

Brian McLaren

“Naked Spirituality and a New Kind of Christianity”

Episode 9 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
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Note: *The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.*

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 9 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Brian McLaren](#) (also [here](#)) is our featured guest. [Brian](#) is the closest thing to a rock star in the [Emerging Church](#) movement. He was recognized by [Time Magazine as one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals](#). He's the author of [many books](#), including [A Generous Orthodoxy](#); [The Secret Message of Jesus](#); [A New Kind of Christianity](#); and [Naked Spirituality](#). Here we discuss “Naked Spirituality and A New Kind of Christianity.” As you'll hear, Brian and I really spiraled each other on this whole notion of a relational universe.

Host: Hello, Brian McLaren, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Brian: Great to be with you, Mike.

Host: I've been looking forward to this for a long time, brother.

Brian: I've been looking forward to it as well.

Host: About a dozen people that we know in common have been speaking highly of you over the years, and this is the first time we've actually spoken.

Brian, you've got quite a journey, and a lot of different things you've been engaged in, in the whole field of religion and spirituality and the [Emerging Church](#). I'd like to invite you at the beginning to say, how did you come to where you are now in your faith journey? A little bit of background would be wonderful.

Brian: Well, I grew up in a very conservative Protestant background. I think [fundamentalist](#) would be a fair description of it—very [conservative evangelical](#). I was one of those kids who

was interested in science, and I had an artistic streak. I was a natural learner and questioner. So, I think I grew up on a collision course with that version of Christian faith. I was, in my own mind, on my way out as a teenager. But I was intercepted by [the Jesus movement](#) when it first was hitting my corner of the world.

I grew up near Washington, D.C., and a couple of things happened. First, I was exposed to the Jesus movement, and then a fellow who attended my church who was actually a [Young Life](#) leader, he invited me to a small group he was part of. It wasn't actually affiliated with the organization Young Life, but he invited me to that group, and a whole constellation of things started bearing down on me, pushing me to make a decision of what direction I'd go in my life.

In the middle of all that, I had a powerful spiritual experience that ended up setting me on a course as a committed Christian. I still had a lot of things to work out. I never planned to be a pastor at that point. I wanted to teach college English, so I majored in English and then went to graduate school, and I got married. While my wife and I were living right near the university, we started a dinner group. Once a week we would make homemade bread and soup and invite some people over. This ended up becoming a little faith community, leading into the formation of a little church. And some years after that—I had become a teacher—and I left teaching to work full-time with the church.

I was just recounting to someone the other day that when I did that, I had no foresight. I don't ever remember thinking, "I wonder if this is my career? I wonder how many years I'll do this for?" But I did it for 24 years, and it was a great focus for my life's work for many years.

But while I was a pastor, a combination of people who came to the church would ask me a lot of questions. That, along with my own continuing intellectual and spiritual development, thrust me onto a path of being uncomfortable with a lot of the answers I had inherited—and that is what led to me writing and getting involved in the work I'm doing now.

Host: I want to go back to when you mentioned having a spiritual experience. I'm curious, is there anything else you'd like to say, in terms of how you came to that, what was going on inside of you at that time?

Brian: Well, 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?

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.

Host: That's one of the things I've appreciated about your whole approach, the emphasis on authenticity and integrity and experience, over dogma and having the right beliefs and the right practices.

Brian: 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.

Host: I agree completely. In fact, I was having a conversation with somebody the other day on pretty much this point, and one of things that I am most excited about with respect to evolutionary Christianity—and, really, evolutionary faith in general, broader than just Christianity—is that for the first time in human history we now have access to the fundamental feeling-states that human beings have always needed to thrive—states like *trust* in the future rather than fear, *gratitude* for the past rather than guilt or resentment, and *inspiration* to be in action in the moment—whatever the challenges or chaos of difficulties or pain of the day.

