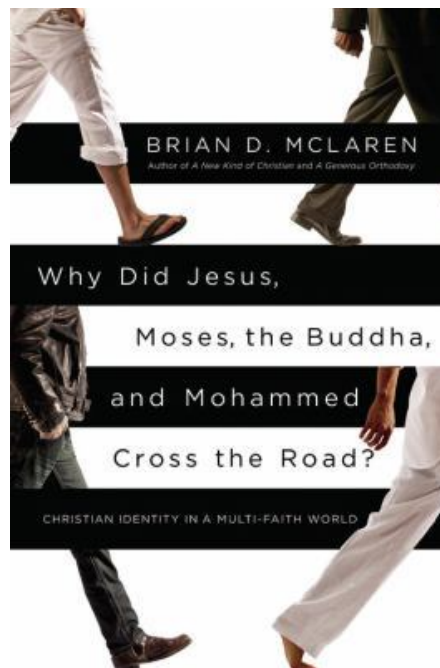




Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World

Brian D. McLaren

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When four religious leaders walk across the road, it's not the beginning of a joke. It's the start of one of the most important conversations in today's world.

Can you be a committed Christian without having to condemn or convert people of other faiths? Is it possible to affirm other religious traditions without watering down your own?

In his most important book yet, widely acclaimed author and speaker Brian McLaren proposes a new faith alternative, one built on "benevolence and solidarity rather than rivalry and hostility." This way of being Christian is strong but doesn't strong-arm anyone, going beyond mere tolerance to vigorous hospitality toward, interest in, and collaboration with the other.

Blending history, narrative, and brilliant insight, McLaren shows readers step-by-step how to reclaim this strong-benevolent faith, challenging us to stop creating barriers in the name of God and learn how affirming other religions can strengthen our commitment to our own. And in doing so, he invites Christians to become more Christ-like than ever before.

Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World Details

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From Reader Review Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World for online ebook

Dave McNeely says

Honestly, when I picked up this book, I can't say I had much interest in it (world religions as a topic has generally not piqued my interest much). But after reading the first few pages, I was hooked and could hardly put it down. What McLaren offers in this beautifully benevolent and insightful groundbreaking work is a re-examination of Christian faith in light of a religiously diverse world, asking whether or not Christianity is meant to have a hostile or benevolent posture toward other faiths (and the people who claim those faiths). Very readable, very thought-provoking, and highly recommended.

M Christopher says

Brian McLaren and I are roughly the same age and we both grew up in conservative evangelical churches (although mine were, for the most part, a little more liberal than those he experienced, I think). We both became second-career pastors. And we both, at roughly the same time, came to question a good deal of the doctrine that we had assumed was necessary based on our youthful learning. Every time I read one of his books, I think, "Here's my brother on a very similar path."

"Why Did Jesus..." continues my sensation of walking alongside Rev. McLaren on his journey of spiritual discovery. His thesis in this book is that Christianity need not be exclusivistic or "hostile" to be robust. He does a fine job of showing how Christianity fell prey to an imperial concept of faith in the years around the Constantinian adoption of the faith and how a more Christ-like belief and practice is actually a more loving, respectful, benevolent approach of solidarity with other Christians and non-Christians alike. He challenges his readers to pursue a Christian identity that is both strong and benevolent.

For those who have begun to feel that there must be a better way for the Body of Christ to interact with our multi-faith world without watering down our message of redemption to the point that it is indistinguishable from a philosophy of "niceness," this book provides some possible solutions. For those who adhere to old fashioned missiology, this book will be a challenge, if not an outright scandal. As for me, it ratifies a number of things I have come to believe about our shared journey with our sisters and brothers of other faiths. I am deeply grateful for Rev. McLaren's easy and engaging prose and his graceful spirit.

Charles Dean says

I frequently tell people that the mark of a good book isn't that you agree with everything the author says, or that you "buy" all the author's arguments, or even that you were convinced to change your view on something. No, the mark of a great book, in my opinion, is it causes you to THINK. This is what I love most about Brian McLaren - he graciously challenges me to rethink my faith and the world. This book is challenging, but oh-so-timely and relevant. It's an important conversation that is happening in our church - and I assume churches across America - whether the professional clergy wants it to or not. And unless you choose the most exclusivistic approach, you understand the conversation is not easy, is fraught with semantics, misunderstandings, nuance, etc. - all the things that challenge us to think, and to think hard.

I loved this book. I'm already discussing it with a few pastors that I meet with regularly, and I hope to find space to invite other into a conversation about it in the coming weeks/months.

In a side note - I'm assuming that the overwhelmingly good reviews on this site reflect the fact that Brian's critics have mostly just stopped reading!!

