



HOW THE WORLD'S LARGEST  
RELIGION IS SEEKING A BETTER  
WAY TO BE CHRISTIAN

BRIAN D. MCLAREN

AUTHOR OF A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIAN TRILOGY AND A GENEROUS ORTHODOXY

# The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian

*Brian D. McLaren*

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## **The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian** Brian D. McLaren

The Christian story, from Genesis until now, is fundamentally about people on the move—outgrowing old, broken religious systems and embracing new, more redemptive ways of life.

It's time to move again.

Brian McLaren, a leading voice in contemporary religion, argues that—notwithstanding the dire headlines about the demise of faith and drop in church attendance—Christian faith is not dying. Rather, it is embarking on a once-in-an-era spiritual shift. For millions, the journey has already begun.

Drawing from his work as global activist, pastor, and public theologian, McLaren challenges readers to stop worrying, waiting, and indulging in nostalgia, and instead, to embrace the powerful new understandings that are reshaping the church. In *The Great Spiritual Migration*, he explores three profound shifts that define the change:

- ? Spiritually, growing numbers of Christians are moving away from defining themselves by lists of beliefs and toward a way of life defined by love
- ? Theologically, believers are increasingly rejecting the image of God as a violent Supreme Being and embracing the image of God as the renewing Spirit at work in our world for the common good
- ? Missionally, the faithful are identifying less with organized religion and more with organizing religion—spiritual activists dedicated to healing the planet, building peace, overcoming poverty and injustice, and collaborating with other faiths to ensure a better future for all of us

With his trademark brilliance and compassion, McLaren invites readers to seize the moment and set out on the most significant spiritual pilgrimage of our time: to help Christianity become more Christian.

## **The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian for online ebook**

### **Marlies says**

5/5 at the beginning, 3/5 toward the ending. This is a great book that the Christian community needs to take in and soak with. How did a religion based on love lose its way and how can it get back on track? McLaren has some great ideas.

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### **Camille Olcese says**

I've stopped calling myself an evangelical for political reasons. However, I have a high view of scripture. Therefore, this book seems theologically radical. Nevertheless, I couldn't find anything in it to disagree with. In fact, McLaren is starting a movement, and I'm in. I so want to discuss it with my friends. Please read it and let me know your thoughts.

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### **Kevin Mackey says**

A surprisingly good, profound and important read. The first book in years that my wife and I have read together AND enjoyed. This may sound overstated, but I wouldn't be surprised if we look back on this book in a decade as contributing to one of the most positive turning points in the history of the Christian Church, when it migrated from a religion of exclusivity, hyper-focus on "right belief" and consumption, to a movement of humility, gentleness, love, peace, compassion, generosity, continuous learning and justice.

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### **David Robertson says**

It's difficult to describe in a few words how bad this book actually is! And I am astounded that anyone is taken in by its smug pseudo-spiritual waffle. McLaren demonises those he disagrees with, sets himself up as some kind of guru leading a new movement (hence the need for follow up study guides and leaders guides), attacks the Bible he purports to believe in, demonstrates a spectacular ignorance of history and is illogical in his arguments. For example the fact that he argues against those who have beliefs, on the basis of his own beliefs! Perhaps the greatest sin of all is that he is just so unoriginal - this is just 19th Century Liberal Protestantism re-incarnated into the language of American broad evangelicalism. Embarrassingly bad.

I have written a much fuller review here -<https://theweeflea.com/2017/09/06/the...>

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## **Julianna says**

Reviewed for THC Reviews

"4.5 stars" Brian McLaren has been on my radar since he came to my attention as an occasional contributor to the Sojourners blog. I enjoyed what he had to say in those posts, and as a result, I've had more than one of his books on my TBR list for a while. Our church book club chose *The Great Spiritual Migration*, and even though it wasn't one of his books that I'd had on my list the longest, I was very eager to read it. I found it interesting that both Rev. McLaren and I come from similar faith backgrounds. We were both raised in a more fundamentalist atmosphere, but later in life, have gravitated toward a more progressive view of Christianity. This is why I very much appreciated the chapter of the book titled "God 5.0," in which he explains how each individual's view of God changes dramatically from infancy into adulthood and it's not until we reach the 5.0 version of God that we've truly climbed to the pinnacle of understanding. That's where I'm trying to go right now, although it's sometimes a steep trek to getting there.

