

LEARNING

HOW  
TO

A stylized graphic of an eye, with a white sclera and a black pupil. The word "SEE" is written in white capital letters inside the black pupil. The eye is positioned over a dark red circular background.

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 3, Episode 5  
Christianity and the Cult of Innocence

Brian McLaren: I was once a guest at an important breakfast gathering in Switzerland for multi-faith leaders. I was seated next to a Muslim woman. After she took a sip of what looked like orange juice, she put her hand to her throat and leaned over to me. "Did you taste that orange juice? Something's wrong with it." I tasted it and realized it was spiked. It was a screwdriver, a cocktail made of orange juice and vodka. I told her that's what it was, and she looked shocked. "That is the first time alcohol has ever touched my tongue. Alcohol is forbidden to me as a Muslim," she said. Well, she was very gracious, but I was appalled. I was appalled that the organizers would be so insensitive as to serve alcohol at such a gathering. There are rabbis present, would they put bacon and ham on the menu? There were vegetarian Hindus present, would they put beef on the menu?

Why weren't they more considerate? Many religions make distinctions between clean and unclean. There are permitted foods and taboo foods. There are sacred places and dirty places. There are acceptable people and unacceptable people. The ability to distinguish between what is clean and to be enjoyed, and what is dirty and to be avoided, is an instinct deeply rooted in religion. And it taps into one of our most primal reflexes, the gag reflex, the urge to spit out what might be harmful to us. Clean, unclean. Pure, impure. It seems that our religions use purity codes to teach us an aversion, to physical things, to help train us to avoid non-physical dangers, attitudes and actions like lying or prejudice or greed or hate or revenge. Jesus had a complex relationship to purity codes. For example, he touched lepers, people considered unclean.

He ate with tax collectors and sex workers, people considered unclean. He didn't require his disciples to go through ceremonial hand washing before eating. On one occasion in Matthew 15, he said, "It's not what goes into a person that defiles a person." Going on to explain quite graphically, that what goes into a person is digested and then turned into defecation. Then he says, "What really defiles a person is not what goes into a person, but what comes out of a person," evil thoughts, murder, sexual immorality theft, lying slander. In other words, Jesus was telling people that they can maintain outward purity by not eating bacon, but still be unclean by hating a neighbor. They can maintain outward purity by not touching a leper, but still be unclean by failing to love one's neighbor. The quest for outward purity or innocence can lead people to the very opposite of what they expected.

Many of us struggle today because we look at Christians who consider themselves pure and right, but their zeal for purity and rightness leads them to look down on everyone else. We see them acting with downright bigotry and cruelty in the name of purity. And we think "I don't want to be part of any group like that. I don't want to be polluted by that kind of sanctimonious self deception, those people are unclean." Do you see what I just did? In my zeal for innocence, I just became the very thing I tried to separate myself from. About a hundred years ago in the United States, Christians rallied behind a moral crusade called prohibition, where voters pressured Congress to make alcohol illegal by a constitutional amendment.

After 13 years, prohibition was overturned. But notice what was going on during those same years. White Christians in America did not try to pass a constitutional amendment to prohibit lynching or to end segregation. They strained out alcohol, but swallowed white supremacy, their zeal for morality produced a wide range of immoral consequences. Some people want to stay Christian because they think Christians are clean and everyone else is

dirty. Some people want to leave Christianity because they think that Christians are unclean and they don't want to be associated with them. In today's episode of Learning How to See, we're going to explore how the quest for innocence can become a cult of innocence.

Brian McLaren: Here's a passage from Do I Stay Christian? "Purity and innocence might sound like good things, if you've never read this story of Cornelius and Peter in acts chapter 10. Peter was raised in a strict purity culture, so he felt it would pollute him to go into the home of an unclean gentile like Cornelius. But Peter had a powerful dream or vision in which God repeatedly commanded him to break one of the purity commandments, and thus violate his own innocence. The vision shattered his preconceptions. And so he consented to enter the home of Cornelius, the unclean, the gentile, the other. Then Peter made this disruptive statement, 'God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.' He wasn't just changing his definition of what was clean or unclean. He was leaving that binary behind forever." Peter continued to struggle with this insight. The cult of innocence dies hard, and later Paul confronted him about his inconsistency.