Craig Bergland says

This book may well be an adequate primer for evangelicals who have never considered cooperation with people from other traditions in a meaningful way, but if you have thought about such things for more than five minutes this book is a waste of time and you will see it as simplistic and unrealistic.

My biggest complaint is that for a book purporting to be about Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith world, it spends the vast majority of its pages attempting to re-define conventional, conservative, evangelical, biblical literalist Christianity to be more open to others through modifying a doctrine (a solution that, quite frankly, won't work because doctrinal emphasis by definition excludes others who don't share our world view) and precious little time discussing how we might get along with each other. When he does actually get around to discussing Christians existing in a multi-faith world, his suggestions are once again superficial and involve minimal risk. I have to ask, how can we learn to love one another and live together if we aren't willing to risk?

This book was a huge disappointment.

Casie says

So this is theological, and I don't have a shelf for that yet. But the premise is how would each of these religious leaders interact if confronted with each other. The conclusion that McLaren proposes is that they would cross the street (from their various corners) and find common ground. And yet, Bill O'Reilly is selling more books. I don't get it.

Bill says

See my review at <http://www.billdahl.net/articles/bria...>

It is a pre- pub review. A PHENOMENAL read!!! PRE-order now!!! Available September 11, 2012... Buy a few to give away to others.

I had the privilege to read an Advance Uncorrected Proof of Brian McLaren's new book: "Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? (Published by Jericho Books – Hachette Book Group – Available September 11, 2012). Here's my review. I call it, "A Call to Prayer With Your Feet:"

Subversive friendships populate the history of human progress (the good, benevolent, inclusive and enduring kind) Take for example January 1963, when Rabbi Abraham Heschel and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. met for the first time at the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race. In his opening remarks, Rabbi Heschel

declared;

“To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God’s beloved child.”(1)

Two years later, on March 21, 1965, Rabbi Heschel participated in the Selma Civil Rights March arm-in-arm with U.S. Representative John Lewis (D-GA), a nun, Ralph Abernathy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Bunche, (former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations) and the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. This march was a seminal moment leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in July 1965 – remarkably different people with diversity in their life experiences, ethnicity, socio-economic status and religious affiliations. Returning to his home in New York City after the march, Rabbi Heschel wrote:

“For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”(2) — others have recalled Rabbi Heschel’s verbal remarks as “praying with my feet.”(3)

Enter Brian D. McLaren and his most recent work, “Why did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road – Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World.” (Hachette – New York, September 11, 2012). Theologian, husband, father, grandfather, educator, pastor, activist, speaker, facilitator, author, thinker are all the decent descriptive terms that have been used regularly to characterize Brian. Like Rabbi Heschel some four plus decades earlier, some have used terms and characterizations of McLaren designed to discredit and marginalize him, his message and life’s work. Some of these include heretic, liberal, unorthodox – and all their putrid cousins. McLaren, like Heschel and King has been characterized as a subversive. It hasn’t worked.

There are a few things about Brian D. McLaren that a majority of people can agree on. He’s smart – really smart. He cares deeply about his faith, the Church, people, planet, its ecology, personal transformation, love, kindness, tolerance, peace, compassion, Jesus, present, past and future. One thing that (once again) jumped out at me in this book is Brian’s ability to write...he is a phenomenal communicator...an elegance, imagination, style and depth that is soothing to the soul. Yet, the book also contains McLaren’s authenticity – the raw, guttural, sinewy, sincerity from which this work has arisen.

Once again, Brian McLaren explores the topography of the way ahead providing the map, compass, courage and light we must possess to re-imagine Christian identity in a multi-faith world...Penetrating – Timely – Fundamental – Essential – Shape Shifting – PRE-ORDER NOW!!!

If you’re looking for a book on philosophy – this isn’t it. This is a book about identity – a new perspective on how one can view the Christian faith, oneself, others, their faith (or non-faith) and the opportunity to become part of an exciting new pilgrimage to a vastly better destination. It is uniquely a volume that celebrates the crisis of the current, ongoing unrealized reality that, as Rabbi Heschel declared in 1963; the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart.

Brian teaches us new ways to see, taste, smell, hear, envision, imagine, listen, communicate, risk, comprehend, interact, love – and become all we might be – from whatever faith tradition (or not) we might come from. This is a book about behavior – not philosophy. It is a book that teaches us how to pray with our feet...new behavior rooted in new identity. It’s about learning to love with your life...in the way of Jesus.

Why this book at this time for this author? Listen to Brian McLaren:

“My pursuit, not just in this book but in my life, is a Christian identity that moves me toward people of other faiths in wholehearted love, not in spite of their non-Christian identity and not in spite of my own Christian identity, but because of my identity as a follower of God in the way of Jesus.” P.11.

