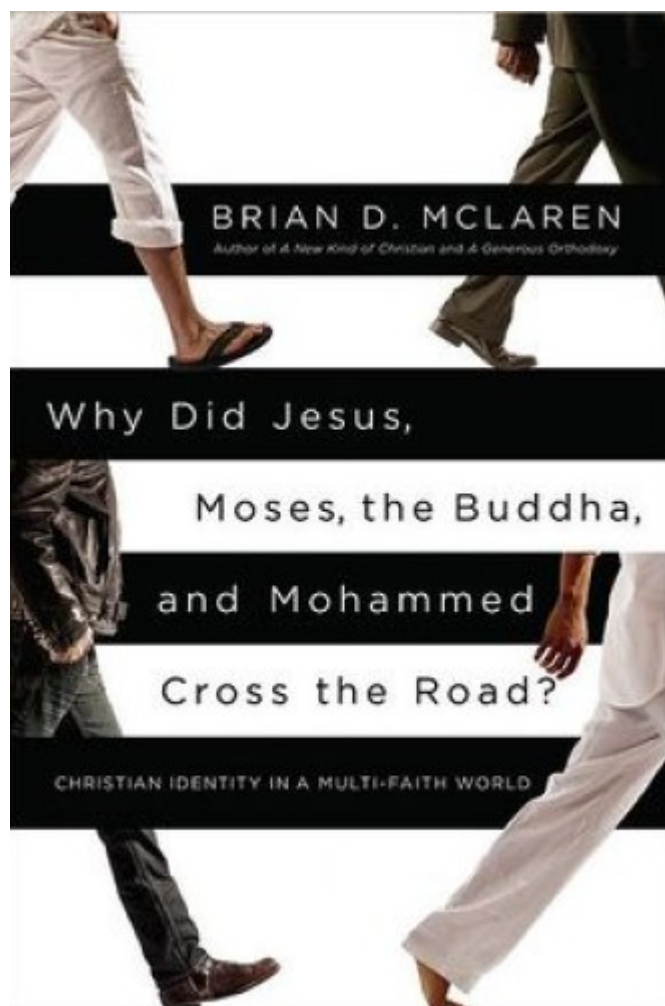


Fervent and open

by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?

By Brian D. McLaren
Jericho Books

If Brian McLaren's new book had a theme song, he says it would be Phil Madeira's "Give God the Blues": "God don't hate the Muslims / God don't hate the Jews / God don't hate the Christians / But we all give God the blues / God don't hate the atheists / the Buddhists or the Hindus / God loves everybody / But we all give God the blues." What particularly gives God the blues is the oppositional nature of our religious identities.

Some would say that religious identities themselves are the problem. The closing ceremonies of the London Olympics featured John Lennon's "Imagine," complete with children's choir in simulated candlelight and the digital appearance of Lennon himself from beyond the grave. Someone presumably thought this a pitch-perfect combination—the nation's most recognizable pop icon and the most elevated of universalist sentiments.

But "Imagine," by most conventions a peace anthem, can also be seen as an antidiversity hymn. Imagine no religion, no countries, no possessions. One wonders why the song is hesitant to complete the obvious list of those pernicious obstacles that prevent the world from being "as one": imagine no races, no languages, no cultures, no gender differences. The song's dream of a world with "nothing to kill or die for" pictures difference (religious difference above all) as the root problem and its elimination as the solution. McLaren imagines something else: strong differences that impel us toward each other in love.

He notes that there are two well-attested strategies for religious formation. One involves straight-up hostility to others, which has proven to be an effective basis for building strong religious identities. We mark the strength of our Christian commitment by the intensity of our opposition to Hinduism or Islam. History and our contemporary world provide ample evidence that defining "us" in terms of a lesser or threatening "them" works. It also leaves a lot of damage in its wake.

On the other hand, adopting a weak religious identity may well increase levels of tolerance toward others. If my religious convictions are thin or unimportant to me, I don't care much what yours are. McLaren says we make it matter less that others are Hindu or Muslim by making it matter less that we are Christian. Such tolerance runs out quickly whenever your faith is strong enough to inconvenience me. McLaren's book is a heartfelt brief for a third option: a strong identity that is also generous and open toward the other.

When a Christian or a Muslim commits a terrorist act, leading voices within the same community object that their holy texts have been hijacked and misused by extremists who missed the point. But the materials for such alleged misinterpretations lie ready at hand in our traditions, like unsecured weapons. Just how effectively or seriously have our formation processes tried to disarm the faith we learn? McLaren has a proposal for disarmament. It has four parts: historical, doctrinal, liturgical and missional.