Paul understood the struggle because he had a disruptive spiritual experience that was remarkably similar to Peter's. Paul was what we would call a religious extremist, a violent fundamentalist terrorist, going from town to town, to arrest, imprison and kill members of his purity culture who didn't uphold the high standards of the cult of innocence. He was so convinced of his innocence that he felt justified in committing violence. Paul had his relapses into clean/unclean thinking like the rest of us," see, for example, 2 Corinthians 6:17, "but he had the audacity to say that the primary contemporary marker of belonging to the community of innocence, which was circumcision, didn't mean anything." In Galatians 5:6, "To another group he wrote 'From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view, from this new point of view, instead of dividing the world into us and them clean and unclean, we participate in a new creation in which we seek to reconcile all people to God and one another.'"

To another community, he said that he had become all things to all people, leaving his supremacist identity behind. And to yet another community, he described his mission as breaking down dividing walls of hostility and preaching peace to everyone, everywhere, no exceptions.

Of course, both Peter and Paul were simply building upon the example set by Jesus himself. He touched lepers, those considered unclean. He protected a woman caught in adultery and challenged her accusers by saying, 'Let the one without sin cast the first stone.' Which means if you read between the lines that if you consider yourself innocent and pure, you just might become a killer."

I'm so grateful to have this time to talk to Paul Swanson and Richard Rohr, dear friends and amazing human beings. Everyone knows a lot about you both already, but I wondered if there's some interesting fact about you that a lot of people don't know something you like, something you enjoy, a surprising experience you had, a surprising person you met, anything come to mind. Maybe Paul, could I start with you?

Paul Swanson: Wow. Put it on the spot. I like it. Here's a potentially surprising fact. I'm a long time Bob Dylan fan. And when he came into Albuquerque this past year, I have to ask for forgiveness.

I ended up sneaking into his concert because the line was so long to buy tickets and he had already started. I was like, "I'll just walk in and I'll just hear one song. I'm sure I'll get booted out." And I walked in and I stood in the back. I was just like, "Ah, this is my last Dylan concert." He's 80 years old. And I was just like, "I'm going to enjoy this song. And then I'll just find my way to the exit." But luck, mischievous luck, I guess, allowed me to stay there the entire concert. And there was the pang of guilt for sure. As I recognized that I was pulling a few pockets out of Dylan's, but may he forgive me? And I am grateful for all he's offered me over the years. The first time I saw him, I think I was 13.

Brian McLaren: Yes, that's so.

Paul Swanson: One of those muses in my life who has opened a lot of doors and helped me look at life and culture differently.

Brian McLaren: Hey, give us a two sentence review of the concert.

Paul Swanson: It was amazing. I've seen him at times where I couldn't understand a word. His voice has become shot at different seasons. And his band is top shelf and his voice sounded so clear. And I was not expecting to be the guy with his arms raised in the back, shouting "Go, Bob, go." And lots of high fives with strangers and friends feeling the connectiveness of what live music can bring, especially the poetry of Dylan's lyrics. It was a highlight of this past month for me, for sure.

Brian McLaren: Something, probably a lot of us since COVID have not got to experience, but your story will stick with us. That's so great. How about a Richard's? Some fact that a lot of people might not know about you?

Richard Rohr: Well, since he chose the concert venue, apart from Bono and U2, where I got invited and didn't have to pay and went, the only concert I've ever gone to in my life was... She's the name who you probably don't even remember anymore. My last year in the seminary, a friend invited me to go to Dionne Warwick.

Brian McLaren: Oh, that's it.

Richard Rohr: Warwick, I don't know what's the correct grade.

Brian McLaren: Warwick, yeah.