This also ties into Rev. McLaren's discussion of how many Christians are seeking to define themselves through lives that are more about expressing love toward others, while leaving behind rigid lists of rules and regulations. I very much enjoyed the chapter on "Learning How to Love," in which he talks about moving away from dehumanizing and scapegoating others and into humanizing them and seeing them as our brothers and sisters in the human race. If we take this tack, we'll always want what's best for others and focus more on the common good, rather than just on ourselves or our own little "tribe." If churches put half as much effort into simply loving each other in a generous and selfless way as they seem to put into trying to get people to believe a certain way (which BTW is pretty pointless IMHO, considering how many different Christian denominations there are out there), then we could really change the world for the better.

The chapter titled "The Genocide Card in Your Back Pocket" was particularly eye-opening. I knew that ever since it allied itself with empire during the reign of Constantine over the Roman Empire, the Christian faith has had a long sordid history of human rights abuses. But Rev. McLaren managed to enlighten me on a few new ones I wasn't familiar with, and let me say, it's truly stomach-churning stuff. In light of this, I can't help but feel that my faith has a lot for which it needs to repent and atone. And I'm not just talking about the past. Many things are still going on today, such as Christian ties to white supremacy, Christian exceptionalism, Christian alliances with politics, and more that we really need to clean house on. In order to do so, we must first give up our view of God as a violent Supreme Being and embrace a new view of God as a sacrificially loving and renewing Spirit.

Lastly I very much enjoyed the chapter on "The Bible in Labor," which seeks to explain the different ways of reading the Bible. Some subscribe to an absolute literal interpretation, while others view it as a literary work that contains artistry and has deeper meanings to glean from its pages. Rev. McLaren shows that reading of this holy text can be done in more than a simple binary way, and in fact is a two axis system. I loved the little chart he provides in which literal vs. literary are on the horizontal axis, while innocent/critical/integral are on the vertical axis. It really helped me to understand these different ways of interpreting Biblical texts and served to convince me that more people need to look much deeper than the surface. In doing so, we can come to an understanding that what we might see as tensions or contradictions between certain passages are really contractions or the equivalent of a woman being in labor. Many worry that rethinking their approach to Bible-reading may call into question whether Jesus still matters, but in reality, looking at it from this perspective can make Jesus even more beautiful by disarming both our understanding of the Bible and of God.

Overall, *The Great Spiritual Migration* is an excellent book that challenges readers to open themselves to a

more generous orthodoxy, which coincidentally is the title of one of Rev. McLaren's other books. It invites persons of faith to rethink their old – and perhaps, in some cases, outdated – views of God to take a fresh look at theology. And since so many of the faithful are beginning to look for ways to ensure a better, more peaceful future for us all, it also dares us to move away from *organized* religion and into *organizing* religion to help others through collaboration. Basically it's time to migrate and change just as the faith has done several times down throughout history, and I, for one, am ready for that journey.

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### **David says**

McLaren offers characteristically compelling stories alongside fresh models for interpreting faith. I especially enjoyed the reflections on the impact of "movements" on "institutions."

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### **Bythos says**

When you propose scrapping 2000 plus years of Christian tradition, belief, and practice, you need to replace it with something more than what can easily be gleaned from: the evening news, social media, sitcoms, dramas, academia, popular music, cinema, publishing, old media, new media, the Academy Awards, The Grammys, The Tony Awards, graphic novels, etc. Simply adding one heaping cup of Jesus to the foregoing ingredients then stirring to combine thoroughly and placing in the oven for 25 minutes won't result in a Christianity cake.

Realizing this might be a problem, the author devotes an entire paragraph to it on page 217: "One response...has been to throw barrels of conceptual beliefs overboard, like excess ballast or baggage that threatens to sink a ship in a storm. Taken to an extreme, this ejection of beliefs indeed saves the ship from sinking, only to leave it without any meaningful cargo and therefore reason to exist after the storm." Which is exactly what he achieves with this book, though I feel certain that's not what he intended.

