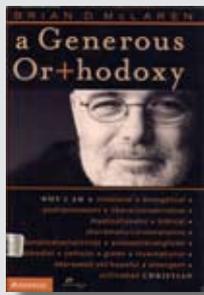


Book Notes

A Generous Orthodoxy, by Brian D. McLaren. (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 297 pages, 2004).

—reviewed by Jon Pon



In this autobiographical manifesto Brian McLaren calls Christians to return to a more Jesus-centered practice of the faith characterized by a generous spirit and humble self-awareness. McLaren lays out his vision of a generous orthodoxy (way of practicing the faith) that calls us to abandon our doctrinal hair-splitting and partisan religious allegiances. He surveys various Christian traditions and fragments of church history seeking to synthesize lessons from past failures with the strengths of Christianity's various strains. Looking anew at Jesus and scripture McLaren seeks to stimulate a thoughtful dialogue that spans our diverse traditions and champions a more missional and global approach to the faith.

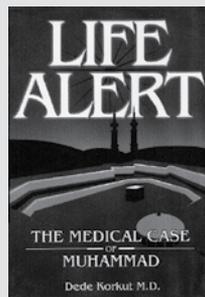
His self-effacing style may be a bit overdone; readers may find themselves compelled to read around the numerous clarifications and disclaimers. McLaren's diffuse and rambling discourse should not, however, prevent readers from noticing some critical issues to which he alludes such as dealing with roots of problems (vs. symptoms), rethinking the role of extended families, grappling with our practices regarding spiritual vs. cultural conversion, and considering the role of missiology in the church.

Though he is largely successful in his aim to praise and celebrate different church traditions, at times his treatment may seem to reduce each to another side-dish in the latest ecumenical buffet. Curiously, he makes no mention of the role of narrative

in scripture as a force that shapes a generous orthodoxy. Foibles aside, *A Generous Orthodoxy* is a clear call for thoughtful Christians to consider the church's message and identity anew while simultaneously owning our past—the good, bad, and the ugly—and forging ahead in a generous and Christ-honoring practice of the faith.

Life Alert: the Medical Case of Muhammad, by Dede Korkut, M.D. (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress Publishing, 213 pages, 2001.)

—reviewed by Mack Harling



Dede Korkut (a pen name) is a trained and practicing neurologist from Turkey. His basic thesis is that the phenomenon of Muhammad's "revelations" can be explained due to medical causes (rather than attributing it to evil spirits or calling him a devious imposter).

The initial chapters of *Life Alert* offer a technical explanation of the brain's functions, as well as certain malfunctions that can lead to various kinds of epileptic seizures. Having laid a very understandable, though technical foundation, the author surveys Muhammad's medical history in chapter 4. He purposes to demonstrate that Muhammad's "revelations" were the result of his suffering hydrocephalus and a type of epilepsy known as "Complex Partial Seizures (CPS)." Korkut cites various "spiritual" experiences that have accompanied some cases of CPS. He asserts that when Muhammad began to experience CPS episodes, his wife (Khadijah) and her cousin, misinterpreted these as "divine visitations."

Unfortunately the author's reasoned tone in his medical analysis is broken up by bursts from a polemical pen. In Chapter 5 "Some Conclusions," Korkut quotes anti-scientific verses in the Qur'an as proof of Muhammad's intellectual confusion, calling it the "scattered outpouring of a defective brain" (130). He concludes that Islam

is a deception, attacks its negative social effects, mocks the "Foolish Qur'an" (119) and asserts that his book proves that Muhammad was "the greatest phony in the history of the planet" (160)! The author is well aware that Muslims will regard his writings as slander, but says it is slander only if what he writes is not true! However, even Christian readers may question Korkut's definition of slander and the appropriateness and effectiveness of such inflammatory language.

In contrast, in Chapter 6 "Hope for Your Life and Future," the author appropriately presents the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and concludes that He is the Son of God and Redeemer and only hope for this world. He urges Muslim readers to accept Christ and "convert to the Christian faith community."

Korkut asserts that the understanding of CPS prior to 1977 as an "accurate understanding of Muhammad was not neurologically possible" (119). Readers should realize that attributing Muhammad's revelations to epilepsy is not a new idea—and Muslim thinkers are not without rebuttals.

Fazlur Rahman (*Islam*, 1968:4) rejects epilepsy as an explanation saying:

1. It is surprising that this condition would have begun at age 40 with no evidence of it earlier in Muhammad's life.
2. It would be quite a strange type of epilepsy that was "invariably" accompanied by revelation. Although someone suffering from epilepsy could have spiritual experiences, if Muhammad suffered from episodes of epilepsy, we should expect the physical manifestations of seizures would *at least sometimes* not be accompanied by spiritual experiences.
3. It is not credible that a sophisticated society such as Mecca or Medina could

not have identified a malady such as epilepsy.