[For virtually all of human history, until very recently, the only way to get access to those feeling-states was through mythic beliefs. There was no knowledge that could get you there,](#) because there wasn't access to enough knowledge about how things are in terms of deep time, over billions of years: these long-term patterns and the nature of reality—both the objective *outside* reality, but also our own human nature, what's going on *inside* of us, why

we're tempted by certain things and drawn in certain ways, all the stuff that now we're beginning to have some evidence about (*also see [here](#)*). We're still in the young stages, but we're now able to supplement some of the long-standing beliefs that have given people these rich, thriving feeling-states, and supplement those with knowledge, evidence, and experience that's cross-cultural. It's just a terribly exciting time to be alive, to be able to see this blend, this coming-together of intuitive ways of knowing, mythic ways of knowing and speaking, and evidential ways of knowing and speaking—and not having them be in conflict, but actually interpreted in a mutually enhancing dance.

Brian: I hadn't thought about that before, Michael, but let me see if I'm getting what you're saying. So, four thousand years ago, human beings around the world would've had the experience of thunder and lightning. And so, they'd have reactions to that and might even develop theology as an explanation based on that. But as time's gone on, we've learned a little bit more about the physics of thunder and lightning, and then we learned more and more. That creates problems for our old mythic systems, but it then gives us new shared experiences and knowledge bases that now we can reflect on and think more deeply about.

And it really is true, when you put us in this universe that is this unfolding, expanding, evolving universe, and now that becomes a shared experience to reflect on. It will be fascinating to see how that affects our inner and spiritual lives.

Host: It really does—and in my experience, it's such an enrichment. My faith walk, to use that language, how I live my life on a daily basis and the quality of my relationships, have improved so significantly as a result of coming to embrace an evolutionary understanding, [a deep-time, science-based evidential understanding of human nature, death, and the trajectory of “Big History.”](#) Those three things—human nature, death and chaos, and the flow of billions of years of history, this emergent complexity—none of those things could've possibly been known by human beings prior to telescopes, microscopes, and computers in the way that we now have an understanding of them. And our understanding isn't complete; it's not finished or final, but it's so much richer than the mythic beliefs we've had before.

There are people who say it makes outdated the mythic understandings, but I don't believe it does at all. For me it enriches them, expands them, deepens my appreciation of them. The classic examples are concepts like the Fall of Adam and Eve and original sin, which are obviously central concepts to the Christian tradition, and they speak to the fundamental understanding of what's wrong with us, why we say we're going to do something and we don't, why we say we'll never do something and we do, why we break our word and let people down, why we have difficulty staying in integrity at times. Why is that? Well, the Fall of Adam and Eve is a really good story that explains that, but now that we've had an understanding of our instincts, that we have instincts like all other animals have instincts, and yet [our instincts don't match the world that we today have to live in](#) (*also [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)*). Our instincts match a world in which our ancestors used to live in, and it helped them survive and thrive long enough to reproduce in that kind of a world.

And yet the world we live in, where we're surrounded by activities and substances and everything that can distract us, lead us astray, that can cause it to be difficult to be in integrity, having some understanding of that, with gratitude, has made it infinitely easier to stay in integrity. I can honestly say that today I don't struggle with my sinful nature—yet there was a time in my life when I would have thought that kind of comment was pure heresy. *We all* struggle: that's the standard belief. But having *gratitude*—for example, I see a really attractive woman and *of course* I think she should be carrying my baby! *[laughter]* That's an instinctual thought. But because I now *understand* my instincts, I don't make myself wrong. I'm not judging myself, nor am I tempted to act on that in any kind of way. I just smile internally, I know what's going on, and then I go about my business.

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 totally make 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-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 God 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. Part of it is that we realize that [integrity is not a solo sport. It's a team sport](#); we need each other—which, of course, is what all the recovery programs say, and everything else.

Brian: I think you're on to some beautiful thoughts there. It hits me: the way that our [moralism](#) can malfunction if, in our moralism, all we want to do is say *this* is a good behavior, *this* is a bad behavior, *this* one will get you to hell, *this* one will get you to heaven, *this* one should be punished, *this* one should be rewarded. You can see that helps some people who've been living in a somewhat pre-moral state. Maybe they need to start thinking about the consequences of their actions. But it also creates this inner world of shame and unacceptability and self-hatred and cover-up and hypocrisy, and so on.

