

Review: JAR1401

MISGUIDED MIGRATION

a book review of

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

by Brian D. McLaren

(Convergent Books, 2016)

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It is that time of year again. The time when hordes of v-shaped flocks of Canada geese make their way south in search of more plentiful resources. While we recognize their migratory behavior as necessary — for we all understand that most birds cannot live in the north in the winter if they are to survive — it has never occurred to many evangelical Christians that perhaps the faith they love needs to migrate to a new place as well if it is to survive. But this is what Brian McLaren, author of *The Great Spiritual Migration*, argues.

In his latest book, McLaren dares Christians of all denominations around the world to join what he believes is the next, necessary movement in Christianity's history after Luther's. Specifically, this movement must make a "great spiritual migration" from a place of religious supremacy, chauvinism, and oppression to a place of love. McLaren asserts that such a migration is necessary because Christians' obsession with "right beliefs" has reduced their faith to an oppressive system with many negative outcomes (p. 19): "For centuries, Christianity has been presented as a system of beliefs. That system of beliefs has supported a wide range of unintended consequences, from

colonialism to environmental destruction, subordination of women to stigmatization of the LGBT people, anti-Semitism to Islamophobia, clergy pedophilia to white privilege” (2).

To what beliefs is he referring? Here are two.

One is the orthodox view of the gospel. McLaren maintains that believing only a few people go to heaven, while most of the world’s population suffers eternal damnation in hell, has instilled an elitist “us versus them” mentality in Christians (76–84). He believes this antagonistic mindset has caused Christians to view themselves as superior to others, which is why the church has felt justified oppressing, enslaving, and even murdering those it considered inferior (112). And McLaren believes many Christians today are still judgmental, prejudiced, and hostile to others they believe are outside their exclusive and privileged club (4–5).

Another is the orthodox view of God. McLaren argues that because the church teaches that the God of the Bible repeatedly has slaughtered nations due to His uncontrollable wrath at humanity, Christians believe God is violent (72). McLaren thinks it is this conception of a violent God that has led Christians historically to become violent themselves, and he believes it could happen again. McLaren says the only thing he is worried about more than “*Christianity dying*” is “*Christianity killing*” (71). He genuinely believes if Christians could kill in the past (a fact of which he says most Christians today are ignorant), they could do it again, given their violent belief about God.

Therefore, because of beliefs like these, McLaren thinks Christianity must shift its focus from “a belief system” to “a way of living” (2). He says, “If Christian faith can be redefined in this way, if our prime contribution to humanity can be shifted from teaching correct beliefs to practicing the way of love as Jesus taught, then our whole understanding and experience of the church could be transformed” (48). McLaren truly believes this shift must occur if Christianity is not only to survive but also thrive in an ever-changing, pluralistic, global world.

I agree with McLaren that Christians should strive to love God and others to the very best of their abilities, for this is what our Lord commands them to do (Mark 12:30–31). I also believe he is right in his assessment that there are far too many Christians today who ridicule, denigrate, and belittle others outside the faith because they see them only as depraved or lost. I believe he also is right when he says there are Christians who come off as critical, judgmental, self-righteous, and superior. And I appreciate his insight that many Christians are ignorant about the church’s violent past and should become knowledgeable so history does not repeat itself.

But here is the problem.

The Great Flaw. In McLaren's plea for the Christian faith to shift from orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxy (right behavior), he severs the causal relationship between *beliefs* and *behavior* in his proposed migration.

Humans were created in God's image (Gen. 1:27) and are different from animals in that they have a rational mind. This rational mind not only houses a person's beliefs but it also acts as the command center that instructs a person when and how to behave, based on the beliefs he holds. For example, when a bank robber robs a bank, it is because the thief's mind forms a belief that robbing a bank is beneficial. But before the burglar can rob the bank, he also must form a series of other beliefs. First, he must form a belief about which bank he thinks is the easiest to rob. Next, he must form a belief about what time of day he thinks is the best time to rob the bank. After that, the thief must determine if he thinks he will need a getaway car, and so on. The crook does not somehow unexpectedly rob a bank unbeknownst to himself as if he were in an amnesiac trance, unless he was drugged or temporarily insane. No! For the theft to occur, the robber must form a set of beliefs about the robbery *before* he commits the crime.