Richard Rohr: This will reveal what probably a lot of people have figured out, my cheapness. I probably in those days paid \$5. I don't know, this was 1969. But I said, "Well, I can hear this on a..." Well, at that time, a cassette, "why do I need to pay all this money and fight all these crowds here beyond Warwick?" I remember being an enjoyable evening because I was with a close friend, but I've just never gone to concerts. They seemed like a lot of money.

Brian McLaren: That's great. That's great. Well, gives me pleasure to think about you being at that concert. That's fantastic.

Richard Rohr: Well, I can see why Paul snuck in. He thought it was too much money too.

Brian McLaren: Well, that's a great actually story to begin with to tell a story of a lack of innocence, because we'd like to talk about innocence today.

Richard Rohr: Yes, it is

Brian McLaren: In this series of podcasts, we're trying to help folks get a look at Christianity. And part of the contemplative mind, really Richard, that you've been teaching so many of us about for so long, is the ability to not jump to absolutist reactions in a binary way. This is good, this is bad. These are innocent, these are guilty. These are friends, these are enemies. These are in, these are out. And what we're trying to help people do, because many of us were brought up with a version of Christianity that Christianity was good and we were right and we were true and all the other people were bad and evil and lost and unorthodox or whatever.

Brian McLaren: We're trying to help people get an assessment of our Christian faith that in no way minimizes or negates the beauty and the wisdom and the depth, the insight, but also in no way minimizes the horrors that have been done in the name of our religion, in the name of the church, in the name of Jesus, in the name of the Trinity, in the name of God, all the holy words that have been brought into so many horrible things.

Brian McLaren: One of the things we want to talk about is this idea of Christianity as a cult of innocence. And Richard, you sent me such a nice note when you read this new book of mine, *Do I stay Christian?* And you talk about how this idea of cult of innocence rang a chord with you. I'd just love to hear you talk about that.

Richard Rohr: Seldom have I evoked so many implications and ramifications by one phrase, at least in the realm of theology. Then when you gave me this phrase, "Cult of innocence," for anybody, even you explained it to me, I said, "That's it. That's what Christianity allowed itself to become." And it's so triply ironic because... Well, you know how I had to study Latin, [foreign language 00:15:00] means unwounded. And here we worship a wounded man, and we said in his wounds are our salvation. And yet much of our moral concentration is unproven. We're not wounded. We're not guilty. We're not wrong. We're not bad. We as Jesus in utter freedom says to the rich young man, "Why do you call me good? God alone is good." That is just such a line of inner freedom where there is no need to be thought of as good. That's just a major, major insight into how we've misinterpreted, misused Christianity in this first 2000 year period.

Brian McLaren: Powerfully said. As you say that, Richard, a memory came to mind. You know how through your life, you meet a few people who you just feel they're your soul friends. And one of my soul friends years ago said to me, "Brian, I think the biggest challenge..." We were both pastors. He said, "One of the biggest challenges that we pastors face is whether we want to be better than we appear, or appear better than we are."

Richard Rohr: Wow. There it is.

Brian McLaren: He said, “I’m really trying to make it my goal to be better than I appear, but it’s such a temptation.” And this idea that here, Jesus was just happy to not say, “Of course I’m good. Yes. I’m the very definition of good. No, I’m better than good. I’m perfect.” But just to dismiss it that that’s not even-

Richard Rohr: “Why do you call me good?” Yes.

Brian McLaren: That’s a game I don’t even want to play.

Richard Rohr: Once you accept a world of titles and roles, particularly in the religious realm, you’re trapped. And you don’t even realize it, you’ve got to live up to a non-existent ideal.

Paul Swanson: What you said just reminded me of something that you had taught on a while ago about Christianity being a religion that has this amazing medicine that we call grace. But the way to succeed in the church is to say that you don’t actually need that medicine, that you can survive without it. And I think that is just so apropos to this sense of projection of innocence.

Richard Rohr: Or you can put in the word mercy or unconditional love. All the things that we’re supposed to be about, we convince people, “Well, we don’t really need it, because we’re we’re not sinners. Oh, come on.” Pope Francis’ first public talk, when he was elected, they asked him, “Who are you?” This strange Bishop from Argentina. And he first words out of his mouth, “I’m a sinner.” What liberation again, my goodness.