But when we augment that with some scientific understanding, so that we say, "It's not my fault"—the examples you gave of sexual attractions, or you could even think of things like aggression and competitiveness and all the rest—you start to say, these are parts of my makeup that were evolutionarily advantageous at some point, but if I give in to them now, and if everybody gives in to them now, we're in big trouble. It breaks us out of some of that self-hatred and that shunning of what we often call our dark side.

Host: Exactly. My wife's niece, Halsey, grew up in a very conservative Roman Catholic family, and she went to nursing school. And in her first semester of nursing school, she had a professor who was a fanatic about evolution. And she wrote a paper on Madagascan lemurs and she had this complete epiphany. She said, "I saw how *beautiful* evolution was!" Then she started reading books on evolutionary psychology and brain science, and she sent us an email. It was coming to understand her own nature at the age of 18, being able to develop a witness capacity, being able to see her own instincts from a place of appreciation—like, of course I've got these instincts!—all this allowed her to take with a sense of humor what six months prior she was constantly beating herself about. And paradoxically, the challenges didn't have any power over her after that. It was quite extraordinary.

Brian: It is, and I certainly identify with that kind of epiphany she had in studying lemurs in Madagascar. When you see the relatedness of things, and you see that we're all part of this common, unfolding story: I know for some people that reduces the universe to some mechanism, but it doesn't do that for me. For me, it gives it this sense of being one giant, expanding family, and there is a sense of glory and connectedness and beauty to it that certainly enhances my spiritual life, my love for God. And I also think, for Christians, there are many deep dimensions in which we can reengage with Jesus, and see Jesus in light of different themes than we may have been trained to do in the past.

Host: What you just said reminded me of a quote from [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) 750 years ago. He said, "*A mistake about Creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God.*" Now, if that's true, what it means among other things is, the more we learn about the nature of creation, of the universe, if we're not updating what we mean when we use the word *God*, we may have definitions and understandings and metaphors that are so far outdated that they're no longer life-giving.

I'm wondering, Brian, how has your understanding of God, and experience of God, shifted as a result of integrating science in your spirituality, in your faith?

Brian: As someone coming from a conservative, evangelical background, I was taught to read the Bible as this unchanging, revelatory document—even though no good theologian would ever say this. I was raised on the *dictation* theory: God dictated the Bible in some way to people. And so, there was this sense that it was a timeless, un-contextual revelation, and we just had to get down to that, and then we would have the absolute truth.

If you believe that, I think it could make you incredibly arrogant: *we're* the ones who possess this knowledge. It also, I think, becomes a little bit boring, especially if you're bright and you pay attention. I've jokingly said, but I actually think it's true, by the time I was in seventh or eighth grade, I'd heard every sermon I was going to hear in my life. If I had stayed in the denomination of my birth, I don't think I would've heard a new sermon, I certainly wouldn't have heard a new hymn, because this was very conservative. They sang the same hymns all

the time. Since I was in seventh or eighth grade, I would not have heard anything new in all the intervening years. It would've just been new versions of the old, same basic things.

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.

Host: Yeah, 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 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 screamingly back into the picture.

Brian: And interestingly enough, that is very much what I think those ancient Genesis myths were conveying. Especially 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.

Host: Yes. I think of all of them as *pre-natural* stories. That is, they're before we could've possibly had a natural understanding. We couldn't have had a natural understanding until we had things like telescopes and microscopes and computers—a worldwide self-correcting enterprise where people test each other's stuff and try to prove each other wrong, and that sort of thing. So [every culture has a pre-natural story that, if you interpreted it literally, would sound supernatural](#)—gods and goddesses flying and jumping and speaking and creating out of this and that, and all kinds of things.

It's like our dreams. We don't call what we do in our dreams “supernatural,” because we understand the dream-state. To call the elements of pre-modern creation stories *supernatural* is to miss the nature of literature of the time, it seems to me, which allows me then to go back and look at them not from a place of “Are they right or wrong?” But, if you operate within this map of reality, within this mythic map of *how things are* and *which things matter*—what's real and what's important—if you live your life according to that, what kind of life will you live? How will it influence your behavior? How will you live in response or related to your fellow beings? From that sort of a standpoint, we can see the deep wisdom in virtually all of the myths.

