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Bestselling Author Brian McLaren Proposes an End to the ‘Cosmic Death Match’ Between World Religions

Brian McLaren, bestselling author, activist, and public theologian, has been called a “spiritual genius” by his fans, and a “heretic” by his critics. Not one to shy away from difficult questions, his latest book tackles one of particular urgency in the post-9/11 era: how should Christians treat members of other religions? In *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (Jericho Books/Hachette Book Group, \$ 24.99 hardcover, September 11, 2012), McLaren engages the challenge with wisdom, compassion, and humility.

While many believers would pit faith against faith in “a cosmic death match,” fidelity does not require Christians to stand against other religions as rivals, McLaren says. Beginning with the title of his book, he reverses the assumption that religions are inherently hostile toward one another. He recalls the old joke about the chicken crossing the road as he imagines the four “not condemning one another, not launching crusades or jihads, but walking together.”

“If you’re a Christian like me...if you love Jesus, if you know him as God incarnate, how do you think Jesus would treat Moses, Mohammed, and the Buddha if they took a walk together?” Jesus would embrace them with open arms, McLaren asserts.

Eschewing the two most common approaches to interfaith relationships—an exclusionary mindset or an attitude of unquestioning acceptance—McLaren’s third way is faithful to Christian belief and charitable to other faiths. He calls it a “strong-benevolent” identity: vigorously Christian while also loving in a way that is far more robust than mere tolerance. “The stronger our Christian faith, the more goodwill we will feel toward those of other faiths,” McLaren says. “It moves us toward others in wholehearted love.”

Healing interfaith hostility won’t come easy, McLaren acknowledges. It requires profound rethinking of doctrine, liturgy, and mission. He emphasizes that Christian doctrine itself is not the problem, rather “fast-growing, easy-to-spread mutations” that create malignancies. Some examples of his vision for a “postcolonial, post-imperial Christian identity” include:

- Rethinking the doctrine of original sin to show how it exposes hostility and rivalry as the origins of sin.
- Understanding the Eucharist as table-centered rather than altar-centered: not a sacrifice to appease an angry God, but a meal of reconciliation and fellowship.

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- Acknowledging offensive elements in hymns, prayers, and rituals—not sanitizing the past, but showing ugly parts of the heritage, as the Bible does.
- Reading and teaching the Bible responsibly following the examples of Jesus and Paul. “Passages that advocate vengeance remind us of who we would be if not for Jesus, and passages that advocate reconciliation remind us of who we are called to be in Christ.”
- Initiating subversive friendship as part of Christian mission—not the religious version of network marketing, but genuine friendship that crosses boundaries of otherness and dares to offer and receive hospitality.

“Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed crossing the road to encounter one another would be holy and humbling,” McLaren says, imagining a meeting filled with joy, grace, peace, and love; hospitality, not hostility; friendship, not fear. “It will be good for our own wellbeing, good for the poor and forgotten, good for our grandchildren’s grandchildren and good even for the birds of the air and the fish in the sea.”

Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? is a book about finding and inhabiting that gracious space—the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed—and welcoming others into it.

Brian D. McLaren has written over a dozen books, including his acclaimed *A New Kind of Christian* trilogy, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, and his most recent, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words*. He lives in Fort Myers, Florida. Visit him online at www.brianmclaren.net/

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Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World
by Brian McLaren

Jericho Books, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
\$24.99 Hardcover

PUB DATE: September 11, 2012