“We are increasingly faced with a choice, I believe, not between kindness and hostility, but between kindness and nonexistence. This is the choice we must make, the road we must cross.” P.12.

“More and more of us are seeking treatment for Conflicted Religious Identity Syndrome (CRIS). You are seeking a way of being Christian that makes you more hospitable, not more hostile...more loving not more judgmental...more like Christ and less (I’m sad to have to say this) like many Christians you have met.” P. 15.

McLaren begins to uncover the issues central to his thesis with questions like the following. P.19 – “What is it about our faith (and even nonfaith) traditions that we are so uneasy about?” What are the hurdles and opportunities? It’s been said that “violence in the world is directly correlative to the violence in each of us.”(4) This is a theme throughout the book that McLaren refers to with the term hostility. Here’s a quote: “Our root problem is the hostility that we often employ to make and keep our identities strong – whether those identities are political, economic, scientific, or religious.” P.63.

The author goes to great lengths describing the many sordid manifestations of hostility in the history, practice and theology of current day Christianity – and the opportunities to alter widespread practices, liturgy, baptism, interpretations of the history of the Christian faith, the creation story, church calendar, confession and doctrine that serve to unwittingly feed the hostility we must eradicate. He champions the adoption of a “strong-benevolent” Christian identity. A Muslim writing to Brian illuminates one primary dimension of this challenge, writing about his own faith, Islam: There is nothing that hurts a religion today more than its own establishment. Established and well-funded religious institutions are becoming their own enemies. There is no better way to say it than: “We find the enemy and it is us. Salaam.” p. 50. McLaren adds: “But, we must be realistic about the ways in which the “religious-industrial-complex” profits by maintaining the status quo of strong oppositional identity on the one hand and weak-benign identity on the other.” P. 70.

Here are some other gems from the book that truly resonated with me, attempting to dignify the content of the book without revealing the truly meaty dimensions of the author’s thesis:

P. 52 – It’s not the difficulty of re-thinking long held beliefs that will discourage me, but the stubborn refusal to accept that difficulty.”

P. 53. In religion, as in parenthood, uncritical loyalty to our ancestors may implicate us in an injustice to against our descendants.: imprisoning them in the errors of our ancestors. Yes, there are costs either way. “Sometimes, the enemy may not even exist, except in the imaginations of the anxious.” P. 62.

“We need the religion industry to be converted from its reliance on the toxic energy of oppositional identity and hostility. We need to research, develop and deploy the renewable and renewing fuel source of divine-human kindness and benevolence.

132 – “God is not a doctrine to be mastered but a mystery to be mastered by.”

122 – So it must never be forgotten that God sees and hears the other.

P.104 – The doctrine of creation has been broken into sharp and dangerous shards. It must be put back together again into a beautiful and harmonizing whole. In that way it can become a healing teaching of unimaginable power.

Karen Armstrong has written:

“To cling to the old theology is not only a failure of nerve but could involve a damaging loss of integrity.”(5)

Brian McLaren doesn't shy away from the truth of this necessity – and clearly – desperately – cares oh so deeply about the opportunity to experience a vastly more robust and more meaningful experience of the Christian faith...for all concerned...to recapture and restore integrity lost.

Brian's new book shall, I pray, catalyze the renewal of a nascent movement; One which contains the necessity for a new identity and a new posture. What might this new posture look like? Read Brian McLaren's "Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?"

A quote from thinker/faith & culture commentator Ron Cole summarizes the new posture of hope that Brian's new book represents:

“A religion that does not embrace all humanity, and all faiths is infinitely small...and is of no earthly good. My goal on the anniversary of 9/11 is to continue my search of the infinite in other sacred texts, cultures...in new friendships and conversations. It is infinitely beautiful to find God in all humanity, and in all faith...somehow, I think the more we pursue that journey, the more we will find life.”(6)

It has been said that “truth requires a maximum effort to see through the eyes of strangers, foreigners, and enemies.”(7) “Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? - is another tremendous contribution by Brian McLaren to provide the courage and illumination essential for us to find a renewed desire to walk into new dimensions of this truth.

Subversive? Maybe – if you think, as Rabbi Heschel spoke in 1963 that – “To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child.” Hmmm...didn't they once consider a man named Jesus of Nazareth as subversive?

Perhaps it's time to march again...together...arm-in-arm — On September 11, 2012 — politicians, Sikhs, Unitarians, activists, Quaker, Ananbaptist, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, New Age, gay and straight, Christians, Buddhists, Anglicans, unaffiliated, Native Peoples, Mormons, Jews, Confucians, Hindus, Sufi, Shii, & Sunni, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalians, progressive, right-to-life and right-to-choice, agnostic, Universalists, pacifists, Shinto, creationists, evolutionists, Pentecostal, Nazarene, Taoists, activists, conservative, Bahai'ans, Rastafarians, Lutheran and atheist – whatever and wherever you consider yourself to be – you are – God's beloved child.

