

THE GREAT MIGRATION by BRIAN McLAREN

That's wishful thinking, a nonreligious friend of mine said when he heard one of the main proposals of my new book. "You say Christian faith is on the verge of a powerful renaissance, but the facts say otherwise."

Of course, I'm well aware of those facts: Most forms of Western Christian faith are indeed shrinking, wrinkling and fading away. Millennials are indeed migrating out of "organized religion" in unprecedented numbers. We are indeed approaching what Episcopal thinker Ken Howard calls "The Religion Singularity," where the number of denominations and congregations in many regions grows while the number of actual active adherents declines, a

perfect equation for unsustainability.

"Actually," I told my friend, "those facts are not evidence against a spiritual renaissance, but rather prerequisites for it." He looked curious, so I explained that basic systems theory teaches that healthy systems maintain equilibrium. They seek to stay exactly as they are.

"And that's a problem," I explained to my friend. That's why systems tend to punish whistle blowers, reformers, prophets and other enemies of the status quo. That's why a living tradition easily becomes a dead one. It is only when systems are thrown into disruptive disequilibrium that radical change becomes possible.

"So," I added, "those well-publicized facts of decline suggest

to me that the religious system of Western Christianity is only now nearing enough disequilibrium that the kind of epochal change we need is possible."

In other words, *things are only now getting bad enough that Christian faith finally has a chance of getting significantly better.*

It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better

In *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*, I outline the route many of us are taking to migrate to "better." I sketch out this route as both a participant and observer: I not only advocate for these shifts in theory, but I have had a chance to observe them springing up in practice in diverse



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This migration path begins (perhaps most controversially) with redefining what Christian faith actually and essentially is. Although it has been long presented as a system of unquestionable beliefs, thoughtful Christians around the world are coming to see the essence of Christian faith as a way of life, a way of life centered in love. To paraphrase St. Paul, "If we have correct beliefs organized in the perfect system, but have not love, we are nothing."

Such a migration involves making explicit the fact that our beliefs have important social functions, regardless of their validity, and sometimes those functions are actually at odds with a prime directive of love. For example, the policing of belief-correctness empowers religious gatekeepers with the "sword" of inquisition, shaming, expulsion and even damnation. Millions of people respond to threats of excommunication with a shrug: *Why would I want to be part of a group that kicks people out for asking honest questions and reaching honest but different conclusions?* (Their response becomes all the more acute each time those gatekeepers are shown to be hiding all kinds of scandalous behavior under their robes.)

Understanding SBNRs

Many, of course, simply walk away from "organized religion" and join the ranks of the "Spiritual But Not Religious." SBNRs are frequently mocked for being narcissistic, consumeristic and shallow. But I suggest that they are often the opposite. They are looking for a cause beyond themselves that will give them a deep purpose beyond consumption, and frankly, next to nobody is offering it to them. (Except, we might propose,

extremist cults like ISIS.) What better cause might be worth calling people to? *I propose that Christian faith has such a cause buried like a forgotten treasure in its backyard: the cause of becoming authentic lifelong practitioners of*

unpredictability, loving one moment and genocidal the next, derives in large part from an unresolved question in our image of God. Is the God of Christian faith purely benevolent and nonviolent, or not? Is God, as



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love. If the Christian faith were to define itself as a community dedicated to the formation of people who love in their personal, ecological, and political lives, we would have the makings of a Christian renaissance on our hands.

The other two migrations (theological and missional) flow inevitably from this one.

Our Image of God

Theologically, we must come to terms with the fact that our Euro-American Christian ancestors have often behaved in ways that are the very opposite of love, as any historically-aware Jew, Native American, or formerly colonized African, Indian, Indonesian or other indigenous person can tell you. This historical

author Michael Hardin puts it, Janus-faced, with infinite wrath seething in tension with infinite love? Or is God, as a New Testament writer puts it, "light in whom there is no darkness at all"? To resolve that question requires us growing up at long last in the way we read the Bible, a subject I explore in the book in some detail.

If we make these spiritual and theological moves, we'll be ready for the missional migration that involves reconfiguring our congregational life around what I call "organizing religion" rather than "organized religion."

Imagine tens of thousands of pastors and priests organizing their congregants as spiritual activists dedicated to saving the planet from human greed and ignorance, reducing poverty and

increasing economic opportunity, building the conditions for peace, and upholding the dignity of all people (no exceptions). You quickly realize why Christian faith in the West is worth saving, in spite of its deep problems and challenges.

Time To Grow Up

Many of my Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other colleagues see the need for parallel migrations in their traditions, and when we compare notes, we often sense that we are colleagues in a process that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the world coming of age.” We have lived long enough with the narrative of decline. It is time to migrate to a new narrative of pregnancy and birth.

I don't claim that such a migration is inevitable: that would indeed be wishful thinking. But I do believe it is possible, now more than ever, and if we are willing to act on that faith, what is possible can become actual and what is now highly problematic can become better. □

Brian McLaren is a popular author, whose latest work is entitled, The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian.

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