Brian McLaren: I approach this subject in the book because I’m sure it’s this way for you too. And you’re writing Richard, but for me often as I’m writing a book, it’s not that I have the whole outline all perfectly figured out as I begin. There are problems that I don’t have answers to, and I hope that as I write, some of it will become clear.

Richard Rohr: Me too.

Brian McLaren: And I wrote this book to help people think through the question of, “Do I Stay Christian?” Because so many people are leaving. And I had this uneasiness, the uneasiness went something like this. I would see Christians say, “If that’s what Christianity is, I don’t want to be part of it.” Or they would say “Those people aren’t true Christians.” As if to say “I’m a true Christian and the people who do those things are not.” And there was something about both of those that bother me. I’m just going to read a quick paragraph or two paragraphs about how I wrote about this from the book. I said, “If I try to sequester myself from all evils associated with Christianity, I’m exploiting the luxury of individuality and white Christian privilege. Not only that, but distancing myself from bad Christians absolves me of the responsibility to confront them as my brothers and sisters for the harm they do. It lets me walls off the stage, feeling superior and innocent. But to feel both innocent and superior, because of my innocence, doesn’t sound terribly innocent.”

Brian McLaren: Author and pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has spoken of the cult of innocence, a useful phrase, which bears some exploration. “The cult of innocence as I understand it, works on a simple formula, an innocent victim to defend plus an evil villain to oppose equals innocence to enjoy.” What does that make you think about, Paul? How about you? Any responses to that?

Paul Swanson: One of the things that immediately jumped in my mind as you were sharing that and

thinking about the nefarious way of individualism and especially within white Christianity, how that plays out. It seems to me as the disembodiment of the mystical body of Christ, you're no longer connected to the whole, with all of its fragmentations and all of its insecurities and entire being is you're trying to separate yourself as the purity in a fraction instead of the beauty of the wholeness. And so the cult of the innocence to me is that separation, that disembodiment from that mystical body of Christ from all that has laid bear, and what to me is the beauty of participation in that wonderful metaphor of the body of Christ.

Brian McLaren: Paul, I had a realization I've never had before, just as you were speaking. And here it is. I was taught that sin means separation. Sin means separation from God. Sin is what separates us from God. And I was also taught that sanctification means separation, separation from the world. And then I think, Richard, one of your great ways of explaining, we all have an ego that's part of who we are, but the separated ego, the separated itself is really at the root of our problems. And this contrasts so much with the whole image of incarnation, incarnation is about God being identified with the whole. And where it's ugly, that identification brings beauty, but so much in us wants to separate and be superior and innocent and pure and all the rest. This has been such a theme of your teaching through the years, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Yeah, I guess so. Probably because I saw it in myself. As a one on the anagram we want to be right, we want to be perceived as good. And I saw that it led me to the exact opposite, to a low level, I hope not high level, maybe so hypocrisy, pretending, living up to, certainly not humility. Seeing it in myself, then I naturally recognize, I think a lot of people are caught in this trap, not to be good, but to appear good. And our goal in low level Christianity in most denominations, as well as I can perceive is to get rid of sin as soon as possible, so I can be innocent again, unwounded. And here we worship a wounded man, but we're afraid of carrying the wound. The way I read the first third of Paul's letter to the Romans is entirely defining this sin of the world.

Richard Rohr: As a corporate concept, all have sinned, all. And I'm trying to build on what Paul just said about the individualization of the gospel. It looked like such a progressive idea to enlighten individuals, but it took us away from the source, which was connection, the body of Christ, as you just said, Paul. We didn't worry about being part of a community. Now in countries like ours, it is very hard to build community. And I know because I tried twice in a major way. We just don't think in a communitarian fashion. The first principle of Catholic moral theology is the pursuing of the common good. That just clarifies everything all the way down, I think. But hardly any Catholics know that, the pursuing of the common good, not that I am good. And you feel the major difference between those two goodnesses, we got our work cut out for us.