I went ahead and gave the book two stars because it is well written and accessible to just about anyone interested in Christianity (or anyone else for that matter). I also really liked the questions for thought and discussion placed at the end of each chapter.

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### **Clif Hostetler says**

This book provides an articulation of a positive and progressive view of Christianity that calls for migration toward a way of life defined by love and away from being a religion about beliefs. This includes rejecting the image of God as a violent supreme Being and embracing the image of God as the renewing Spirit at work in our world for the common good. McLaren describes this as identifying less as organized religion and more as an "organizing" religion consisting of spiritual activists dedicated to healing the planet, building peace, overcoming poverty and injustice, and collaborating with other faiths to ensure a better future for all.

McLaren's message will come as welcome relief to progressive Christians who are frustrated with the way right wing politics has highjacked the widely perceived meanings for the word "Christian" as well as the related adjective "evangelical." Somehow conservative activists have caused these terms to become synonymous with "anti-poor, anti-environment, anti-gay, anti-intellectual, anti-immigrant, and anti-science (not to mention pro-torture, pro-inequality, pro-violence, pro-death penalty, and pro-war)."

McLaren in this book encourages Christians "to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all", migrating "from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life."

So how does the author explain all those people who understand differently from him? His explanation is that they are at different Christian maturity levels. A person's understanding of God can vary from God 1.0 to 5.0. Unsurprisingly, the author is at 5.0, the other people with differing understandings are at the other levels. The various levels are roughly described as follows (my shorthand descriptions):

- God 1.0—God's role is to provide whatever you demand.
- God 2.0—God 1.0 plus wants you to be a good person.
- God 3.0—God 1.0 and 2.0 plus obey authority figures and rules.
- God 4.0—God 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 plus commit to service for others.
- God 5.0—A God of the *inclusive we*

In order to elaborate further of God 5.0 McLaren provides the following statements by Jacqueline Lewis:

- We need God 5.0 to lead us away from the precipice of cataclysmic war.
- We need God 5.0 to save us from paralyzing polarization.
- We need God 5.0 to teach us to wisely revere and care for the earth upon which we all depend.
- We need God 5.0 because we now realize we have evolved together with all other forms of life on this tiny, fragile planet, which means that all creatures are our relatives, our relations. We are all part of one family tree, one web of life, and we need our understanding of God to embrace that reality.

McLaren addresses the various approaches to the Bible with the following grid. Presumably "Integral/Literary" is the author's preferred approach. (I tend to be more "Critical/Literary".)

In the second part of the book McLaren describes some the damage that conventional, unconverted understandings of God have caused and are causing. In the third part of the book he develops a fresh understanding of communities, institutions, and movements so Christians can migrate from *organized* religion to *organizing* religion (i.e. organizing for the common good).

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### **Sarah says**

I give it two stars out of Christian charity. This book irritated the fool out of me. I can't even really put my finger on what inspired such a passionate distaste for it in me. Was it the undercurrent of pretension? Perhaps. Maybe it was the sum of dozens of slight irritations—referring to the disabled as "diversely abled," (I live with a disability. I am not diversely abled), the offer of coaches standing by to teach churches to love (I'm guessing not for free), and don't get me started on God 1.0-5.0. This book is spiritually chafing. My greatest disappointment (besides having purchased it) is that this "better way to be Christian" turns out to be just, well, being a Christian. Jesus tells us to love one another, without any qualifiers. And he does so eloquently in significantly fewer words than Brian McLaren. My thought? Skip McLaren, read the Gospels, especially the red letters. And then go and do likewise.