Learn to pray with your feet...a book about behavior...rooted in a new identity...a new posture...kindness or nonexistence...the choice is ours... “Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? “This is the road we must cross.”

Read this book!

It's fabulous.

Period.

Thank you Brian!

NOTES:

(1) Branch, Taylor Pillar of Fire – America in the King Years 1963-1965 Copyright © 1998 by Taylor

Branch Simon & Schuster New York, New York. pp.21-23. Note: I had the privilege to meet Taylor Branch. His signed editions of his 3 volume work on the Dr. King and the U.S. civil rights movement are treasures in my personal library.

(2) <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~vox/0405/04...>

(3) Ibid. Branch, Taylor – page 611.

(4) Mehl-Laituri, Logan Reborn on the Fourth of July – The Challenge of Faith, Patriotism and Conscience, IVP Press Downers Grove, Illinois Copyright © 2012 Logan Mehl-Laituri, p. 53.

(5) Armstrong, Karen The History of God – The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Ballantine Books, New York, NY Copyright © 1994 by Karen Armstrong, p. 172.

(6) Excerpt from Ron Cole: <http://thewearypilgrim.typepad.com/th...>

(7) Ibid – Branch, Taylor – p.xiv – describing “the conviction from which the civil rights movement was made.”

Scott Brazil says

As you can expect from anything written by Brian McLaren, the reader will be both challenged and inspired by what you find in the book. I was particularly intrigued by his argument that Constantine's "conversion" laid the seeds for later hostilities between Islam and Christianity. Also, I should add that this book got me to think not so much about interreligious relations but, more specifically, the "other" that seems to get my blood boiling in my own religious tradition and how I need to respond differently.

Marc Arlt says

Hands down the best of McLaren's work I've read thus far. Highly recommended.

David says

Growing up in a Christian home I eventually, like most kids, began to question the faith I had been taught. Some stories of questioning begin with taking a biology class and learning about evolution. This was never a problem for me. I always figured that the truth or falsity of evolution had little to do with the central claims of Christian faith. For me the questions always revolved around other religions.

If I believe Jesus is the savior of the world, is unique, what does this say about other world religions and religious figures?

If there is only one God, how come there are so many religions?

Can people of different religions ever learn to live together in the world?

It was questions such as these which led me to major in religious studies at Penn State. And it is questions such as these that lead me to pick up books such as Brian McLaren's Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Muhammad Cross the Road?

Brian McLaren is one of those authors that causes me to get nervous as I write a review of their books. If I say positive things, some Christians will assume I have gone down the same path of apostasy that they say Brian has, a path that will lead to hell. If I say negative things, other Christians will assume I am just a closed-minded fundamentalist who thinks I am one of the lucky few who get to go to heaven. The truth is that I enjoy reading McLaren's books because they make me think and question my own assumptions. I am less and less interested in reading books that just reinforce what I already and have always believed.

This book is McLaren on how Christians ought to relate to followers of other religions. He sees a problem in the Christian church. Those who have a strong Christian identity, who are unquestionably orthodox, often are very hostile to outsiders. But those who are kind to outsiders often water down their Christian faith to such an extent that there is not much "Christian" about it. McLaren seeks a Christian identity that is both strong and kind. He does this with sections on doctrine, liturgy and mission.

I imagine that those who are already fans of McLaren will enjoy this book while those who see him as a false teacher will not like this book. Personally, after finding much to like in many of McLaren's books I did not like his A New Kind of Christianity (I think I gave it 2 stars out of five) so my expectations for this were not high. That said, I found this book mostly helpful, challenging and encouraging. McLaren correctly identifies the problem that most of us Christians (and really, most humans) find our identity in what we are against. In other words, "we" are right and "they" are wrong," or, "they" are the problem which needs to be changed or fixed. McLaren's argument is that Jesus frees us from this hostile attitude and sends us in the world to reach out to the other in love and friendship. He says that the world does not need Christians to abandon their faith, it needs Christians to take their faith even more seriously.

What if we Christians took our faith, took Jesus more seriously? What if we really did seek to love our enemies, even to the point of dying for them as Jesus did?

What if instead of trying to change everybody into clones of ourselves, we sought to serve and bless others as Jesus did?

Those are the sorts of questions I take away from this book and for that I am grateful.

Wendy says

Well it is no big secret that I love this book. I loved it from the day the proposal hit my desk and I am delighted with the final result. I am a McLaren reader and I have the utmost respect for the man. This, in my humble opinion, is the best thing that Brian has ever written. So far...

