

Brian McLaren

“Naked Spirituality and a New Kind of Christianity”

Episode 9 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Brian McLaren was featured by *Time* magazine as one of America’s 25 most influential Evangelicals. He has served on the board of *Sojourners’* Call to Renewal and is a founding member of Red Letter Christians. His book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is widely considered a manifesto of the Emerging Church movement, and *A New Kind of Christianity* explores the intersection of Christian faith with contemporary culture and global crises.

HIGHLIGHTS

This is a good introduction to **the “Emerging Church” movement**, which is the **most progressive edge of evangelical Christianity**. (Note: “Progressive Christianity,” espoused by several speakers in this series, is at the leading edge of moderate-to-liberal *non*-evangelical forms of Christianity.) McLaren has 24 years of pastoral experience, and he speaks in a way that is **easy for lay church people to understand and apply to their lives**. He also regularly draws upon personal and other anecdotes to illustrate his comments. Significant religious concepts include the upside and downside of **“Christian exceptionalism,”** a **critique of “God-as-engineer,”** a celebration of the **creation myths of other cultures**, and **an inclusive understanding of the Kingdom of God**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Highly recommended for all moderate-to-liberal faith groups and especially for Evangelicals who are open to learning about the most progressive edge of Bible-based Christianity.

BLOG COMMENTS

Don Smith says:

Another great dialogue. When I read Brian’s “A New Kind of Christian” I wondered whether this was one rogue evangelical or a sign of something emerging within more

conservative Christianity. As a progressive/liberal, I honestly had my doubts. Since then, however, I have been impressed with the depth of ideas and thinking within evangelical Christianity without it trying to become liberal or progressive or 'like me'! I now see this as a very good thing.

As Brian Swimme suggests, diversity is a gift of the Universe—and our ability to discern the beauty and richness which diversity of culture and ideas brings is an evolutionary challenge. People like Brian McLaren have allowed folks on both sides of the conservative-liberal divide to see more clearly the value of differing approaches to the divine and our shared journey.

Thanks to you, Brian, for your life of discerning and sharing—and to Michael for making this all happen.

Pastor Andy Schottelkorb says:

Another good conversation to tune-in on. Thanks. As a lifelong ELCA Lutheran (a fairly young church with 5 centuries of tradition behind it), I especially appreciate that this discussion covered the static traditional vs. dynamic emerging church, and the wrestling (hopefully peaceful wrestling, as McLaren also hopes for) within those two polar opposites. Adding science to the mix there just adds to the fun!

KEYWORD TOPICS

Emerging Church, the Jesus movement, Young Life, direct spiritual experience (importance of), **stages of faith development, hope** (importance of and diversity of needs for), **evil** (problem of), **genocide, Gospel** (as message of hope), **trajectory of evolution. Big History, human nature** (mismatched instincts), **the Fall, Original Sin, integrity, gratitude, addictions, temptations, morality, shame, self-hatred, hypocrisy, evolutionary psychology, witness capacity, Thomas Aquinas, biblical literalism, God as engineer, God's immanence, universe as creative, creation myths, "pre-natural" v. supernatural stories, Marlin Lavanhar, Kingdom of God** (inclusive view of), **inclusive interpretations of Christian doctrines, postmodernism, Spencer Burke, Christian exceptionalism, Pentecostal, Evangelicalism, emergence** (as an evolutionary process), **emergentism** (in lieu of "materialism"), **religious naturalism, Terry Deacon, Ursula Goodenough, John Haught, religious education** (for youth questioning their faith), **"the courage to differ graciously"**

BIOGRAPHY

Brian D. McLaren is an author, speaker, pastor, blogger, and networker among innovative Christian leaders, thinkers, and activists. His work has been covered in *Time* magazine (where he was listed as one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals), *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century*, *The Washington Post*, and many other print media.

McLaren has been active in networking and mentoring church planters and pastors since

the mid 1980s and has assisted in the development of several new churches. He is a popular conference speaker and a frequent guest lecturer at seminaries and denominational gatherings, nationally and internationally.

He is the author of numerous books, including *A Generous Orthodoxy*, which has been called a manifesto of the Emerging Church, and *The Secret Message of Jesus*. His more recent books, *Everything Must Change* and *A New Kind of Christianity*, explore the intersection of contemporary culture, global crises, and Christian faith. His 2011 release, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in Twelve Simple Words*, focuses on soul formation and the inner life.