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## **MG Maudlin says**

I love Brian McLaren and have been greatly influenced by him--especially by the two NEW KIND OF books, CHRISTIANITY and CHRISTIAN. But his latest one disappointed me. First, I felt the main metaphor--a grand spiritual migration taking place--seemed more asserted than described in any detail, let alone proven. Also, he seemingly sees this emerging shift as between those who think Christianity should be about love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, and justice and those who are mean and angry; these two groups also seem to break down cleanly between progressives and conservatives (also called fundamentalists). Being in the progressive camp myself, I still felt this breakdown was way too simplistic. Further, I really wanted to know which institutions and communities were giving reality to this emergence--because I would love to support them but have had a very difficult time locating any thriving examples (besides conferences where Brian speaks). Finally, one of the migrations is moving away from a conception of faith as obsessing over getting our beliefs right to focusing on incarnating the faith in community and caring (amen!) and then Brian spends the rest of the book obsessing over the beliefs of this new group. What? I read Brian to be challenged and to see the familiar in a wholly new light (one of his many gifts), but I have to say that I learned very little in this book despite being very sympathetic to its goals.

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## **Lisa Smith says**

A hopeful and enlightening read

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## **Paul C. says**

Speaker and former pastor Brian McLaren has given us a book which will prove provocative to many Christians. In The Great Spiritual Migration (Convergent, 2016) McLaren utilizes superb communicative skills throughout all 205 pages (228 counting the three Appendixes), speaking into the dissatisfaction among "Catholics, Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Orthodox Christians...that there must be a better way to be Christian" (p. 3-4, Introduction). While I agree that such a dissatisfaction is evident and needs addressing, McLaren has some interesting "solutions."

Get rid of doctrine

This is a sentiment throughout all of the book. Although I very much was intrigued by the opening pages of the book (I've never encountered a book by this author), it became very apparent that McLaren is not a fan of doctrine but actually seems nauseated by it. Doctrine, according to him, needs to be replaced by love, by inclusivity, by living like Jesus. McLaren is of course reacting to the serious problem in Christianity in which believers are more consumed and concerned with believing the right things than they are living the right way. But why cannot right living and right believing coexist? Are they really incompatible? The New Testament (NT) seems to hold both in balance. If some Christians highly stress doctrine and neglect right living, should we really throw the baby out with the bath water?

Become a Relativist

Besides flirting with universalism (p. 91-92), McLaren pushes for Christians to wander from what he perceives as close-mindedness and into the realm of anything is possible here as he hints often that there may

be no absolute truth (see especially p. 211 where he equates an openness to absolutely anything with an openness to the Holy Spirit as well as makes more implicit here his stance that there is no absolute truth).

I happen to be a big advocate for maintaining mystery in our relationship with God as it has nurtured my awe and wonder of him. I don't, however, throw a staple of Christianity (=Scripture and doctrines extracted from it) out the window. An open mind is never a bad thing. But once you wander into relativism, it is not too speculative to say you'll never return. McLaren shares stories of his personal faith journey and of how he has almost left the faith. In reading the book I honestly did wonder if he in fact hasn't already left the faith and replaced it with relative ambiguity.

Use your experience as the lens through which you read Scripture

I've never used the phrase "a low view of Scripture." It's a phrase that many fundamentalists may use when they disagree with you. Nevertheless these words are what my brain came up with when writing this review. McLaren implies greatly that our culture (as well as our emotions and experience) act (or rather should act) as a lens through which we read Scripture rather than Scripture being a lens through which we view culture (and our experience). Spiritual Migration disregards the importance of the Bible left and right, a confusing thing to ponder since historically this book has been a great anchor of our faith.

Throughout the book the idea is put forth of moving on from what we know (doctrinally) and moving into the unknown and mysterious. I am very much an advocate of maintaining mystery in the Christian faith; but I cannot enter the relative oblivion that McLaren holds on tightly throughout the pages in Spiritual Migration in which there may not really be any truth, only love.

At the start of ch. 2 he uses an analogy of the changes made in science, stating that just as there new discovering which change how we view science, so we need to let our beliefs undergo change and evolve... To what end do Christians evolve? I'm all for being subversive, something that is sadly not always happening in the church's interactions with culture because of the dichotomy between the "sacred" and the "secular." But what McLaren calls for throughout his new release is not just an evolution which calls Christians to be subversive; but rather McLaren seems to call Christians to give up on Christianity (historical Christianity) and yet still call it 'Christianity'! (This really is mind-boggling to me.) To give up on doctrine and just love people.