The first part deals with what he calls conflicted religious identity syndrome (CRIS). The syndrome is typified by writer Anne Rice's widely publicized reconversion to Catholicism and her equally high-profile subsequent decision to quit Christianity so as to no longer be associated with the "deservedly infamous group" known as Christians. Following Christ, she said, will always be more important than Christianity, no matter what Christianity is or may become. McLaren's prescription for CRIS is to take a good dose of history. Learning about instances in which Christian identity has been defined in deformed and destructive ways teaches us to relativize any particular form of that identity.

In one chapter, McLaren invites his readers into a thought experiment on the origins of Islam. Suppose that Muhammad had an authentic vision and calling from the God of Abraham and Jesus. Suppose furthermore that the logical result of this event would have been for him to lead people into Judaism or Christianity, becoming a great hero of one or both faiths. McLaren lays out the plausible obstacles that existed to such an outcome in the Arabian setting at that time—obstacles constituted, for instance, by the assimilation of Christian identity into the cultural and political domination of the Byzantine Empire. Conflation of Christian identity with that of cultural enemies blocked the path to solidarity and essentially forced Muhammad to be the founder of a new religion. McLaren's hypothetical may not be particularly attractive to Muslims, but its intent is to sensitize Christians to the ways in which Christian identity can conflict with authentic Christian faith.

The second challenge is doctrinal. McLaren proposes a "reboot" of central Christian doctrines to debug them of interpretations that foster hostility and violence. To some people, he acknowledges, this might at first look more like abandonment. Hence the importance of the dose of history that helps us grasp how far afield received doctrine might have strayed to begin with. He treats Christology, creation, original sin and the Trinity, reconstructing each on the theme that within each is to be found a critique of oppositional identity and a generous invitation to solidarity

with others, including religious others.

McLaren retells the story of the prodigal son so as to focus on the older brother, the one who could not reconcile himself to the father's generosity. He notes that the introduction to this story runs: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them,' so he told them this parable. . . ." Suppose the grumbling was from fellow "Christians" who objected that Jesus was eating with Muslims and Buddhists, New Agers and agnostics?

The third part of his proposal is liturgical. How do we actualize this new perspective on identity in the regular rituals of worship? McLaren considers this question in relation to hymn lyrics, baptism, the Eucharist and the seasons of the church year. He imagines a Christmas season celebration that would include a feast of the circumcision, celebrating Jesus' solidarity with the Jewish people, and a feast of the magi that would celebrate the gifts of other religious traditions. He envisions a pattern for biblical interpretation that would never tell violent stories from the Bible in isolation. The story of David killing Goliath would not be told without the rest of the story, in which God forbids David to build the temple because he is a violent man. The story of Elijah destroying the prophets of Baal would not be told without the story of Jesus' rebuke to the disciples who recommended the same response (Luke 9:53-54). Most of the suggestions, it must be said, are more about ingraining nonviolence and reconciliation as part of the Christian DNA than they are about specific interactions with religious traditions.

Finally, McLaren takes up the missional challenge. That challenge is to live as though the boundaries of hostility have been taken down, as Christians believe they have been in Christ. The great commission remains in effect: go into all the world and preach the good news of reconciliation. The witness to that gospel is, or should be, that Christians characteristically move toward the other in friendship. The most powerful form of witness is "witness."

McLaren gives as an example his decision to keep the fast of Ramadan with the help of a Muslim friend. When he received a note saying, "We hear about Christians insulting our prophet . . . but never about them respecting us and joining us in our fast," he felt that in some small way he had begun to address the problem of Christian identity that Anne Rice described. He was bringing that identity a bit more in harmony with the one who originated the brand. McLaren ends by imagining the

leaders of institutional religion setting aside time to model witness, collaboration and friendship with each other, committing their communities to stand with others in mutual support.

All of this is set out in short chapters, with McLaren's characteristic conversational style and engaging clarity. The book weaves anecdotes drawn from his own interfaith journey—many focused on Islam—into a constructive manifesto. He asks us to imagine a different form of Christian identity. And sometimes a lot of imagination is needed.

Religious liberals may respond as one did after a talk by McLaren that we both attended: "There's nothing new here." McLaren's enthusiasm for the possibilities of social trinitarianism and René Girard's anthropology or his revelations that Christian doctrine has its unsavory historical associations can have a slightly breathless quality. It is as though one has only to sprinkle these seasonings over the church and everything will change.

But this sells him short. The quest for a Christian identity that is both strong and open is no simplistic task. McLaren has put his finger on a question of central importance and addressed it with great practical wisdom.

In one chapter he offers a ten-point survey gauging the strength of Christian commitment. For each statement—such as "Intensity: My Christian faith is so central to my life that it requires of me sacrifices and commitments that are sometimes costly and even painful"—one is to register a view ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement and receive a corresponding point score. Strong agreement with more of these statements adds up to a stronger Christian identity.