Orville Jenkins says

Does Dissent or Disagreement Have to be Hostile?
(The Model Jesus Gave Us)

This review essay was prompted by a review article by Bob Allen of Baptist News Global in 2013, "Author proposes end to interfaith hostility" and is based on my early comments there.
<https://baptistnews.com/article/autho...>

I was amazed at some of the wild-eyed comments by readers who lashed out against McLaren for various envisioned evils or concepts they attributed to terminologies they saw reflected in the book, through Allen's review essay news article.

Some comments denounced McLaren on various charges or views unrelated to the book, which I found to be full of Gospel and Grace, in line with the approach and speech Jesus used as portrayed in the Gospels. He was particularly lambasted as a universalist who had abandoned the exclusive claims of the Bible about Christ. This was not even what McLaren was talking about.

I have read several books by McLaren and am somewhat aware of his warmhearted outreach to non-believers and estranged believers.

I note that McLaren is not speaking against any "exclusivity" nor was his intent to promote inclusivity -- that was not the topic he addresses here. In fact he does affirm the uniqueness of Jesus and his message. That was not in question, nor was it the topic he was discussing in this book. He is speaking against hostility. How much Good News can we project if we are hostile and sarcastic and combative? Would you listen to such a harangue?

Terminology may distract us from the real Gospel issues here. Jesus, from what I see in the Gospels, never disrespected anyone. Look at the fun he had with the Syro-Phoenician woman in their discussion, making fun of the respective cultural attitudes towards each other. Then he simply acted as the healing Lord. The gospels portray Jesus welcoming attitude and willing interaction with serious-minded enquirers of any background.

Combative Culture

It is not about winning, or about defeating a religious enemy. It is about making sure people hear the Good News -- about God's Love in Jesus! People aren't listening to you if you are attacking them!

Does our expression of disagreement with someone's idea, proposal or philosophy need to be an attack on the writer or speaker's integrity or personal worth? This seems to be the ethos today, ironic for a society built upon and touting today the concept of tolerance and diversity? It seems even otherwise good people feel it is not only appropriate but righteous to trash a person they may disagree with.

Such a response is even more egregious, it seems to me, when the reacting individual has stated or obviously indicates he has not even read the book under discussion!

We are called, as Good News people, followers of Jesus Christ, to follow his example, to give our neighbors and friends and fellow confessors of Christ Good News, not beat them down and defeat them. The people Jesus was most harsh with were the leaders within his own cultural faith tradition. More self-reflection on our own backgrounds might be more appropriate. Jesus was not a modern westerner.

McLaren is addressing our attitude -- is it like that of Christ, the Suffering Servant model that gives us a life-sized view of how God's love works? He contrasts the world's militarist belligerent approach to others with God's wooing loving way to freedom in service, overcoming even Death with submissive service on behalf of others.

This is the portrait the Gospels provide and the character reference McLaren references in his focus on the problem of belligerent hostility toward others. This common militaristic approach contrasts with loving

outreach demonstrated in the New Testament, in contrast to some of our cultural streams of western Christianity.

Jesus' Setting

So it would help us to project ourselves into Jesus' historical and cultural setting to hear the words Jesus says as speaking to our own tradition. The authority is not our western religious tradition, but the Covenant God as revealed in Jesus in His time and space.

In our decades of missionary experience in Africa and the Middle East, we were always able to relate on a positive spiritual level to non-Christians who were seeking to know God's will and way. We experienced few instances of antagonism from non-Christians of whatever tradition. I have never had any Muslim acquaintance reject my offer to pray for them in Jesus' name.

I try to follow the biblical Covenant relational approach, in preference to the modern western rationalist idea approach (mental concepts as the basis of truth). This is what I understand McLaren to be calling for. It is easy to be seduced by the rationalist Modernist worldview to think Truth consists in objectified "facts" and collected bits of information on religious or metaphysical topics.

This is ironically the shared framework of both what was called "Modernism" and the backlash that called itself "Fundamentalism." They were just two forms of the same type of rationalist reductionism, but too different ideological directions, and defended different ideological premises.

This Rationalism in whatever ideological guise is simply one form of the Gnostic approach to truth that followers of Jesus rejected very early in the history of our Faith. What is Truth? Jesus -- not information or true facts, as modern rationalist science would have us believe -- is the Way, He is the Truth -- and He as Life is found in Faith, because of the Covenant Love God expressed for us through His Blood.

Jesus is the Way

Jesus is the Way, not modern American reductionism to any of a selection of rationalist theories. Thanks to McLaren for reminding us of that. Like Jesus taught us, we should treat others the way we want to be treated.