McLaren has served on a number of boards, including Emergent Village and Sojourners. He is a founding member of Red Letter Christians, a group of communicators seeking to broaden and deepen the dialogue about faith and public life. He is a key participant in the emerging global dialogue about the future of Christian faith in its many forms. He served as a church pastor for 24 years. His website is: <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/about-brian/>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

3-minute video of McLaren's focus on a liberal evangelical faith:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SznXSH2N3Ng&feature=player_embedded#!

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones posted) at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/brian-mclaren-emerging-church-evolving-faith/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **The downside of “belonging to the elect.”** Brian McLaren summarizes key aspects of his Christian upbringing that, in his youth, made it problematic for him to remain a Christian:

I grew up in a very, as I said, somewhat fundamentalist, sectarian, dogmatic setting, and there are certain things about that that I think hold an appeal. There's an appeal to belonging to the elect, to feeling that you're the people with both the high calling and the great burden of knowing the truth and being the redeemed, and so on. But the downside of it is that all the questions are answered, and everybody else is wrong and we're right. And that created a lot of issues for me, in part because as a young boy, I was interested in science and nature and animals and plants and so on, and I just found that the simplistic way of reading the Bible I'd grown up with kept forcing me to make choices that didn't seem right to make. **If God was so great, then why was I told to stop asking questions?** Why were certain issues completely out of bounds, and why was the whole thing so fragile and tense?

Question 1A: Which aspects of Brian McLaren's story ring true, given your own faith journey?

Question 1B: *Brian speaks of both the upside and the downside of, what is sometimes called, “Christian **exceptionalism**” — feeling among the “elect.” Do you (or did you at one time) feel a sense of Christian exceptionalism? If so, what is/was the upside for you, and what is/was the downside? If not, have you experienced a downside when other Christians let you know that you weren’t perhaps quite Christian enough to be among the elect?*

Question 1C: *How can **children** be offered a Christian (or other worldview) perspective by parents and religious educators in a way that has them feel good and safe in the religion they are given— while guarding against their acquiring a self-righteous intolerance of, and superiority to, other approaches to faith that they might encounter among their peers?*

2. The importance of authentic spiritual experience. Almost all of the speakers in this series choose to include in the summaries of their faith journeys a moment of authentic spiritual experience that made a huge difference in their life. For many it happens in childhood or the teenage years. Others choose to recount a key experience later in life. Here is how Brian McLaren recounts the importance (though not the substance) of his own.

In many ways, what I needed was some kind of **personal experience that would go beyond this very rigid system of dogma**, and that's what happened to me. I was invited on a retreat by a friend from another church, and this was one of those times in the early '70s when there seemed to be an awful lot of this going around. We were at this retreat center, and I don't think it was a particularly good retreat. I don't think there were any great speakers, or anything like that. There was no music. In fact, parts of it were pretty corny, but I just know that was the weekend where something inside me opened up, and I felt there really was something there. And the **grandeur and majesty of my experience of God** had so much more weight and substance to it than the more thin and narrow dogmatism I'd inherited.

Question 2A: *How valuable is it for you to hear the speakers recount such spiritual experiences? If this story reminds you of **an experience you had**, please share it with the group — both how you interpreted it back then and how you interpret it now.*

Question 2B: *What are the **circumstances** in which you sometimes choose to share the story of your own most profound direct spiritual experiences or sense of awakening? Reflect on who in your life, right now, might benefit from hearing your story. And who in your life, right now, might you invite to speak to you of their own. Please share your experience of pondering these questions to whatever extent you are comfortable.*

3. Stages of faith development and the importance of hope. Brian McLaren tells this story:

One of my observations in life is that people always are looking for **the next step up in their development**. If they're down in the basement, they're looking for a way to get to the first floor. And if they're on the first floor, they want to get upstairs, and so on. Very often, answers that to one person seem ridiculous, and they would seem like a step down, are a step up from where people are starting. I felt this a couple weeks ago. I happened to be in Cambodia, and I met a woman who had lived through **the horrible genocide there under Pol Pot**, and she had come to faith after the

genocide. She wasn't someone who found God in the midst of all the horror. It was after the horror that she had an experience of God. She said she heard the gospel, and I kept asking her, "What was the gospel you heard?" I think she wasn't used to anyone asking her that question, but finally, here's what she said to me. She said, "Really, what it was is they told me that there was **a God who created the universe**. And I thought if there really is a God, then maybe there's some **hope** in the midst of all the horror and loss I've experienced through this horrible regime."—just the simple idea that there was some hope: that's what helped her at that moment. I think we're all in various predicaments, and that's why what helps one person doesn't help another. They're in a different predicament, they need something else, and I think that's important for us to remember.