Brian McLaren: And again, it comes back to, I want to separate myself from everything that's bad because I have this fear and shame. I'll read another paragraph from this chapter. "It's easy to see how guilt inducing, shame based religious communities would put their members under such constant moral pressure that they would be intensely attracted to the cult of innocence formula. They would not only gain transfused innocence from innocent victims, they would also gain an easily identified enemy, namely those evil villains who don't join in our righteous cause. It's like our religious institutions that constantly make people feel guilty and then constantly give them a shortcut to innocence." And there's so many consequences of this and

we can see it at work in so many different areas. We might just want to pause and just see what examples come to mind that we'd like to bring up or where do we see this at work.

Richard Rohr: A teaching example that we're very familiar with, what was this deal of Jesus inviting himself to eat with sinners? And it worked, he got the whole religious establishment accusing him of it. "He eats with sinners." So we see Jesus identifying with what we avoid. It's real clear in that example. And you both know the whole tradition of table fellowship in the middle east and Mediterranean world, who you eat with is your kind of people. And Jesus said, "These are my kind of people." He identified with human evil sin. Without calling it good, he just said, "I'm not going to spend my life separating and trying to feel superior. I am one of humanity." Boy, that's good stuff.

Brian McLaren: It really is. And it goes right to this another phrase related to cult of innocence, which is guilt by association. We then won't associate with people because we don't want to be seen as being less than innocent. And for Jesus to intentionally eat with sinners, even invite himself to their house, to go under their roof, it's this sense that... Again, as you said before, I'm interested in going in the opposite direction of that kind of innocence.

Richard Rohr: There you go. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: I grew up in a traditional conservative Christian home where gay people were stigmatized. This was a long time ago. We didn't even talk about homosexuality. We didn't talk about sexuality. We just talked about the soul and the spirit and the Bible.

Richard Rohr: Join the club. All of us. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: But as I was a pastor, I had a lot of gay people come out to me and I started realizing what I've been taught isn't true. And I tried to question it, I tried to challenge it. This was the days before gay marriage was even legal in the United States. I hadn't really been challenged to take a public stand. You would probably both know Tony Campolo. Tony's wife, Peggy, and I were also friends. And I started doing some writing about full inclusion of LGBTQ people and changing the stigmatization on that. Peggy wrote to me, and at that point, Tony was still not ready to cross that line. Peggy wrote to me and said, "Hey, Brian, I think I'm closer to you than I am to Tony on this."

Brian McLaren: It was in a joking way. And then she said, "But I want to put you on this spot. There is a church led by a gay pastor that would like you to speak at a big conference that they're putting on. And if you accept the speaking engagement, there'll be a bullseye on your back." And she said, "I don't want them to ask you and then have you reject them, because that will be crushing to them." She said, "I guess I'm like the junior high kid who goes between two people to see if you'll say yes to go on a date." She said, "If they were to ask you, would you say yes knowing that it's going to put a target on your back?" She said this to me in an email and then in between I had a chance to think. I said, "Of course I'll say yes," because my main thought was, I should have said yes a lot earlier, but I have been worried about guilt by association.

Brian McLaren: And I suppose we all reach points where we have to make the choice, do we follow Jesus or do we follow the cult of innocence? And I should add that that was ended up being one of the most important lines that I ever crossed because about, I don't know, three months later,

one of my sons came out as gay. And it was such a different situation for him to come out when his father had already come out as publicly as being accepting of this. So thanks be to God for Peggy, for bringing that challenge to me.

Richard Rohr: Foundationally where the problem lies, it seems to me that's all that we made the gospel into a moral matter instead of a mystical matter. And morality is that which separates you from the immoral, mystical is that which unites you to everything, including the negative, as I've been calling it lately. Once you recognize Jesus included the negative, I'm using Carl Young language, he didn't exclude it, he didn't punish it, he didn't hate it. He just said it's part of the deal. But as long as you've got that in your mind, I'm amazed at other... I have evangelical pastor friends who can agree with me on almost everything except that inclusion of gays, that is immoral action. But I said, "That takes away the Imago day in that person? Don't you think gender is what I call the false self? It isn't ontologically foundationally the person and you're going to let a false self feature undo the indwelling Holy Spirit?" But a non mystic doesn't know that, for some reason. They haven't come to honor it in every human being. Every, no exception.