Brian: And even more so, when we start seeing them be in conversation with each other, and you think, “Okay, this myth is trying to improve upon problems that came up in the last myth.” And then you start to see them not so much in terms of right or wrong, true or false, but as appropriate and needed and helpful. And then, in some ways, you see each of those narrative frameworks then create a new set of problems that have to be solved by later ones. Even in that— isn't it interesting?—there's a kind of evolutionary unfolding process, a process of growth happening through all of those stories.

Host: Yes. I'm wondering, if you look to the future and imagine things unfolding, emerging in the direction that things seem to be emerging, how do you see the common creation story that we now get through science, of [13.7 billion years of creativity, physical evolution, biological evolution, and cultural evolution as one sacred story](#), our common creation myth: How do you see that shifting Christianity? Or, how do you see Christians embracing that? Or, *do* you see Christians embracing that?

Brian: Well, there's the million-dollar question, isn't there! I think the picture looks more complicated to me now than it did twenty years ago. I'll tell you a couple reasons why.

First, I think, I grew up as a child of the '60s and '70s, believing that secularization was the big story. But I don't think too many people feel that way anymore. I think, either we realize that secularization was wishful thinking on behalf of some people, or it was a phenomenon which would then have a counter-movement against it—and we're living in that now. But when you think that something like 33 percent of the world's population are affiliated with Christianity—not all of them are affiliated with the most conservative forms, but there are growing numbers of those conservative forms—and then you think that about 24 percent of the world's population is affiliated with Islam, which shares a lot of the similarity of texts and affirms the same ancient creation stories, and it tends to interpret them in the same literalistic way, and then you look at demographic trends—and I was just told by a friend who studied this sort of thing that the prediction is that in 2100, 66 percent of the world's population will be either Christian or Muslim. So, that's up from 50-some percent, to two-thirds of the world's population. So if Christianity and Islam don't find a better way to integrate their understanding and their reverence for their ancient texts with a more scientific understanding of origins and history, we're in for a lot of trouble, I think. And so this, it seems to me, is extremely dynamic.

Now, on the hopeful side—I should try to get around to answer your question—as we together try to understand the stories of Islam and Christianity and Hinduism and Buddhism and Confucianism and so on, as we try to understand the stories of our religious traditions, somehow inside of this larger story of an expanding (roughly) 14 billion year old universe, that might give us the chance to see our stories in less combative and hateful and fearful ways. That could really open up some new territory that's very hopeful.

Host: I hope so, too. I know when I think about the question that I asked you, and I imagine 50, 80, 100 years out, I think that we are in the early stages—and I hope it's not just wishful thinking—of a huge transformation religiously. As I read it, the essence of it is *how we see evidence*. I think we're in the midst of, you could call it, an “[evidential reformation](#).” The Church—or at least the western Church—embraced ways of thinking about divine guidance, divine communication, mostly in and through the tradition. The Bible was important; but it was the Bible interpreted through tradition that mattered. And then, of course, the Protestant reformers were all about *solo scriptura*, only the Bible. And so there if you asked, “Where is God's primary guidance, God's primary communication?” it was the Bible, this set of books.

I think we're in the early stages of what could be called an evidential reformation, where we understand [God's guidance and communication through historical evidence, scientific evidence, and cross-cultural evidence and experience](#). And that's the piece that my gut tells me will be the biggest tool helping our religious traditions to evolve in ways so that they don't feel like they're giving up something or losing something, but it's actually a gaining. “Look at [what God's been revealing for the last 200 years](#) that couldn't have possibly been revealed to Moses!” That kind of thing at least has the possibility of igniting more than a reformation, but [a religious revival grounded in a naturalistic understanding](#)—not a pre-natural or unnatural understanding (what sometimes gets called “supernatural”), but in a this-world, realistic way. I call it the *naturalizing* of religion, or the *REALizing* of religion.