Question 3A: *When you experienced your greatest life challenges, where in your faith or worldview do (or did) you most readily **access the gift of hope**? Alternatively, does your current faith or worldview **not adequately provision you** with such comfort in times of distress and need? If so, why not? What seems to be missing?*

4. **An evolutionary understanding of sin and temptation.** In many of the episodes of this series, **Michael Dowd** shares his own experience and understandings. In this conversation he revisits a topic first explored in depth in Episode 2 with Denis Lamoureux. He talks about how an evolutionary understanding human instincts profoundly enriches his appreciation of the mythic wisdom of the story of the Fall and helps him maintain integrity. **Dowd says**, in part,

The same thing applies to everything from **television to sports to shopping and drugs and alcohol and tobacco and caffeine and video games and internet porn** and all the different things that we can so easily be captivated by—and that our attraction to makes total sense from an evolutionary standpoint. Whereas, if your best story for what's going on inside of you is that the reason I'm having these **temptations**, thoughts, feelings, and habits that are difficult to break is because my great-great-grandmother ate an apple ... If I think *that's* the truth, if *that's* the best story I've got, then there's no explanatory power, and there's definitely no gratitude, no feeling of thanksgiving, that **if my ancestors didn't have these same instincts, I wouldn't be alive**.

It's like being able to 'give glory', to use religious language, to **feel this gratitude**. I don't know how to speak about it other than praise language: gratitude and thanksgiving for the fact that these things were *essential* for me to be alive. And now, *knowing* this and being able to *feel* grateful makes it 100 times easier to **stay in integrity**.

Question 4A: *Has Michael Dowd explained himself well enough for you to understand how it is that he values the **evolutionary perspective** for helping him live "in Christ" — that is, in **integrity**? How can he actually say that he is "grateful" for aspects of his evolved nature that cause the most challenge?*

Question 4B: *Is there an aspect of your own life (including how you judge others who may be challenged with temptation) where you can see **how Michael Dowd's perspective might serve you, too**? That is, would it make a difference in your life to nurture an **appreciation** of the fact that our inherited instincts evolved to serve our ancestors' survival and reproductive needs prior to the agricultural revolution — but those very same instincts are now **mismatched** for the world we have to live in today?*

5. **Beyond God-as-engineer.** Brian McLaren speaks of how he was raised in an evangelical setting in which the Bible was regarded as having been “dictated” by God, and hence it was a “timeless, uncontextual revelation.” As he moved beyond that view he recounts,

What a different world than to live in a world where there is always more to learn, where everything you learn teaches you even more that you didn't know! It's a radically different experience of life, and it gives you **a different understanding of God**. In one case, God is kind of like a cosmic—sort of a cross between an engineer and a mean fifth grade teacher, and everything's about a test question and do you have the right answer or not, versus this sense of an amazing factory of creativity and diversity and beauty, and **a universe that's this amazing mix of unpredictability and pattern** and so on. It gives you a very different image of what a Creator of those two different universes would look like.

Question 5: *Has your understanding of the Bible and of God developed in ways similar to that of Brian McLaren's journey, or differently? Please explain.*

6. **Evolution and the immanence of God.** Michael Dowd concurs with Brian McLaren that an “engineering” view of God is a diminished understanding. He takes it one step further. **Dowd** says,

For many people, their vision of God isn't the **Creator** at all. Creators take what's real in the moment and then create from it. Engineers figure it out ahead of time. For many people, their metaphor for God is more that of an **engineer**, someone who figured it out and then made it at all at once, in the beginning. But what we've discovered *evidentially* is that **the universe itself is creative**. Stars are creative, galaxies are creative, planets are creative, creatures are creative. And so, that brings the **immanence** of God back screamingly back into the picture.