Brian McLaren: Yeah. We're having this conversation on day 16 or 17 of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. And just yesterday, he gave a speech where he was trying to shame any Russians who were not supporting him and his war. And he used an anti-gay insult to shame them. And here's a great example. He's making the people who oppose him seem immoral and dirty. And while he is committing crimes against humanity and mass murder and launching a war based in his own ego and pride and delusions of grandeur and all the rest. And you think there it is right in front of us, somebody is willing to kill, and they do it by promoting themselves as innocent. Even his ruse of we're going to invade Ukraine to save them from Nazis, so we're not going in to kill children and destroy homes and make 3 million refugees, we're going into to be saviors. And there it is, it's this horrible thing. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: It does seem to me that moral outrage almost always leads to a bunker, whether in the exterior life or the interior life, or it can drop you into isolation and guilt and fear of waiting for the supposed barbarians to come in, or it can lead to an invasion where you're in bunkers because you are on the attack and the offense because you have to wipe out the supposed unclean. And it just continues to be the antithesis of what we were talking about earlier about Jesus' table fellowship of entering the homes of the supposed sinner to be able to participate in the goodness and the fullness, that is human connectivity

Brian McLaren: Well said, Paul. And you come from a similar background to me. Do you remember any times in your spiritual growth and upbringing, were you had to make choices to, in a sense violate the cult of innocence?

Paul Swanson: I'm thinking back to times when I worked at a Bible college and I would often have to have private conversations with students who were struggling with sexual identity. And the ways that I would have to step out in a way against what was the supposed norm of the tradition I was in and say, "You are creating the image of God, I love you for exactly who you are." Because I'm not a public figure, like the two of you, I didn't have to do that in a public way, but in a communal way where I had to step out and to know that was going to rub some folks the wrong way, or that I was going to be seen as leading students as astray or accepting what should not be acceptable. I think for me in my day to day layperson private life, it

happens more in ways where my community of origin, my church of origin has a harder time understanding some of the choices I make, because I haven't cut off those ties, which is a weird...

Paul Swanson: It creates that tension. You start to say things that they don't quite agree with. And I don't quite agree with some of the things that they say, but it puts you into a tense relationship where you can't always talk about directly, because then ties will be severed. But I think around sexuality and around war have been the two primary pieces that have ostracized me from particular communities or cults of innocence that was for so long a card caring member of.

Brian McLaren: In the chapter, I took a bit of a risk, but I felt it needed to be done. I wanted to talk about how the pro-life movement could easily be manipulated as a cult of innocence. And I want to preface this by saying, I was actually involved in the pro-life movement in the very early days, but in the years since I've come to see how the movement can be co-opted to all kinds of harmful ends, even with complete sincerity on the part of the participants. And in particular, I've noticed how white Christians like me can reach that kind of moral outrage that you spoke about, Paul, about abortion, but we don't have much to say about race. I'll just read another bit of a paragraph and invite you to respond in any ways you would like. Here's my hypothesis. "When white Christians see themselves as valiant defenders of vulnerable unborn lives, they identify with the innocence of the victim so that the innocence or purity of the unborn victim is transfused into them.

Brian McLaren: The idea of transfused innocence has a special appeal to people like me who were raised with an understanding of Jesus as the innocent victim, whose innocence was transfused..." Imputed was the theological term used. "To us through something called penal substitutionary atonement. With one sinner's prayer, we were born again and given a new identity card, so to speak. By a divine transaction, we were removed from the list of guilty hell bounded sinners and shifted to the ledger of innocent forgiven saints, all through association with an innocent victim." Well, let me just leave it there and see if either of you have any response to that.