Korkut has addressed this first objection by interpreting some events from Muhammad's earlier life as suggesting epilepsy; however, he does not address the second one. As for the third, Korkut actually acknowledges that epilepsy was known by the ancients (who attributed it to evil spirits).

Kordut has marshaled much data that shows how CPS epilepsy harmonizes what we know about Muhammad. However, the fore-mentioned insults will likely keep most Muslim readers from carefully considering the merits of his theory. However, he does not seem to me to have proved his case—other explanations are still very much in play. Nevertheless, *Life Alert* does alert Christians to the need to consider other paradigms that can account for the prophet of Islam.

Montgomery Watt, a great (evangelical) scholar of Islam concluded, "Of all the world's great men none has been so maligned as Muhammad" (1983:60). (Watt mitigated most of Muhammad's alleged moral failures by pointing out that they were largely for the sake of strengthening Islam's position or departing from tribal tradition, and were not serious departures from the standards of his time).

A more generous alternative to Korkut's view of Muhammad is advocated by J.H. Bavinck (*The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 1981:124-126). Bavinck believes that Muhammad "wrestled" with the One True God—even if it was a powerful encounter through general revelation. The deficiencies in Muhammad's life or teaching evidence the fact that he, like all of humanity (Christ excepted), at times "suppressed the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18).

Life Alert's 200 pages are interspersed with brain charts, diagrams and photographs (one page is in color). Regardless of its contents, this paperback's price-tag (\$24.95) alone should keep most Muslims from purchasing it!

Other Titles of Interest

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

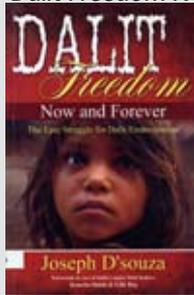
All of the following six books or book-lets focus this time on the two rich/poor extremes of the "second-level" type of frontiers of mission described in the editorial at the beginning of this issue.

All these documents in one way or another cast light on the very real task of what believers do after they get "saved"—other than to try to get others "saved." This question has a great deal of cross-over with mounting secular discussions about "International Development," the much-talked-of "Millennial Development Goals" and, of course, just plain old global poverty, suffering, and premature death.

Don't think these documents have been chosen as part of a selection of "the six best books on International Development." Only the last of these would normally even be a candidate for that choice or normally classified in that subject sphere.

So why choose these? Because, of course, they are new and you may want to know about them. But more specifically, the two purposes here are simply to underscore the importance of the basic, "what's next" question, and to show how even a diverse selection of current materials does in fact relate to that same, burning question.

1. Dalit Freedom Now and Forever: The Epic Struggle for Dalit Emancipation, by Joseph D'souza (Centennial, Colorado: Dalit Freedom Network, 9034 E. Easter Pl, Suite 206, 259 pages, 2004).



The dark secret of India today is the fact that the reason the increasingly strident Hindutva philosophy and the

RSS, a militant movement, are seriously and violently opposing Christians is because Christians welcome into their midst the lower-class, "outcaste" Dalits. The "Hindutva" philosophy is simply "right-wing fundamentalist Hinduism," (p. 26), the "RSS" is an armed extremist hate-creating organization (p. 26), and the "Dalits" (oppressed) are those considered to be *untouchable, unapproachable, or even unseeable* (p. 28).

The book is an eloquent, urgent, both reasoned and practical declaration of

the predicament of the largest direly-oppressed category people in the world—250 million.

Hindutva is not the official position of the world's largest democracy. The government of India has long maintained certain "preferential" policies regarding the Dalits. But those are ignored by the RSS in the first place and are weak and limited in the second. Furthermore, whatever slight privileges there are for Dalits any Dalit that becomes a Christian loses those benefits.

Probably no book more clearly reveals the connection between oppression and poverty. One of its values is that it contains the entire 70-page address by the famous Dr. Ambedkar, "The Annihilation of Caste," which was prepared for delivery but never delivered due to the forceful cancellation of the conference which invited him to give the address.

Of interest to IJFM is the relatively ambiguous role of church leaders, especially in the past. Caste has even been maintained within the Christian church. This book is, however, in part, an outstanding attempt to clarify things in that sphere.

Especially important is the evidence today in India that to the extent that missionaries have preached merely an "otherworldly Gospel" changes for the better of bitterly oppressed people has been discouragingly slow. This is why followers of Jesus or admirers of Jesus are far more numerous than you would expect.

How, and to what extent, is the Christian mission to downtrodden people going to enable them not only to look forward to heaven but also for His "will to be done on earth as it is in heaven"?