Tracy says

Some things Brian McLaren is very confused about, in no particular order: the Bible, biblical criticism, hermeneutics, etymology, theology, doctrine, church history, ecumenicism, other religions, the definition of "gospel", John the Baptist, Jesus, the Gospels, the Bible (Old and New Testaments), evangelism, economics, colonialism, politics, prejudice, psychology, and much else.

Some things Brian McLaren is not confused about, in no particular order: his certainty that his critics don't understand him and/or the truth and/or Jesus and/or are hostile and/or of no consequence and/or prove he is right, his own ability to bestow amazing insights on other, simpler and/or more perplexed human beings, his desire to write and sell books for your sake, his proficiency at name-dropping, the wonders of his friends on the Christian celebrity speaking circuit, quoting Important People by quoting Important People who quote those Important People, altering (he calls it "adapting") quotes by Important People for his own purpose, his conviction that he writes really well, his certain knowledge that his particular understanding of Jesus/Faith/The Bible is THE understanding of Jesus/Faith/The Bible, and much else.

If you are confused about any of the things that Brian McLaren is confused about, this book won't help. If

you think Brian McLaren is the cat's meow, you'll love this book as much as he does.

Malin Friess says

Brian McLaren was an unknown pastor until 2005 when Time listed him as one of the top 50 most influential Christian Leaders. He was at a evangelical pastors gathering and asked to declare his position on homosexuality. He responded by saying: "The thing that breaks my heart is that there is no way to answer that question without hurting someone else on the other side." This "tension" branded him the label from Time as a "kinder and gentler brand of religion."

McLaren at the time was a leader of the Emerging/Emergent Christian movement (A non-denominational new way of thinking about Christianity). They were a group that pushed belonging before believing, deeds before words, a general vagueness and humility when it came to doctrine, inclusivism, a love of the arts, social justice, and a general antagonism towards traditional evangelicalism. To many they were simply old main-line protestant denominationalism with new brighter wrapping paper.

My first McLaren read had the unique title of Generous Orthodoxy, "Why I am a missional evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian. Wow..that's a mouthful. McLaren generously wrote this book to encourage the different Christian denominations to play nice (We are not competing against each other. We are on the same team). We can find beauty and truth in all the different denominations: presbyterians (order and grace driven theology), baptists (high view of scripture), methodists (emphasis of sanctification), catholicism (maintaining tradition and the Saints), Orthodox Church (adherence to the mystery of the Trinity and Incarnation), charismatic (emphasis of the Holy Spirit).

In this book it seems McLaren wants up the ante to see how the world's major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam) can play nice despite their theological, cultural, and social differences. Not a light undertaking.

A few interesting excerpts:

McLaren is fond of recalling and highlighting the worst in Christianity (the Florida pastor who burns the Koran, the clergy who describes the Haitian earthquake as God's punishment for sin, of a Baptist who stands at a military funeral with a sign, "God hates Fags", or a Catholic Diocese that protects child sex abusers, or pentacostal preacher that once again fails in his prediction of the End of the World.) He is also fond of authors like Anne Rice who have famously "quit" Christianity. I wish he would also highlight the good: Salvation Army, Food Kitchens, Samaritan's Purse, Feed the Hungry, World Vision, Adoption.

McLaren sees the paradigm as such. The "conservative" church is characterized as a strong Christian identity and also a strong hostility towards other faiths. The "liberal" church is characterized as having a weak Christian identity but a tolerant acceptance of other faiths. McLaren wants a third way. No "us" vs. "them." He says too many religions when using the us vs. them launch into Domination (Us over them), Revolution (Us overthrowing them), Assimilation (Us absorbing them), Purification (us eliminating them), Competition (us competing with them), Victimization (us oppressed by them), Isolation (us apart from them). Is there a third way?

McLaren has always been controversial and to some heretical. He has rejected the idea of original sin, hell, vengeance (page 261). He has rejected the traditionally accepted idea of penal substitution (God cannot

forgive sin without inflicting punishment and shedding blood. Sin is an offense against an infinitely holy God. The punishment must be absolute, irrevocable, and eternal. God must provide a substitute upon whom God's infinite wrath can be vented. God tortured and killed Jesus to be able to vent divine wrath upon a single human representative.) I wish McLaren would not reject penal substitution, but I agree with him when he says, "should we be sent into the world primarily with an evacuation plan for heaven and an escape plan from damnation, rather than with an incarnational, reconciliation, and transformation plan for this conflicted world"

So what do we do? What is the third way? McLaren wants us to form "subversive friendships?" McLaren goes to great length to form friendships (not with the point of conversion) with other faiths. McLaren's church reached out to a Mosque after 9/11 and an Imam started attending his church. McLaren went so far as to show solidarity with Muslims he fasted during Ramadan. McLaren implores us to make these "subversive friendships." He wants us to share a meal with a Rabbi, talk with a Hindu Activist about the horrors of the Caste System, talk theology with an atheist. He thinks these relationships can change the world.