Richard Rohr: Once you think, you can identify and localize evil in one specific place. This is why this naming of the cult of innocence, for me, parallels the teaching on the scapegoat. It's got to go somewhere. I first of all, refuse to participate in evil, and then I choose someone else to carry it for me. I cannot help, but read the meaning of Jesus cross in particular as a radical identification with human failure, human suffering, human woundedness. And we pretty much at the beginning said, "We're not going to do that. We're going to define ourselves as above that, apart from that, better than thou." The results have been disastrous.

Paul Swanson: I just flash back to how many times in my childhood I needed a shot of innocence. I would accept Jesus into my heart again with this sense of, I got to get this slate cleaned again, because the guilt of whatever was happening in my life at that time to feel like I needed to rejoin the club, because I felt like my sin was separating me from, from God in such a way that I would continually have to re-accept Jesus into my heart in that sinner's prayer, because I wanted to make sure that I could rejoin the innocence club.

Brian McLaren: I think we all maybe have experienced the sin in different ways. And when I brought up the

pro-life movement, I wasn't doing that to discredit the whole movement. But just to say that something seemingly so pure as caring about the most vulnerable period of human life, how that could become twisted so that we end up with a scene like we remember from January 6th, 2021, when the very people who are claiming association with vulnerable human life are chanting "Hang Mike Pence" and looking for Nancy Pelosi to string up as well. We end up in the name of innocence and purity, ready to commit horrible atrocities. And we end up being willing to polarize the world based on our particular shortcut to innocence. And we see it happen in so many ways. And we will see it happen in new ways in the weeks and months to come.

Brian McLaren: My guess is that it will be very easy for people to start hating Russians and making Russians the source of all evil without realizing it, doing it as a way to reduce our shame and give us the sense of innocence. It's sort of sad to say, but then the Ukrainians will become the new innocent victim from whom, like parasites, we try to suck innocence. This is only a danger that people who care about being good are prone to, but it can lead us to places we never intended to go.

Richard Rohr: I think we would all agree that the discovery of how the human psyche works, in our lifetime called psychology, has been an immense clarification for many things Jesus said. He never got to precisely define the shadow self the way Carl Jung did. Not the bad self, but the self we are not ready to see. The self we deny. It's not evil. It's the unwillingness to be seen as evil. And that ironically ends up making us do evil. Jesus said that in his whole sermon on the Mount and the log in the eye and there was good psychology, but we have the ability to clarify that you could say the cult of innocence follows directly from the denial of the shadow.

Brian McLaren: Talk more about that, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Well, the human beings are simply unwilling, or it's with great difficulty that they see truly unflattering material about themselves. I am vain. I am proud. I am violent. I am war like. My country is not perfect. Our ability to deny what we do not want to see to the point now in our politics, and Russia is too now, of telling complete bold face lies from the top. And people know they're being lied too, but it's easier to believe than to admit that America has a shadow or that I have a shadow.

Paul Swanson: Brian, you had mentioned the inability for Christians, white Christians, to approach this to race. I'm curious, hearing what Richard had just said about the cult of innocence and denial of shadow, how do you see this correlating to Christianity's upholding of systemic racism and white supremacy? Any thoughts spark there?

Brian McLaren: Wow. Well, this is crazy and super obvious, but as soon as you say it, here's what I think of. I think of the old Ku Klux Klan, what do they do? They put on a white sheet.

Richard Rohr: White. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: And they carry crosses. In fact, they burn crosses to make them shine. It feels like we want to be upset about a whole lot of things to keep us from face to being upset with our own history of what many of our own ancestors. And even if we are recent immigrants to north America, it's what our religious ancestors supported through doctrines that created a cult

of innocence among white Europeans, so that they could portray the native Americans as savages. That then justified Europeans treating them savagely and then could enslave, kidnap Africans and show up at church every Sunday, praising God for God's grace to forgive me, but almost using the forgiveness as an excuse to say, so why bother dealing with this exploitation and rape and torture and all the rest. I remember I was listening to a podcast once with an African American theologian who made this interesting comment. "When did the obsession against Darwin really gain? It's Darwin is the enemy and evolution is the enemy, when did it gain its impetus when lynchings were happening in America like what we call fundamentalism?"

