

# Brian McLaren's Hospitality Gospel

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Ideas have consequences. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Brian McLaren's recent book *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (Jericho Books, 2012). The book is a manual on how to be a properly postimperialistic, postcolonial, postmodern Christian. Specific bible doctrines need to be deconstructed (the usual culprits, of course, being original sin, penal substitution, and hell). If we reinterpret these "malignant" doctrines as "healing teachings" (p. 101), we can avoid much of the religious hostility that "is part of the problem to be overcome in the world" (p. 20). In fact, perhaps the whole idea of doctrine needs to be "reformulated not as an instrument of mind control and social pacification, but as an instrument of healing—including healing from the diseases of empire" (p. 101). This gospel of hospitality can even help us to see how we can be committed Christians "without having to condemn or convert people of other faiths" (book jacket).

I argue, by contrast, that McLaren's gospel of hospitality should be rejected by every true Christian. **First**, it employs a deeply flawed understanding of 'hostility'--one that would actually render Jesus and Paul supremely hostile religious figures. **Second**, it renders missions irrelevant, since it implies that the Holy Spirit is moving and working in other non-Christian religions. **Third**, it removes the offence of the cross, and thus involves a different Jesus and a different Gospel. **And finally**, McLaren's hospitality gospel approach is self-refuting. It turns out that he can embrace his own gospel only at the expense of failing *his* test for religious hostility. We should therefore flatly reject McLaren's hospitality gospel, along with the post imperial house of cards he attempts to erect upon it.

## 1 DEFINING "HOSTILITY"

McLaren's principle worry in the book is that Christians with a strong sense of who they are have carved out their identity in opposition to non-Christian religions. This, he thinks, is not a good thing:

The stronger our Christian commitment, the more we emphasize our differences in terms of good/evil, right/wrong, better/worse. We may be friendly to individuals of other religions, but our friendship always has a pretext: we want them to switch sides...This kind of pseudofriendship expresses the 'love the sinner, hate the sin' mind-set: love the Hindu but hate his Hinduism (pp. 9-10).

## And again

When religions develop an oppositional identity—we oppose, therefore we are, or we know who we are because we know whom we oppose—their strong identity comes at a high cost” (p. 20).

### The cost is hostility, which McLaren equates with opposition:

By hostility I mean opposition, the sense that the other is the enemy...Hostility makes one unwilling to be a host...Hostility is an attitude of exclusion, not embrace; of repugnance, not respect; of suspicion, not extending the benefit of the doubt; of conflict, not conviviality” (p. 19).

To find out just how hostile you are—in particular towards other religions—you can respond to the following statement (on a scale of 0-5, where 0=absolutely untrue and 5=strongly agree):

I see other faiths as wrong, false, or evil, and I maintain a posture of opposition to all faiths but the Christian faith (p. 69).

The higher your score, the more hostile you are. It goes without saying, of course, that opposition in this sense (treating others as repugnant, suspicious enemies)—let’s call it *personal opposition*—is generally deplorable and something Christians should do their best to avoid. Still, it wouldn’t automatically follow that a Christian shouldn’t seek to develop an oppositional identity. For consider *propositional opposition*. Two propositions **P** and **Q** are propositionally oppositional, we might say, just in case **P** and **Q** have opposing truth-values (one is true, the other false). In fact, McLaren himself agrees that hostility extends to the world of ideas; for we can be “hostile toward science and learning, hostile toward honest questions and new ways of thinking” (p. 20). And here he is surely right: we can indeed be hostile (i.e., opposed) to these things.

### 1.1 DECONSTRUCTING “HOSTILITY”

Let’s think for a moment in terms of Aristotle’s famed ‘Square of Opposition’. The opposite corners on his ‘Square’ have opposing truth values—and necessarily so, since they are contradictories. Now suppose, for argument’s sake, that I believe the ‘**A**’ corner for some specific proposition, say,

**A:** All human beings are sinners.

And then let’s say you believe its contradictory—the ‘**O**’:

**O:** Some human beings are not sinners.

It's just a matter of sheer logic that if I believe **A**—perhaps because I read it in my bible (Rom 3:23)—I have to oppose the truth of **O**, the thing you believe. I have to *exclude* that in my thinking; I have to see us as differing in terms of right/wrong. For if I don't, I'll find myself believing contradictions. Moreover, if it is better to hold true beliefs than false ones, I should think that my **A** belief is *better than* your **O**. It scarcely follows that I won't shake *your* hand or have *you* over for dinner. Propositions and people are not the same thing. I can love and respect you without believing what you believe. Now here, I'm afraid, McLaren muddies the waters considerably. This is mere "pseudofriendship," he says. For the friendship has a pretext: "we want them to switch sides." It is easy to see, I believe, that this line of reasoning is deeply flawed.