I don't know whether that's wishful thinking or not, but I do hope and pray that the Church is able to fully embrace evidence as the way God is communicating and guiding us today. That would go a long way towards reconciling science and religion in the minds of millions of people, it seems to me.

Brian: And, of course, you and I and whoever's listening to this conversation: we all will play a part in how that unfolds. So it can be hopeful thinking that then motivates us to action to help that actually become real. It reminds me, as you describe this resurgence of faith, of a conversation I had almost six years ago. It was my last Christmas as a pastor, and it was Christmas Eve. The church I pastored was just down the road from [NASA Goddard headquarters](#), outside of D.C. We had a lot of people who, when you'd ask what do you do for a living, they'd say, “I'm a rocket scientist”—and they weren't kidding! One of our astrophysical engineers at the church introduced a friend of his. He said, “This is my friend; I work with him at NASA. He's not a Christian; he's an agnostic. But he's just here for the cultural experience of Christmas Eve.” I said, “It's good to meet you. Glad you're here. What kind of work do you

do?” And he said, “I’m in pure science.” And that’s code word to say, “You’re a normal mortal; you couldn’t understand what I do.” I made the mistake of trying to get deeper in it with him, and finally he said, “I study information.” And I said, “Computers.” He said, “That’s what everybody thinks. No. Avant-garde physics. In avant-garde physics, we’ve found out that our theories of information actually help us describe the universe—that you can look at a galaxy as a set of information, a human body as a set of information, any phenomenon as a packet of information.”

So, we went on with the Christmas Eve service, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said. It made me think of those words at the beginning of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word,” and this idea that there’s a logos and a message that the universe itself becomes a message, that there’s meaning to it. To me, this is an amazing, simultaneously both scientific and spiritual insight.

Host: I completely agree. In fact, one of the things I love about “[Big History](#)”—the [Great Story of everyone and everything](#)—is that when you look at it through the lens of, “What are the meaningful patterns?” one of the things that jumps out is that how information has been stored and shared has changed about seven or eight different times. And you could see these as the major transformations, the major transitions, in evolution—how information gets stored and shared.

Then in the human realm, we’ve gone from where we stored and shared information orally, through stories, and then we began storing information and sharing it in writing. Of course, that’s when [we tended to make an idol of the written word](#) (*audio podcast, [here](#)*): like this is the most important information here, that’s written down, because we became absolutely fascinated with that means of storing and sharing information. So much chaos and confusion resulted because there was so much writing, that science emerges as a way of organizing written language, written information, and sharing it, and then checking each other’s findings about it. And then electronics comes along, and then computers, and now the internet. We keep finding ways of storing and sharing information in larger spheres that allow us to [cooperate at large scale](#).

But, we don’t yet have a unified story that allows us to see each other as brothers and sisters worldwide, or as one global family or one global community or part of one larger body of life. Our creation stories are still at an earlier stage that facilitate cooperation at a smaller scale, and I think that’s one of the challenges of our time: how to honor those earlier creation understandings and that night language, the poetry and the symbol there, but to provide a conveyor belt, if you will, that allows people to come into a story where we start seeing that the stars are our ancestors, and this is a scientific fact, that the atoms of our bodies were forged inside ancestor stars. We’re related to the stars, not just all of life. There’s a sense of belonging to the universe, a sense of relatedness—that we’re related to all of the creatures, that we share a common ancestry.

One of my favorite quotes from [Marlin Lavanhar](#); he’s a pastor of [a Unitarian Universalist church in Tulsa](#), Oklahoma. In fact, I think it’s the largest Unitarian Universalist church in the

country. He's got this great quote. He says, “*We've all heard some fundamentalist-minded person say, 'Don't tell me I'm related to monkeys!' But now that we understand DNA and have cracked its code, we know that we're not just related to monkeys, we're related to zucchini. So let's get over it!*”

Brian: That's great.

Host: [The whole story](#) is seen in a sacred light that motivates us to live lives of greater compassion, integrity, greater love, greater Christ-likeness and Christ-centeredness (to use traditional language).

