. Interpersonal relationships become impossible, whether with human beings or the Lord. Tragically, then, their recommended solutions actually undermine what they prize highly—the need for close, intimate relationships. Instead, to have real intentionality seems to require that mental states be the kind of thing that can have an immaterial quality, which suggests they too are immaterial. And so, it seems that there must be something about us that can have and use these states. In turn, that suggests there is something more to us than just our physical bodies. It seems we need souls to have interpersonal relationships.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, McLaren replies that he has allowed that mental states, and even the soul, might emerge from the physical.<sup>51</sup> Suppose we grant for the sake of argument that claim. Even so, just having mental states will not enable us to have interpersonal relationships. For we are not like a mere collection of mental “inputs” into a physical processing system (the brain). If we pay attention to what is before our minds when we interact with others, consciously we can be aware of not only our thoughts and feelings but also that we have them. For McLaren, however, the soul is not the owner and unifier of all our parts and properties; it too is just another emergent feature. So it seems we would experience just a jumble of states. But our usual experience is not like that; instead, our experience is that of a subject who owns thoughts and feelings and can ponder them, draw inferences, and act in light of them. But to own these, it seems we need a soul as our essence.

These philosophical points reinforce the traditional, biblical interpretation that we are a unity of the physical and nonphysical. God made us to be embodied, but we are not identical to our bodies. If we were, then we could never be separated from our bodies; but Scripture indicates otherwise (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:8). When the Sadducees confronted Jesus, He pointed them to Moses’ writings, that in regard to the patriarchs, God “is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12:27). But to be alive still, Abraham and others could not have been just their bodies, for their bodies were not yet resurrected (cf. John 5:28–29; Rev. 20:11–13). Instead of preserving God’s compassionate desire to be our God, for us to be His people, and for Him to dwell among us intimately, their views actually undermine God’s heart: we could not love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, nor our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27).

God ends up being utterly distanced from us, as we are from others. Their “solution” shows a lack of compassion toward God’s people, leaving us isolated and unable to have interpersonal relationships.

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## NOTES

- 1 John Culp, "Panentheism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 5, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/>, accessed July 23, 2016.
- 2 Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 31.
- 3 Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 78.
- 4 As noted, Emergents are not alone in this observation (e.g., Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* [New York: HarperCollins, 1997], chap. 2).
- 5 Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 104 (hereafter *Worth*).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 8 Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*, Kindle ed. (New York: Jericho Books/FaithWords, 2012), 106.
- 9 McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 102.
- 10 Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 175.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Pagitt, *Worth*, 113.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 15 Compare Moses' appeal to kinds in Genesis 1:24, 26.
- 16 Shults has influenced Pagitt. E.g., see Pagitt's *Flipped: The Provocative Truth That Changes Everything We Know about God*, Kindle ed. (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2015), 8–10. Recently, Shults has become an atheist.
- 17 LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 164, 183–84.
- 18 An essence is that which makes, or defines, a thing as what it is.
- 19 Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 217, note 1.
- 20 McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 43.
- 21 Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God*, 1–12; Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., and Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, BC: 2000), 88–89.
- 22 McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 280–81.
- 23 McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 175–76. Descartes' view made it hard to see how the body and soul could interact.
- 24 Tony Jones, *A Better Atonement: Beyond the Depraved Doctrine of Original Sin*, Kindle ed. (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2012), loc. 106–107; also 353–54.
- 25 He sees the story of the fall as "paradigmatic." It shows our universal proclivity to sin and our fallibility. But it is not historical and thus not factual.
- 26 E.g., see Pagitt, *Worth*, 78–79.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 29 *Ibid.*, chap. 8.
- 30 Doug Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology," in Robert Webber, gen. ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 142.
- 31 Pagitt, *Worth*, 76–77.
- 32 Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology," 135.

- 33 Ibid., 132.
- 34 Pagitt, *Worth*, 90.
- 35 Pagitt, *Flipped*, 13.
- 36 Bell, 59.
- 37 Ibid., 98.
- 38 Ibid., 99.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., 100.
- 41 Ibid., 134.
- 42 Ibid., 144.
- 43 Ibid., 151.
- 44 Ibid., 155.
- 45 Ibid., 159.
- 46 Also: "I understand God to be the energy, the glue, the force, the life, the power and the source of all we know to be the depth, fullness and vitality of life." Rob Bell, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God*, special ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 18.
- 47 Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 3rd printing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 239.
- 48 Ibid., 300.
- 49 E.g., Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*, Rockwell Lecture Series, ed. Werner H. Kelber (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 124.
- 50 Aquinas held a better view than Descartes, in which the body and soul are deeply united.
- 51 McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 280–81.