Point ten is "Hostility: I see other faiths as wrong, false, or evil, and I maintain a posture of opposition to all faiths but the Christian faith." McLaren asks whether agreement with this statement needs to go along with strong agreement with the others. Suppose it were replaced with this statement: "Solidarity: My understanding of Jesus and his message leads me to see each faith tradition, including my own, as having its own history, value, strengths and weaknesses. I seek to affirm and celebrate all that is good in each faith tradition, and I build intentional relationships of mutual sharing and respectful collaboration with people of all faith traditions." Would assent to this statement require any of the others to be changed? This fluent blending of theological reflection and *Cosmopolitan*-style self-quiz reflects McLaren's

gift for stimulating discussion.

Critics will note that the ten points all measure qualities of the respondent (my experience of Christianity's value, my level of investment, my sense of loyalty) and none expresses any beliefs about the referents (Christ, God, salvation). McLaren cites historical lessons to teach us to beware of conditioned Christian identities that have lost touch with the source code of Jesus, yet his measure of Christian identity is entirely self-referential.

Despite such an approach, McLaren clearly does attach religious commitment to normative claims, since he insists that his vision of authentic Christian identity is based on the real Jesus, the real teaching of the Bible, and right doctrine as opposed to imperial distortions. As the subtitle suggests, the book is not addressed to a multifaith audience. Christian faith is not revised by subordination to some outside authority (secular reason or some common religious ethic) but by reference to its own key sources. The whole point is to find Christian reasons for being open to others, as opposed to prudential or external ones. The strength of this identity is that it stands on its own. McLaren's contention is that his set of beliefs can be held with the same level of particularistic intensity as more traditional ones, but to dramatically different effect.

This points up an ambiguity in his notion of strong Christian identity. Most of the time, he seems to mean an identity that is robustly grounded in Jesus and scripture and subjectively important to the believer. But his argument makes little sense unless it also includes strength as sociologists would define it. If it is possible and admirable to have such a strongly benevolent Christian identity, but hardly anyone wants to, then its effect on our world will be minimal. And an effect on the world is exactly what McLaren is after. Strong hostile religious identities are rather good at attracting adherents and reproducing themselves. Diluted religious identities tend not to have much staying power in the spiritual economy: the passionate case for timid commitment is hard to make. Such identities are more commonly a way of being "still religious" than a way of setting the world on fire with a new possibility. McLaren is looking for a benevolence toward others that has the glow of contagion about it.

It is here that the book gives us less to go on. McLaren's pitch more or less assumes that the reader is deeply committed to Jesus and the Bible (or wants to be) and will be guided by their direction. He then "debugs" both to modulate the result of that

commitment. But why would one be attracted to this form of Christianity among others, or this Christian faith in preference to another tradition? To find these sources uniquely motivating, it seems one would need to find them uniquely valuable in some way. Exclusivism or pride is the last thing McLaren wants. But the absence of anything that can tempt us in that direction is the hallmark of a lack of religious vitality.

Indeed, he is clear that conversion is not ruled out. He says that the ideal is for those in different religions to exchange their treasures with each other with no need to convert on either side. But he also adamantly defends the freedom to change religions, for those who cannot find an open religious identity in their own community should be readily welcomed into another where they can.

Somewhat ironically, the attitude toward religious diversity is one basis on which it is appropriate to leave a false religion for a true one. Different groups, from the Disciples of Christ (whose name originally proclaimed a desire to shun all sectarianism) within Christianity to the Baha'i (who proclaimed that they transcended all religious particularity) outside it have shown the way to make the lack of exclusivity a selling point to attract others. McLaren essentially argues that his way of being Christian, by the very virtue of its openness to other faiths, offers more possibilities for personal transformation and will deliver more in spiritual depth and reconciliation than its alternatives.

Most interesting in this connection are his tantalizingly brief descriptions of the liturgical challenge, in which he suggests practices that could embody this vision. Taken alone, beliefs about interreligious harmony tend toward the dilution effect McLaren wishes to avoid. That outlook may reproduce itself more effectively when woven into particularistic practice. McLaren's gift-of-the-magi celebration of other religions will carry weight when it is part of a Christmas that celebrates something irreplaceable about Jesus.

But the two concerns need not be at odds. In many ways it seems that the religious paths most suited to be comfortable neighbors in a pluralistic environment are those that involve thick forms of practice: practices of a spiritual, ritual or communal type that take up significant life space. Such practices at their best provide intrinsic rewards (to use sociological language) for the adherent, spiritual and interpersonal. They signal concretely to the participant that she or he belongs to a particular community. And these practices themselves can attract others (an attraction that

need not be posed primarily in terms of belief, nor expressed in any oppositional terms), who can clearly see the life difference it would make to adopt this way rather than another. McLaren indicates how interreligious “witness” could be one strand in that bundle of specific practices. His discussion illustrates also why it cannot be the only one.

Religious identities can be things “to kill or die for,” but they are powerfully things to love for. McLaren insists that those we are to love for Christ’s sake include not only our religious neighbors but their religions as well. Imagine that.