## 1.2 THE LOVE-HATE PROBLEM

For if we think about it carefully, the "love the sinner, hate the sin" argument is both logically invalid and its conclusion (very probably) a strawman. From the fact that

(1) We should love the sinner but hate his sin

it hardly follows that

(2) We should love the Hindu but hate his Hinduism.

For (2) is not a substitution instance of (1), and this for the simple reason that Hinduism—taken as a collection of doctrines—isn't the right sort of thing to count as a sin (along with lying, cheating, stealing, and the like). It's a set of propositions—propositions that are either true or false, reasonable or unreasonable, etc. You don't hate propositions; you believe them or disbelieve them. What McLaren is doing here is uncharitably shoehorning an emotionally loaded term ("hate") into the equation where it really has no business. So (2) doesn't follow from (1); at best it's a strawman imputed to the Christian without justification. No sensible believer will take responsibility for it.

What he will no doubt affirm in its place, however, is

(2\*) We should love the Hindu but *disagree* with his Hinduism.

The left side of the conjunction follows from Matthew 22:39 – "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The right-side is required by the law of non-contradiction. Since Christianity and Hinduism are contradictories, a thinking

Christian *must* disagree with Hinduism. So *contra* McLaren we can emphasize our differences in terms of true/false and right/wrong without that spilling over to personal opposition.

## 2 “HOVERING” AND HOSPITALITY

### 2.1 THE “HOVERING” DOCTRINE

There are some doctrines you just can’t afford to get wrong. For the missionary, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is like that. A proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit will begin by telling us who the Holy Spirit is. Here is McLaren’s definition:

The Holy Spirit is God-in-us or God-upon-us or God-among-us everywhere and anywhere...the Spirit is ubiquitous—everywhere, always, in all creation (p. 150).

We’re given a few options here, but the central thrust seems to be this. Since the Spirit is *omnipresent*, we can rightly say that He is “in” us, “upon” us, and “among” us. And the idea, I take it, is that this follows if He is *everywhere*. According to McLaren, this also “leads to [another] thought, logical and hard to dispute”:

the Holy Spirit pre-exists all religions, cannot be contained by any single religion, and therefore cannot be claimed as private property by any one religion. That means that Pentecostals don’t own the Holy Spirit, nor do Christians, nor do monotheists, nor do theists...So we can say that the Spirit is open-source rather than proprietary” (p. 150).

In other words, a Christian—say, a missionary like the Apostle Paul—shouldn’t think that he has the Holy Spirit a unique sort of way based on a relationship only a born again Christian can have with God. Indeed, on McLaren’s view, the Holy Spirit is *already* working in and through these other religions, so that the goal of the missionary isn’t to see people *turn* (to Christ) but rather *learn* from these non-Christian and pagan religions. Thus, McLaren:

we can understand human religions—all human religions, including our own—as imperfect responses to our encounters with the Spirit who is present in all creation...each religion, based on its unique location and history, would have a unique, particular, and evolving perspective from which to encounter the Spirit in a unique way (pp. 151-152).

Consequently, “we would expect the Holy Spirit to be moving, working, ‘hovering’ over each religion...[so that] other religions have something to offer us as well based on their real and unique encounters with the Spirit” (p. 153).

Missions teams are out; “learning teams” are in. As one church puts it, the goal is “to learn, share and build relationships with others...spending time in various settings, learning from partners, and building friendships.” In short,, our attitude towards other religions should be one of respect, but respect understood as *participation*. We need to be on a “journey into *with-ness*,” says McLaren. Reflecting on an invitation he received from a local imam to participate “in the Muslim fast of Ramadan,” McLaren writes: “Instantly I felt the Holy Spirit speaking deep inside me: ‘*This is it. Do this. ‘I’m in’, I said*” (p. 243). McLaren’s response is revealing: “I received notes from Muslims around the world...nearly all positive, saying, ‘We have never heard of a Christian having respect for our religion. Thank you’” (p. 243). You show respect for other religions by participating in them.

Here you might be wondering what we are to make of evangelism. Is there such a thing? There is; but it’s an entirely different animal: “[T]here is a great future for a new king of evangelism, although it will be so different that it may well need a new name” (p. 256). The apostle Paul’s evangelistic method involves a “decisive break” approach—a “turn[ing] to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9). Not so for McLaren:

This shared journey is not the call to convert from your religion to mine...[rather, we] are converted from hostility, from seeing the other as a threat to be feared, pitied, eliminated, or refashioned...We are converted into hosts and guests” (pp. 256-257) .

McLaren missionaries call people to turn from *hostility to hospitality*. Nothing more.

## 2.2 THE COLLAPSE OF THE “BIG TENT”

Now in one way, just stating McLaren’s views is the *reductio ad absurdum* of his position. If this is what Christianity really comes to, then I’m not a Christian—and neither was the Apostle Paul. There are so many things to say here; so many confusions to dispel. Here I’ll highlight a couple of the more glaring deficiencies.