My take: McLaren is not quite a universalist (but about as close as you can get). To McLaren the good news is for all and a message that the Christian God would bring peace, justice, and love within your own faith. McLaren as you would expect has a negative view of Evangelism. He equates evangelism with Northern European Colonialism (converting the "heathen" and the "savages.") Yes McLaren still wants to see saved souls..but saved from what? He wants to see Souls saved from the disastrous effects of overconsumption on our ecosystem, our misguided dysfunctional religion, our politics that oppresses the marginalized, etc. A different soul making indeed.

At the end of a McLaren service you would see an Alter call (not an Altar call). Rather than invite a non-Christian to repentance and God's ability to rescue and transform..he would invite them to ALTER their own understanding of God.

What would this look like..McLaren's vision is the following: (even if it sounds like the setup to a bar-room joke), Imagine the Pope, the Dalai Lama, a televangelist, Muslim Imam, rabbi, and a Orthodox patriarch side by side serving meals in a refugee camp, distributing mosquito nets, or assisting dentists in providing dental care in a poor village (no kidding these are his words.).

I still like McLaren. I give this book 4 stars. He stretches me to go to some uncomfortable places. I wish more Church Bible Studies would take on a book like this.

Nancy says

This book has been life changing for me. For anyone who is dealing with interfaith relationships, or struggling with any "them" and "us" issues, this is for you. I realize that the author has been dissed by certain Evangelicals for advocating a new kind of Christianity, but in truth, he is advocating paying attention to the message of Jesus, and living in love and cooperation. If we could share the gifts of our beliefs, without agenda, and work toward common goals without hostility, can you imagine what would happen? I thank him for settling me down regarding several issues, to include my own interfaith marriage, and the current 2016 presidential election!!! I will be devouring the author's other titles!!!

Andrew Marr says

Very clear an easy-to-read introduction to Christian dialog with other religions. A valuable book on an important topic for our time. McLaren does much to build empathy for other points of view & traditions without losing focus as a follower of Christ. Extensive use is made of René Girard's thought, helping to pave the way for using Girard's theory constructively in inter-religious dialogue.

Jo says

Interesting, thought-provoking, hopeful book for our time. McClaren makes an argument that God wishes Christians to love our neighbors, to live responsibly in a pluralistic society, yet not lose our Christian identity in the process. He begins the book by exploring the hostility and violence we see around us. He then moves into practical suggestions on how to build a strong faith identity with a benevolent posture, rather than hostility, toward other faiths, and how NOT to weaken your faith identity by minimizing differences between religions in order to emphasize what they all have in common. Throughout the book, Brian explores Christian tradition, and explain it in a very accessible style. The book is an inspiring read. It would be a good book for a small group study or book club as there is so much to discuss.

Rebecca Foster says

More of McLaren's catholic, progressive theology, this time with an ecumenical focus. He is knowledgeable and respectful of world religions, never dismissing or conflating them. Between the extreme options of a strong, hostile Christian faith and a weak, accommodating one, he proposes a strong, benevolent faith that starts with genuine friendship and a fresh understanding of original sin – that we are all flawed beings caught up in anxiety and rivalry and need to get back to God's vision for humanity. I read the first 90 pages and started skimming because I wearied of the style; maybe I've been more willing to ignore it in previous books, or maybe it's become more prominent in recent years, but I grew weary of the repetition of his own created phrases, the extended metaphors, the piling up of adjectives (he'll never use just one when five would do), and the frequent, lengthy footnotes and quotes from other writers. Still, McLaren is one of the contemporary theologians who's had the biggest impact on my thinking in the last 13 years.

Lee Harmon says

We have just enough religion to make us hate but not enough to make us love one another. --Jonathan Swift

What does it mean to be a Christian in a multi-faith world? In a world that keeps shrinking, McLaren draws us back to Christian neighborly principles, encouraging respect and interfaith understanding, but without sacrificing our allegiance to Christ. While it may be true that fostering an us-versus-them atmosphere strengthens the walls and adds purpose to our lives, this does not mean it's the only (or proper) way to remain strong in our faith. McLaren teaches a Christian identity that moves us toward people of other faiths in wholehearted love, not in spite of their non-Christianity identity and not in spite of our own Christianity identity, but because of our identity as a follower of God in the way of Jesus.