Beliefs drive behavior. Behavior does not drive beliefs, despite the claim many people make today that it does. This is why Paul instructed the Christians in Rome to be transformed by the renewing of their minds — so their behavior would not conform to the pattern of world (Rom. 12:2). Paul understood that the only way to bring his flock's behavior into alignment with God's will was to make sure their beliefs aligned with God's will *first*. This is why Jesus asked Peter to tell Jesus who Peter thought He was (Mark 8:28). Jesus knew that Peter's belief about Him affected Peter's future behavior in carrying out Jesus' mission. This is one reason (among many) why Christianity historically has focused on "correct beliefs": a Christian's *beliefs* about key doctrines *affect* how he relates to others as well as how he spends his time and resources.

It is true that many people are *unaware* of the beliefs that drive their behavior. However, when they examine their minds with the help of a good therapist or pastor, the beliefs that drove their behavior usually emerge. It is also true that some people act out impulsively, as if there was no thought process behind their behavior. But there was. It just goes unrecognized because it develops seconds before the behavior is executed. That people are unaware of their beliefs due to denial or some other defense mechanism the mind employs, or that some beliefs are formed rapidly, does not change the reality that beliefs drive behavior.

What is interesting is that while McLaren seems to understand this concept well (for it is the very *reason* he believes Christianity needs to make a migration in the first

place), he somehow thinks behavior can be severed from a belief system in his proposed paradigm. It's as though he believes that in this one case, behavior somehow will exist in a vacuum, and beliefs will not be connected to behavior. All Christians need to do is just start behaving lovingly toward everyone for no reason other than that Jesus did it. Or does He?

The Great Swap. The truth is, what McLaren really is asking his readers to do is make a great swap from one belief system (the orthodox view) for another (his). He does this throughout the book. For instance, he urges them to replace what he believes is the violent view of God with his view that God is loving and never violent, like Rob Bell's view (101). He also bids them to change the belief that the Bible is an "authoritative source" that must be "accepted without question" and replace it with his belief that the Bible is an ancient literary work that chronicles humankind's evolving view of God over time, which shifts from a violent conception of God in the Old Testament to a loving one in the New (112).

McLaren warns new recruits that swapping their traditional belief system for the new one won't be easy. Why? Because McLaren says it will involve having to stifle the "inner fundamentalist perched" on their shoulders that will "scold" them for even daring to consider altering the core beliefs that were passed down to them (11). He says this inner voice will insist that the basic tenets of the Christian faith have been "defined once and for all by Jesus and his apostles" and therefore can never be changed (11). But he says making the swap is worth it because once it is made, adherents will be free to start following Jesus the way Jesus intended.

So it seems McLaren does not really believe the church has been wrong in its focus on teaching "correct beliefs" and "correct doctrines" after all, because that is precisely what he focuses on, too. He is very specific about which orthodox beliefs he wants advocates to ditch and which heterodox beliefs he wants them to adopt. I can only assume McLaren thinks the beliefs he proposes are the "correct beliefs," for what is the alternative? Is not admonishing the historic church for doing the same thing "the pot calling the kettle black"? And just because Christians fail to live out the faith as Jesus intended does not mean the orthodox beliefs should be replaced with McLaren's heterodox beliefs. It simply points out what the Bible says is true of humans — that we are sinners (Rom. 3:23).

For these reasons, "the great spiritual migration" McLaren advises the church to make is misguided. After all, "practicing the way of love as Jesus taught" depends on the *beliefs* Christians hold about *why* they should even follow Jesus in the first place (48).

—Patty Houser

Patty Houser has an MA in Christian apologetics from Biola University, where she wrote a thesis under Dr. Scott Smith on McLaren's previous work. She is also the author of *A Woman's Guide to Knowing What You Believe: How to Love God with Your Heart and Your Mind* (Bethany House, 2015).