McLaren will use Scripture at times to prove points but then will contradict himself by making statements which downplay Scripture and doctrine. He constantly pits love and doctrine against one another all the while quoting from the likes of Jesus and Paul. What McLaren needs to realize is that Jesus and Paul are both Jews and therefore doctrine is a given, as the Jews historically held very tightly to their "doctrines"; that there is one God, that the Law is from God, that it is a light to Israel's feet, etc. Paul and Jesus are not products of America in the 70's and the "make love not war" era; there were Jews (from Israel) from 2,000 years ago.

One section, noting many terrible things done in the name of God (by apparent Christians) implies that because much in the past was terrible, we cannot trust the past exegesis of church history. Once again this is an example where the author throws the baby out with the bathwater. Many of the terrible things noted in his book (conquests, slavery, etc.) of course arose from different factors, one of them being a mistreatment and abuse of Scripture; a projecting of cultural norms onto Scripture to make Scripture align with our own twisted (or fallen) agenda. This happened in America when "Christians" used Scripture to justify slavery (=a cultural norm) and what McLaren does throughout Spiritual Migration to justify his modern agenda full of modern cultural norms (of inclusiveness, universalism, relativism).

\*(When I refer to “inclusiveness” I mean by it the support of gay marriage.)

Ultimately McLaren’s new release scoffs at the idea that both love and values can be held in high and equal esteem, utterly rejecting such a notion.

In closing, I am happy to have read this book as I have been interested in what Brian McLaren has to say (as I hear him quoted often among progressive Christians). This book does seem to indicate that he has given up on the church as we have known it for 2,000 years. That said, I am grateful to have a voice which stresses the importance of social action/justice and calls for us to reexamine not just what we believe but why we believe it.

(I received my copy from Blogging For Books in exchange for an honest assessment.)

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### **Randal Martin says**

Liberating book. Some parts are challenging for a recovering Baptist like myself but that's the beauty of Progressive Christianity. It's less about having the correct beliefs than it is the fruit of your beliefs. While many churches get caught up in maintaining the old practices even in the face of new questions and challenges, Brian's book challenges you to allow questions to be asked. Re-look at the way you have just accepted some things about your faith in the past. Remember that Jesus started this great migration away from being bound by the law; why have we as a church chosen to re-incarcerate ourselves inside those very same walls?

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### **Mary Ann says**

Read this for my study group at church. Very enlightening. Love the perspective of focusing on the way we live as opposed to dividing ourselves by what we believe

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### **Heidi Archer says**

A sneaky favourite of the year! I did not expect this book to be this good. It was like Brian McLaren has been eavesdropping on my thoughts and my conversations with David for the past year or so, and then wrote a book nearly perfectly expressing those thoughts and conversations. And on top of that, tangible suggestions for action and deep, hard challenges for me personally.

Loved the second appendix, where he writes "Fourteen Precepts of Just and Generous Christianity" inspired by "Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism" by Thich Nhat Hanh. I was uncomfortable reading these when I thought about what it would mean to live them out in my life. I'll need to reflect on these more.

Right off the bat, Brian nails down the obsession with certainty that runs rampant in many communities -

Christian and non-Christian alike. He explores the Christian idol of certainty, specifically when it comes to the bible, and I pretty much loved everything he had to say about that. It was a relief to read the words of someone so wise and much further down the path of life than I who had struggled with the same issues that I do.

I appreciated his gentle, yet frequent, reminder that the violent God needing appeasement that much of modern-day Christianity propagates needs to be replaced with the God of peace. "...for the world to migrate away from violence, our God must migrate away from violence." I am still surprised to think back on how I perceived God in my past and how violent and angry that God was. Yes, that was the God taught to me in many facets of church, though there were notable exceptions. Whether this violent God was taught to me and others on purpose or not, I don't know.

Chapter 4 - "The Genocide Card in Your Back Pocket" - whoa. So hard to read this chapter. It is horrifying. Thankfully at the end of each chapter, there are some discussion questions to help you digest what you have just read.

Brian talks about a "system of beliefs versus a way of life," which made total sense to me, especially in light of how people treat the environment. The suicidal track of consumption the world is on will kill us all - Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Atheist alike. Environmental justice as a spiritual practice is relatively new to me, and I am still working out how to live that out in this world.

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