Anne Rice once proclaimed, "In the name of Christ ... I quit Christianity and being Christian." Many of us have felt the same frustration as we outgrew our oppositional tendencies and pondered what it really means to be Christian. McLaren calls it "Conflicted Religious Identity Syndrome," this matter of opposing opposition, for it is opposition—standing not only for something but against something—which stabilizes our identity.

But if we jettison our strong/hostile Christian training, will we drift toward its opposite, a weak/benign faith? Yes, if we don't direct our efforts! Weak faith is weak faith! So McLaren calls for strong/benevolent Christians. Contrary to the arguments of aggressive atheists today, the antidote to bad religion is not no religion, but good religion.

As I read back over my review, I see that I've used too many big words; I haven't been very true to the flavor of the book. It actually is quite readable and satisfying, and I loved it.

MG Maudlin says

I loved the big idea at the heart of the book--that we should question our tribal and oppositional Christian identities and reinterpret them in nontribal ways. Amen and amen. Still, I thought Brian was a little too heady/abstract at times and went down too many rabbit trails, which prolonged the book. I also wish he was more careful in how he constructed the book since some may interpret him as being arrogant (since he is the hero/ideal/solution to all the problems), but he certainly is not arrogant. But overall, I would say it is an important book on a crucial and controversial topic.

David A. says

I once read about a time that Allen Ginsberg was crossing the quad of a college somewhere, and a student called out to him, "Hey Ginsberg, what do you think of so-and-so's latest book?" Ginsberg didn't know the book, but he knew the author, and he gathered from the student's tone that the student was looking for a little trouble. So Ginsberg responded, "Whatever he's doing, I'm for him."

I think Ginsberg sounded a little like Jesus when he said that--not necessarily (though not unnecessarily) in what he said about the poet, but definitely in how he subverted the kind of litmus-testing that people do with other human beings, created in the image of God. Brian McLaren is, I think, one such lab animal, litmus-tested to death over the past decade. The fact that I read his latest book will be scandalous to some in my life; the fact that I liked it could be enough to get me kicked out of fellowship in some churches. I think that's obnoxious, and so before I review McLaren's latest book, let me say first that whatever he's doing, I'm for him.

Now, on to the book, which I liked quite a lot. McLaren has, I think it's fair to say, pretty much mastered the form of the general-audience Christian non-fiction issue-oriented book. He knows how to craft a long-form argument, how to help readers keep pace with his thinking, how to anticipate and fend off critiques, how to earn a reader's sympathy and trust while maintaining the high ground in contested terrain. McLaren is fun to read. He managed, for example, to sell me on the book's title about three pages into it, when I had been convinced that it would win the award for worst book title of the year. He did it not by exploiting the jokiness of the joke title but by taking humor seriously and drilling down on the question. McLaren offers possible answers to the title's question intermittently throughout the book, each response not contrived

silliness but pregnant possibility, each potentially a future book of its own. So, three pages in and I was sold.

The content may surprise some of McLaren's naysayers, since he calls for a strong Christian identity--not the weak Christian identity of some past failed programs for religious pluralism. McLaren refuses to envision a diluted Jesus, a Christianity that is not distinctly and authentically Christian. But he makes the provocative argument that one can affirm a strong Christian identity and still love one's non-Christian neighbor, still wish them well and actively seek their well-being, still (gasp) engage in mutually enriching relationships with non-Christians without colonizing their own distinct and authentic belief systems. McLaren refers to his proposal as "strong-benevolent faith/religion" and makes a strong case for it.

This is, of course, the *Everything Must Change* guy, and so to affirm a strong Christian identity doesn't necessarily mean to affirm the culturally conditioned Christianity we've been presented with. Chief among the things that must change under this perspective is the pride of place we've given to hostility. Hostility has been the lens through which the Bible has been read, McLaren suggests, because somewhere along the way we cast God not as lover but as avenger. We, meanwhile, were cast as agents not of God's love but of God's vengeance (and, if you were lucky, his mercy). That the world is a hostile place is self-evident; that it didn't need to become as hostile as it has is provocative. That the Christian church could make the first move away from hostility and toward love is as self-evident as it is provocative, as provocative as it is self-evident.

McLaren has made a point of intersecting with people of good faith in a variety of religions other than Christianity. He is well-read in comparative religions, not in a clinical/theoretical way but in an urgently pragmatic way: the intersection of world religions is a lived reality in some parts of the world even if much of us in the United States are protected from it, and where world religions intersect, hostility still largely holds sway. But McLaren here demonstrates that, like Allen Ginsberg of all people, God looks at people and is for them, no matter what creed they espouse, no matter how badly they've mucked up the works. That's good news for us, and it's also a challenge: God loves us, and he calls us to go and do likewise.