Question 6: *Do you share Dowd's perspective that an evolutionary understanding enhances the immanence (and omnipresence) of God? Overall, if and where does Dowd's perspective attract you—and if and where do you depart from it?*

7. **Learning other people's creation myths.** Brian McLaren introduces an ancient creation story:

Some years ago, I read about some of the **ancient Egyptian creation myths**, and I thought, “What different societies get generated based on their creation myths!” So, if you're in the Book of Genesis, which very possibly emerged in conversation and argument with an Egyptian creation myth—in **Genesis, human beings come into a world where they're given responsibility, creativity**. The animals don't have names, so humans are supposed to understand the animals and name them. So much of science really is observing and naming, isn't it? So, there's room for science, and the world isn't fully populated. There's all this space for evolution and development. But in the ancient **Egyptian creation narrative**, the rice fields were planted, the irrigation channels were all dug, the houses were built, and *then* the Gods say, “We need some people to keep this whole thing going.” **This kind of story creates a universe of stasis**, where my job is to be a drone and fill my function, and nothing more.

Our myths, even these ancient myths: in many ways, we still see them at work, don't we?—in the different kinds of political and economic lives that we throw ourselves into.

Question 7A: *Do you enjoy learning about creation stories from other cultures, or does it seem irrelevant or make you uncomfortable? Have you experienced the Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell interview series: **Power of Myth** (which original aired on public television in the late 1980s)? If so, in what ways are you attracted — or unattracted — by this kind of learning and comparative thought?*

Question 7B: *Have you found a way to **interpret the biblical creation stories** so that they serve your faith? If not, do you have a different mythic origin story that is meaningful to you? Or is **Big History**, the **epic of evolution**, sufficient for you? Do you think something is missing if we do not find and embrace a creation story in a way that moves us and connects us to the fullness of space, time, and whatever we regard as divine? Please elaborate.*

8. **An inclusive understanding of the Kingdom of God.** The Emerging Church is known for bringing an inclusive sense to traditional Christian concepts that are important to **Evangelicals**. Brian McLaren says,

Jesus has this message about the **Kingdom of God**, and the Kingdom of God is this large reality, this large story that encompasses everyone and everything. It's not just one religion or one ethnic group; it's completely all-inclusive.

Then **Paul**, who's a Pharisee, has to rethink everything in light of that experience of Christ that he had, and that message of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. So, if you look at the book of *Romans*, he starts with the Law of **Moses**, and then he goes before Moses to **Abraham**, because he says not everybody shares the Law of Moses—although he tries to say everybody does have some sense of conscience. Then he goes before Moses to Abraham, and he says in Abraham, everybody who has faith is part of the same family. But then he even goes before Abraham to **Adam**, as if to say in Adam, we have a story in which we're all human beings. And I think this is very much what you and I are struggling for: a way of seeing this bigger story that is all-inclusive.

Question 8: *How important is it to you for **faith doctrines to be interpreted in inclusive ways**? What is to be gained by inclusive interpretations, and what, if anything, is lost?*

9. **The “courage to differ graciously.”** In talking about how to guide **young people as they question religious doctrines**, Brian McLaren also advocates that they be guided in how to have “the courage to differ graciously.” He says,

By that I mean, when someone says something like I heard when I was a kid, **either you believe in God or you believe in evolution, not to get into an argument**, but just to have the courage to differ graciously. Say something like, “Well, I believe in God, and I think evolution makes a lot of sense, so I probably don't fit that statement.” And not to cause a fight, but just to raise your voice. If more and more of us do that, it helps change the environment.

Question 9A: *Would McLaren’s “courage to differ graciously” be a useful skill for religious educators and Christian parents **to teach their kids**? What about its broader applications?*

Question 9B: This series includes a widely diverse mix of Christian thought-leaders, some whose concerns are more pastoral and other who are more academically theological. Brian McLaren **pastored** a church for 24 years and is now a leader in the **Emerging Church** movement at the most progressive edge of evangelical Christianity. *Do you find the dialogues **with pastors or with theologians** (or both, in different ways) to be more helpful to your faith concerns and questions?*

10. **The appeal of the Emerging Church movement.** The Emerging Church movement is widely considered as **the most progressive edge of evangelical Christianity**. Some, of course, regard it as over the edge—as too **heretical**.

Question 10A: *Prior to this educational series, were you aware of the **Emerging Church** movement? Did this dialogue give you a sense of why **progressive Evangelicals** may find it very attractive? Say more.*

Question 10B: *What questions or confusion remain for you in understanding the Emerging Church movement and what it may offer to Evangelicals who can no longer accept traditional interpretations of Christian doctrines?*

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