Brian: This was to me one of the big conversions I went through in the last 12 or 15 years, because I'd been raised to read the Bible in a certain way, and especially to read the Apostle Paul in a certain way, that probably was reinforcing a lot of the rigid categories that now you and I would think need to be loosened up. But, I've come to see Paul in a radically different way now. As you were speaking, I'm thinking of the book of *Romans*. Instead of reading Jesus in the light of Paul, or trying to understand Jesus in the light of Paul, you try to understand Paul in the light of Jesus. 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.

Host: Yeah. I love the way you just put that.

Brian, you're a leader in what's often called the [Emerging Church](#) movement. Please give our listeners a sense of the urgency and the opportunity that propels you and your colleagues to stretch evangelical Christianity in new directions.

Brian: Sure. I'll maybe connect it with what I shared earlier about my own story. Some years into my work as a pastor, I started asking a lot of questions. It was a tremendous relief when I wrote my first book. And writing that book—it was called [Church on the Other Side](#)—it was kind of an act of courage, because I thought that when this book comes out, I'm going to lose all my friends. But I was trying to tell the truth about something that needed to be said.

People started coming out of the woodwork! And the thing I would hear again and again was, “I was so glad to find your book. I thought I was the only person who had these questions. I thought I was the only person who was having these thoughts.” So, a larger and larger number of people started finding each other in the late ‘90s and the early part of the 2000s. At first, most of us who were finding each other were from evangelical backgrounds, but then we started finding there were mainline Protestants who were having similar questions, and there were Roman Catholics who were having similar discussions.

So what I've become absolutely convinced of over the last decade or so is that a conversation is spontaneously arising around the world among Christians of all different stripes and backgrounds. I've now had the chance to be part of this conversation in Africa, Latin America, Asia, as well as Europe and North America. It's a conversation rethinking the faith on very deep grounds—and certainly including the issues that we've been talking about. As you said, it's not even just limited to Christianity.

I remember getting a phone call seven or eight years ago, and on the other end of the line is this rabbi, and he says, “I represent a group of about 75 rabbis who've read all your books, and we're going through the same issues you're going through in Judaism.” Of course, now I've found similar conversations among Muslims. So it is a very exciting time, as you say, and in the Christian community where this conversation is happening, you could call it a movement. I hope it becomes more and more of a movement. But in the short-run, I think it is a conversation—and it's an exciting one.

Host: For those who aren't familiar with your first book, the subtitle, [Doing Ministry in a Postmodern Matrix](#), really, it was one of the first books that lifted up a postmodernist vision — or at least a Christian conversation with deep sensibilities in postmodernism.

Brian: What was especially helpful to me when I was writing *Church on the Other Side* is that the term postmodern helped me relativize modernity. In this modern era, where everything is seen as black or white, right or wrong, true or false, and very dualistic in terms of natural and supernatural—those were the only two categories—that world was stultifying. It didn't feel big enough to deal with both what I was finding in the Bible and what I was experiencing in real life. In some ways, the word [postmodern](#) helped me realize there's more in the universe besides what could be contained in the box of modernity. It wasn't a desire to reinterpret Christianity within the box of postmodernity; but it was a desire to not be held within one box or the other.

Host: My first exposure to Emerging Christianity was with [Spencer Burke](#). He contacted me, I think in 2004 or '05, and mentioned that he had watched one of my DVDs, and we had a long conversation. I remember when he first introduced himself to me, he said, “I'm a postmodernist evangelical.” I had a tilt experience, and I said, “What exactly is that?” And he said, “For example, I'm passionately Christ-centered, but I'm not so much interested in converting

Buddhists to Christianity as I am learning from Buddhists how to be a better Christian.” I remember at the time thinking, that's a different kind of evangelical.