**First**, McLaren’s approach is defective because it is unacceptably *inclusivist*. Nowhere in the bible, not in a single place, does it ever say that the Holy Spirit “hovers” over other religions. This is based on a profoundly flawed understanding of the Spirit, who McLaren defines as follows: “God-in-us or God-upon-us or God-among-us everywhere” (p. 150). For McLaren, the “us” is all of us—believer and non-believer alike.

But surely this is a loaded definition. It simply assumes without biblical justification that everyone has the Holy Spirit *in* them. That simply isn't true. The Holy Spirit isn't *in* a person unless he or she has received the Spirit. And there are very precise conditions for that to take place. Acts 2:38 – “And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

What McLaren has badly confused is the Holy Spirit's *omnipresence* (his being everywhere present) with the Holy Spirit's *indwelling presence*. The former doesn't imply the latter. According to the bible, the ministry of the Holy Spirit to non-believers is not that of co-creation but rather *conviction* (cf. Jn 16:8-11).

**Secondly**, McLaren's “Big Tent” approach is defective because it is based on a flawed, unbiblical understanding of *respect*. To be sure, the bible does say that we should show respect to others. 1 Peter 2:17 – “Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (NIV). It never says that to do so we have to believe what they believe or participate with them in their religious activities. Here's the problem. McLaren's concept of “respect” derives from his hospitality gospel, which requires that the Christian community (including grade schools, bible colleges, universities, seminaries) should adopt a *generous spaciousness* stance to other religions. Some organizations have voluntarily taken it upon themselves to create “prayer spaces” for non-Christian religions, which is scandalous.

Consider, for example, a fictitious religion—say, the religion of Tash. Naturally, the followers of Aslan don't believe in Tash. Indeed, to them he is no deity at all, even if he is worshipped by the Calormenes. Suppose further that Tash worship were somehow to arise, and that Christian organizations eager to “respect” the religion of Tash generously created spaces *inside* their organizations for worshippers of Tash to pray to him. Wouldn't that just be a case of showing hospitality to Tash devotees? Well yes, it would, but only if we're thinking of McLaren-respect. Biblically, however, it would be a clear-cut case of promoting idolatry. The very idea of this should be anathema to every Christian. You cannot mix the “the only true God” (Jn 17:3) with any other God. He simply won't have it.

### **3 DECONSTRUCTING DOCTRINE**

One of the things that promotes hostility and opposition between religions, McLaren tells us, is when doctrines are expressed using the language of exclusion, that is, the sort of “us/them” language that breeds a judgmental mindset (e.g., true/false, right/wrong, good/evil, saved/unsaved). Here, for example, we are told that the traditional doctrine of original sin

promotes a dualistic judgmental, accusatory mind-set...[which] in turn breeds hostility and rivalry...[It] often aids in the expansion of sin (p. 133).

McLaren doesn't mention which sin he has in mind. But some of the things he says about doctrine in general suggest that he's thinking of the sin of "empire" or "imperial control," (p. 101) which, in this case at least, amounts to a blunt power move on the church's part: making doctrinal pronouncements for the purpose of subjugating and controlling others. Thus McLaren asks:

Has the very concept of doctrine as popularly understood become so full of imperial bugs that it needs to be deconstructed—not just specific doctrines, but the very concept of doctrine itself? Is doctrine...a tool of imperial control? (ibid).

The question, of course, is rhetorical. For McLaren, both doctrine itself and individual doctrines *are* tools of imperial control and so must be deconstructed. "Oppositional" doctrines—those driven by power motives and inevitably undermining hospitality—are first identified, then rejected, and finally replaced with new and improved "healing" teachings:

Can doctrine be rediscovered...as a healing teaching?...In other words, can the idea of doctrine itself be reformulated not as an instrument of mind control and social pacification, but as an instrument of healing—including healing from the diseases of empire? (p. 101).

So we're looking at a re-write of many traditional bible doctrines, using non-hostile, non-imperialistic, healing terms—such terms as 'care', 'love', 'listen', 'appreciate', 'harmony', 'learn', 'accept', and so on. When I express my doctrines using healing language (as opposed to binary, "oppositional" language), I can generously extend "orthodoxy" to those with divergent views. I can adopt a "big tent" posture with respect others. Indeed, I can create all sorts of "space" under the tent because its boundaries are fluid and *personal* as opposed to fixed and *propositional*. If I no longer have to think of my views as *true* (hence under the tent), I don't have to see yours as *false* (outside the tent). And then since it's a big tent, and you're now happily under it, I don't have to see you as a rival or enemy. I am free to be hospitable.