Richard Rohr: Wow.

Paul Swanson: No way.

Brian McLaren: And you think, "Of course white Christians needed something to obsess about so that they didn't have to fret about..." A Muslim scholar called it a weapon of mass distraction. We distract ourselves by with six day creationism so that we don't have to deal with what has been called the color line or the issue of race. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: Yes.

Richard Rohr: Wow. Wow. I find it interesting that whoever created this phrase, maybe it was you Brian, maybe it was Nadia. I don't know, but that you chose the word cult, it has the character of a deeply held belief that holds a group of people together in what we negatively call it cult. And it has its object of worship, and its object of worship is my purity. Now, you both know you can go to the scriptures and I don't think you can find one time where Jesus validates what the Jewish religion called purity codes. Don't touch this, don't go there, don't be a part of this meal or whatever it might be. Jesus has no interest impurity codes. And yet that we created out of his religion, a cult. A cult of innocence. How we could all cover ourselves with the blood of Jesus, so we could feel innocent and other people could hold the sin, the evil of the world. This is so foundational to understanding human history. And to understanding history in a collective way, instead of just bad people.

Brian McLaren: It's so interesting to go back to the scriptures and then we see this battle playing out in the pages of the scriptures. I remember when I went back and read Acts chapter 10, this story of Peter and Cornelius in this light where Peter has a vision, a mystical experience in which God tells him to sin in the sense that tells him to violate the purity code and eat animals that are considered dirty or unclean. I love it. He says, "No way, God, I'm not going to do what you're telling me to. I've never eaten anything dirty before. I'm a clean guy. You're asking me to be unclean." And then he goes to the house of Cornelius, and even though he's supposed to be evangelizing them, you get the sense he's being evangelized because he says, "I now see, I should never call anyone unclean."

Richard Rohr: That's a perfect yes example. Thank you, Brian.

Brian McLaren: And then just to round it out, we find Paul having to confront Peter. He talks about this in the book of Galatians because Peter forgot that. It becomes just a mirror of us and Peter would refuse to eat with unclean people. It's us, isn't it? This is a continual struggle for us, the cult of innocence.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. And what a invitation to continually remember, and to go back and be like, “I’ve done it again.” The role of forgiveness, mercy to continually start again and to live in that grace is actually to do the work of that mercy, of that forgiveness, of that grief and reconciliation and not just stopping and having the community. I love that Paul has to remind Peter. It takes the community to remember what we’re about and not continue to further isolate.

Brian McLaren: Listen, as I read this passage from, Do I Stay Christian? “But here’s the problem. If I leave Christianity to achieve innocence, won’t I just be seeking to be innocent of Christian supremacy to be pure than Christianity’s purity culture by separating myself from it? Won’t I be seeking some status of superiority? That’s why the best option I can see for myself is to stay Christian while rejecting supremacy and embracing solidarity instead. Traditional theologians use another word for solidarity: incarnation. The belief that Jesus incarnated or embodied the spirit of God in human flesh, which means in solidarity with all humanity.

Brian McLaren: Through Jesus, God joins in solidarity, not just with religious humanity, not just enlightened humanity, not just with pure innocent idealized humanity, but with the fleshy, messy, mucky humanity of unclean slobs like us, who lost our innocence long ago. So what is the opposite of a cult of innocence? Not a super cult of hyper innocence, but rather a movement of human solidarity. Staying in solidarity with Christianity with all its faults is a way of staying in solidarity with humanity with all its faults. By staying in solidarity with a flawed and failing religion, I stay in solidarity with all flawed and failing religions, and with our whole flawed and failing species.”

Brian McLaren: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of Learning How to See. Special thanks to father Richard Rohr and Paul Swanson, guests for this episode. Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all they do to support helping conversations like this happen. And thanks again for your attention and for listening to Learning How to See. And a special thanks to Corey Pigg, the producer of this program, who is such a joy to work with.