I grew up Roman Catholic and had a born-again experience in my teenage years, and then went to [Evangel College](#), which is affiliated with the [Assemblies of God](#), and then Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now [Palmer Seminary](#)). So, I've had a background in both [Pentecostalism](#) and [evangelicalism](#) (and still consider myself an “[Evangelical Pentecostal naturalist](#)”)—even though neither one of them was I born into. But, in some ways, I felt myself to be a more passionate devotee, passionately committed. I remember one time thinking so arrogantly on a college campus of 1,700 students at Evangel, I remember telling my roommate that I thought there might be seven to ten real Christians who had given everything to Jesus—and I was sure that I was counting myself among the elect. *[laughter]*

Brian: There were seven to ten—and you had questions about nine of the other 10. *[laughter]*

Host: Exactly! During the worship services, close to 2,000 people, and I was usually the first one down to the altar with my hands splayed wide open. I look back now and think, Wow, okay ... there you have it. *[laughter]*

Brian: Yeah, but that passion, for all of the problems with it, there was something beautiful in it that I'm going to guess is part of what's kept you passionate to keep asking these questions and to delve into this new territory. It's a passion to learn.

Host: I am absolutely sure that's the case. That's the thing: I don't consider myself an ex-Catholic. I'm not an ex-Pentecostal; I'm not an ex-evangelical. I just keep finding ways to embrace that and something else—like this whole understanding of evidence as divine communication, embracing that. I still find that the language of evangelical, Pentecostal Christianity moves my soul, and the music does. And yet, [I just don't interpret any of it in an unnatural way. I interpret it all in a natural way, in a this-world, realistic way.](#)

Brian: Yeah, and you were going through that process. That's why I say, something is happening on a grassroots level, and as more and more of us find each other and share our findings and learn together, we give each other courage—and that becomes a very exciting process that maybe is worthy of the word ‘movement.’ I hope that's really growing, because when religious communities dig in their heels and the evidence mounts up that undermines their—let's call it a pre-natural way of thinking—then they have to become more and more rigid and angry and afraid and defensive. And that brings all kinds of consequences along with it.

Host: It really does. I'm imagining—correct me if I'm wrong—that when you and your colleagues were launching this Emerging Church conversation, I'm imagining that you were probably unaware that the word [emergence](#) has become pretty much the word of choice for

many leading scientists today. They no longer refer to themselves as materialists, but *emergentists*. This notion of processes of evolution and the history of the universe have helped us come to understand that we see this greater complexity, greater interdependence, and greater cooperation at larger and wider scale—and it's the opposite of *reduction*. It's *emergence*.

Brian: Yes.

Host: I find it fascinating that this term has now such rich meaning, both in a religious context but also as the term of choice among many hardcore science people. [Ursula Goodenough](#) wrote a book called [The Sacred Depths of Nature](#), and she co-wrote an amazing article with a neuroscientist, [Terry Deacon](#), called “[The Sacred Emergence of Nature](#).” In fact, if listeners just put into Google “Sacred Emergence of Nature,” you'll get both Connie's and my podcast on that article, as well as a link to the article itself.

It's this understanding of [religious naturalism](#) that's profoundly conscious of and attending to the sacred, the holy, the meaningful, the inspiring—and doing so in a way that helps the religious traditions to evolve. So it doesn't diss the traditions, doesn't put them down for the pre-natural understandings or their mythic understandings, even if interpreted literally. It's helping the traditions themselves to expand beyond themselves to ultimately a place of, I think—I hope—greater integration and a unifying of knowledge, so there's not this wall of separation.

I'm just wondering, in the [Emerging Church movement](#), have you found that most people are saying “emerging” in a religious sense, or are some people aware of just how meaningful that term is in the scientific community?

Brian: Well, when a group of us started using the term self-consciously, we were aware that there were a number of different ways it was being used. There was the idea of *emergent wetlands*—plants have their roots in a wet world, and yet they spring out into a dry world. And we felt that way: our roots were in a kind of modernist version of Christianity, and we were emerging into a different context.

There was the image of emergence in *forest succession*. It was the idea that there are small plants, small saplings, ready to grow when something opens up in the forest canopy. We were also aware of this emergence theory and the theory of the complex systems and all the rest. I think we wanted to tap into all of those levels of meaning. [The Emerging Church movement] is extremely hopeful, and it even takes the word naturalism—which for some people has meant a reductionistic naturalism—and it blows that inside out.

Host: Exactly. Well, I want to begin winding down, but there's a question I'm dying to ask you, which is a sort of pastoral question. What would you say, how would you support, a young

person who was grappling with how to think about science and religion?—with how to hold creation and evolution? What would you say to somebody like that?