2. The Kingdom Assignment: What Will You Do with the Talents God Has Given You?, by Denny and Leesa Bellesi. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 109 pages, 2001)

This is now the opposite extreme from the picture of the Dalits in India. It is beamed, I would guess, to up-and-out U.S. Christians (lay people) who sense little if any connection between their daily lives and the advance of the Kingdom of God.

Bellesi, who pastored a mega church when he and his wife wrote this says,

I was raised in the church and grew up believing the Christian faith was only about heaven ... Heaven could wait as far as I was concerned ... Suddenly everything became clear. Being a Christian wasn't about going to heaven, although that was a benefit. It was about becoming a part of the Kingdom among us.

Coupled with this arresting insight, Bellesi and his wife created a fascinating experiment to give their church members an awareness of the day by day presence of the Kingdom of God. One Sunday morning they asked for 100 of their members to come forward to accept a "Kingdom Assignment." Once forward they were astonished to be given \$100 each, which they were to invest in some sort of project which would reflect and represent the Kingdom of God reporting back in 90 days just what they did with the "talents" apportioned to them.

When the day for reporting came people flocked to the church to see what had happened, parking blocks away. Even a TV channel was present to record the results. The first impressions of most who unexpectedly received \$100 to aid them in working for the Kingdom was total puzzlement, but soon amazingly creative ways of discovering need and meeting it took place.

Note the first four items in a list 25:

- books for the lonely
- blankets for the homeless
- countless prayers and acts of kindness for people outside the church
- Bibles for the spiritually hungry

Many of the hundred volunteers asked others to match the \$100 they received and they themselves added to it. It was estimated that the money given out (100 x 100 = 10,000) had exploded into the equivalent of \$100,000.

But the most significant gain, the book observes, was the transformation of awareness of a Sunday-religion to one that pervaded the whole week.

However, good and beneficial though all this was, notice that it did not in any major way illumine or affect the nature,

quality, or kingdom purposes of people's eight-hour day. It was a further brightening of what could be called "After-hours Christianity." It was all to the good. It no doubt had lasting effect. It made a lot of people think creatively.

In the "mission field" where I worked for ten years up until 39 years ago I helped to start 17 small part-time businesses for bi-vocational pastors (most pastors in Latin America are bi-vocational) but I came to realize that poor people don't get rich by selling to each other. Hand labor in general, even if linked somehow to the international economy, ultimately fizzles in the face of the global competition of automated machinery in a "flat world."

Today those people, who were back then already paralyzed by limited means of gainful employment, are in far worse condition due to the inexorable advance of "globalization." Why? It is like small businesses trying to survive next door to a highly efficient machine called WalMart, only in this case the WalMart could be a thousand miles away with, however, equivalent impact. Small entities are no longer protected by distance. Micro finance, micro credit in many cases merely create projects that are doomed to die leaving the poor in worse debt than before.

Two items that understand much of this are:

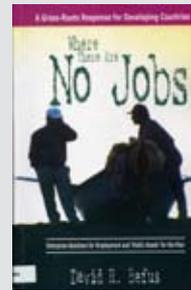
3. *Where There Are No Jobs: Enterprise Solutions for Employment and 'Public Goods' for the Poor*, by David R. Befus (Latin America Mission, 220 pages, August 2005).

4. *Kingdom Principles for Where There Are No Jobs: Economic Development as Holistic Christian Ministry*. Also by David R. Befus (Latin America Mission, 42 pages, August 2005).

This man, Befus, is currently head of the Latin America Mission, has spent 25 years in hands-on economic development, and has an MBA plus a PhD. One of his writings published by Indiana University is "From Assistance to Enterprise: the Re-Engineering of World Vision Community Development." He points out that

while people need to work to make a living, giving them a living without enabling them to be productively involved themselves is no solution.

This is an absolutely fabulous book, based on extensive and in-depth experience. Loaded with insights that are anything but arm-chair, yet perceptive of basic themes and principles. Very knowledgeable about secular approaches, very realistic about human failure.



5. *God's Economy: Biblical Studies from Latin America*, edited by Ross and Gloria Kinsler (Orbis, 250 pages, 2005, all 11 chapters have been translated into English).

Somewhat political in orientation, these former Presbyterian missionaries in Central America focus on what people do wrong and could do right in regard to the poor.

6. *Together in Mission: Core Beliefs, Values, and Commitments of Mennonite Mission Network* (Mennonite Mission Network, 18 pages, 2006).

The various Mennonite denominations have now formed one mission board and have restated their position in this 18 page booklet which is one in their excellent series entitled *Missio Dei: Exploring God's Work in the World*, 2006. Full of condensed statements about mission and development.

None of these books takes adequate notice, as I see it, of the hugely harmful role of disease in poverty. Also, much of their focus omits reference to the both positive and negative roles of international commercial activity. **IJFM**