### 3.1 THE HOSPITALITY PRINCIPLE

There are two basic reasons to think that this brand of "big tent" Christianity collapses on itself. **First**, McLaren's hospitality approach to doctrine implies that we should reject what Jesus plainly teaches about himself. In order to generate his "healing teachings," McLaren requires something like the following principle

(call it the ‘Hospitality Principle’):

**HP:** If a doctrine or teaching promotes hostility and rivalry to others, we should reject it. If it promotes hospitality and collaboration, it can be acceptable.

Armed with **HP**, McLaren can then say that we should reject the traditional doctrine of original sin, which “breeds hostility and rivalry” (p. 113), in favor of his preferred narrative

in which a beautiful songbird sings from the tree of life, inviting us to eat again of its original fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control” (p. 114).

Not surprisingly, this “songbird” narrative passes **HP** with flying colors. After all, who could possibly be upset or offended by a singing bird?

But there is a problem. For consider what Jesus teaches about his own life and ministry. “Do not think,” he says, “that I have come to bring peace to the earth.” On the contrary,

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household (Matthew 10:34-36).

Here Jesus’ intent lines up rather badly with McLaren’s. McLaren says our purpose should be to avoid religious conflict by employing healing language. Jesus’ purpose, by contrast, appears to be quite different. He came to bring a sword and to set people against one another. It’s not just that his teachings did produce sharp divisions, what Jesus says actually implies that they were designed to be that way.

Or again, consider Jesus’ remarks in Luke 11:23: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” Here it seems that McLaren’s Hospitality Principle seems to have escaped Jesus’ notice. Not only does he use oppositional language, he divides people into two camps: those who are *for him* and then *everyone else*. If Jesus’ goal were to create a climate of “generous spaciousness” and harmony among religious groups, this is exactly the wrong sort of language to use. If **HP** is correct, we shall have to reject many of Jesus’ teachings, since both their language and effect on listeners are indisputably “oppositional.”

Here McLaren has things precisely in reverse. He thinks our doctrinal test

should be the absence of offense. According to the Apostle Paul, however, we distort the gospel when we remove its offense.

But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed (Galatians 5:11).

So there's your test. If you remove the offense, you lose the gospel. It can be tricky. On the one hand, you and I are to proclaim the gospel with "gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15); *we* shouldn't be offensive. On the other hand, the heart of the gospel is the cross of Christ. And Paul says that *is* offensive. It's offensive to human pride. Remember, Paul's gospel begins with the fact that we are sinners and enemies, and God doesn't actually accept us just the way we are.

But, given **HP**, that makes God out to be a bad host. He's "hostile" to unrepentant sinners who refuse to trust in the one "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood" (Rom 3:25). Not surprisingly, our tolerance driven culture finds this message deeply offensive. Is there anything we could do to "soften" it up a bit? Well yes, there is if it doesn't trouble you "to distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal 1:7). We could re-write our doctrine of the cross. And so McLaren:

How...might our atonement doctrines be reformulated in a nonviolent, post imperial, postsacrificial light?...How might we reformulate those doctrines of heaven, hell, and final judgment so they are no longer malignant? (p. 157).

Unfortunately, tortuously redacting the cross of Christ into one of McLaren's "songbird" narratives here would be sheer disaster—indeed, a "turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). For there isn't a shred of offense in a deconstructed hospitality cross. You can turn to it if you like, but it can't save you. It's just a postcolonial distortion of the true gospel, the one by which Paul says "you *are* being saved" (1 Cor 15:1).

### 3.2 HOSTILE HOSPITALITY

There is a **final** problem. McLaren's "big tent" hospitality gospel is actually self-refuting. Think for a moment about his Hospitality Principle **HP**. How shall we regard it? McLaren clearly believes it and wants us to as well. Does he think it's true? If he does, then those who believe its negation (as I do) believe what is false. But on his view that's oppositional and hostile. It puts me outside the "big tent." Does he think it's better than my belief? That's judgmental and accusatory. You get the point. Any attempt to legislate **HP** or enjoin it upon me is going to be a philosophical tar baby.

Or you can look at it this way. **HP** says that if a doctrine promotes hostility and opposition, it should be rejected. But let's not forget that **HP** is also a doctrine. It's the doctrine that implies we should put up with a Jesus other than the one Paul proclaimed, and remove what can't be removed without departing from the gospel: "the offense of the cross" (Gal 5:11). If hostility is what McLaren says it is—seeing other views as "wrong, false, or evil," and maintaining a "posture of opposition" (p. 69) towards all but one's own doctrinal views, I can tell you with a high degree of confidence that **HP** is hostility promoting, if only because Jesus and Paul are flatly opposed to it. By its own criteria, therefore, we shouldn't hesitate to reject the principle. And the same goes, I would suggest, for that entire post imperial house of cards McLaren erects upon it.