Brian: Well, the first thing I'd say is how fortunate they are, because I don't even want to think about how many years ago—40 years ago, when I was asking these questions—it was almost impossible to find something that a 14-year-old could understand at that time. I think we still need to have a lot more books written that are aimed at a 12, 13, 14, 25 year olds, because that's often, I think, the ages when these issues come up. I even think they're coming up for six and seven and eight year olds, now, and we have to find ways to introduce them to a vision of the faith that isn't in opposition with what they're learning in fifth grade science, for example.

So, what I would tell them first is that they're not alone, and that this is a great time to be asking those questions. And then I would direct them to some very good writers—like the ones that you're interviewing in this series. I remember, for me, the first writer on faith and evolution I came across who was extremely helpful to me was [John Haught](#). I found his work so liberating! I had been thinking along similar lines, but it helped to have somebody who was more knowledgeable than I in many areas just say it. So I would direct them to some of those helpful books, [including yours](#), and I would hope including mine as well. So, that would be a first step.

Second step is I would encourage them to have what I would call “the courage to differ graciously.” 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.

Host: On the side of our van, we've got [the Jesus fish and the Darwin fish kissing, with hearts between them](#).

Brian: I haven't seen that one yet, that's great.

Host: Well, Brian, speaking of your books, could you let our listeners know—you've written some excellent books, and some of them have become bestsellers. Just walk us through, say a little bit about each of your books, and then any project that you're working on now, or how they can get more information.

Brian: Well, first of all, if people want to learn about me and my books, my website is [BrianMcLaren.net](#). So it's just my name, [BrianMcLaren.net](#). I've written [about a dozen books](#), so I won't go through all of them, but maybe I'll just mention a couple of my more recent ones, and then the next thing I'm working on.

I wrote a book that is probably a good introduction to my work for people from a Christian background especially. It's called [The Secret Message of Jesus](#), and it's a way of trying to see the whole Christian faith through the window of Jesus' life and teaching—especially his

message of the Kingdom of God. I think when you enter through that door, it's a different way than many of us were given.

I also wrote a book called [Everything Must Change](#). That book tries to look at contemporary global crises in relation to Jesus' essential message of the Kingdom of God. And by the way, this to me is one of the reasons this emergence is so essential, because we have some monumental emergencies we've got to deal with relating to the planet, relating to poverty, relating to peace, and at the core of them is our sense of story. So, that's what that book explores.

My most recent book is called [A New Kind of Christianity](#), and it really asks some big questions about what our basic story is. It's built around ten questions that people are raising about the faith, and ten questions that I think open the doors to some very good ways of thinking about the faith in the future. And then my book that comes out next year, in early 2011, is called [Naked Spirituality: A Life of God in 12 Simple Words](#). In many ways, it's trying to help people develop a deep inner life that makes sense in the context you and I have been talking about.

Host: Also, could you mention just a little bit about your book, [A New Kind of Christian](#). You also wrote *A New Kind of Christianity*, but your book *A New Kind of Christian* is particularly fascinating.

Brian: Well, thanks. I actually wrote a trilogy: three books that are fictional. But you might say they're *teaching fiction*, or something like that. The first was called [A New Kind of Christian](#), and it tells the story of a young pastor whose faith is falling apart on him. He's given permission through a friendship to start to see his faith in a new way, moving from that modernist framework to a more expansive framework. Then, I wrote a sequel to that, which is very relevant to our discussion today. It's called [The Story We Find Ourselves In](#), and it's a way of trying to see the big biblical narrative in a more expansive way—but a way that has some integrity with what's actually there in the biblical text.

The third in that trilogy is called [The Last Word, and the Word After That](#). It's a book primarily about the whole issue of hell, and of life after death, and so on—which is such a big sticking point for so many people. So that's a book that jumps right in the deep end on that question and grapples with it.

Host: That's great. Well, thank you, Brian. Thank you for taking the time to be with us in this series, thanks for your great work in the world, and thank you for sharing your ideas and your life experience with our listeners today here on the leading edge of faith.

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