

Editorial

Christian Folk Sociology: Brian McLaren's Sociological Imagination

Christianity in general, and conservative evangelicalism in particular, has notoriously lacked what C. Wright Mills described as the sociological imagination, the “vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society” (1959:5), the comprehension of relations between biography and history. For example, traditional, institutionalized Christianity has historically conceptualized both virtue and vice as predominantly attributes of individuals, not social structures. Nevertheless, as sociology emerged and grew throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, there were attempts to deliver “Christian Sociologies,” each with their own social carriers, philosophical bases, and social and intellectual climates, and each confronting what would become perennial issues of philosophical anthropology, ethics, and epistemology (Lyon 1983). Throughout the two centuries they have shared, sociology and Christianity have fluctuated from combining to colliding to colluding and back to combining again (Brewer 2007). From when John Henry W. Stuckenberg penned *Christian Sociology* in 1881 during the origins of the social gospel movement, to when “the sociological imagination proved a revelation in theology and biblical studies” (Brewer 2007:21) toward the end of the twentieth century, the relationship of sociology and Christianity has continually evolved.

As it did during the social gospel movement, the sociological imagination is once again awakening and activating some expressions of Christianity today, especially its more liberal/progressive manifestations, as can readily be seen in certain church movements and popular Christian writers. Brian McLaren is one of the leading exemplars. Raised in the fundamentalist Open Brethren, part of the Plymouth Brethren, he was first introduced to the wider church by *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), which earned *Christianity Today's* Award of Merit in 2002. According to his website, today McLaren is “an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. A former college English teacher and pastor, he is a passionate advocate for ‘a new kind of Christianity’ – just, generous, and working with people of all faiths for the common good.” Many of the more than 20 books he has published have been translated into other languages, including Korean, Chinese, French, Swedish, Norwegian, German, Portuguese, and Spanish. His work has also been covered in *Time*, *New York Times*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century*, the *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, CNN, and many other print and online media. In 2005, McLaren was recognized by *Time* magazine as one of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.

However, as a leader of the emerging church movement – other leading proponents include Tony Jones, Rob Bell, Peter Rollins, Phyllis Tickle, and Donald Miller – Brian McLaren is clearly no longer evangelical. The worldwide network of thousands of congregations that comprise the emergent movement is a “deconstructed church,” a “creative, entrepreneurial religious movement that strives to achieve social legitimacy and spiritual vitality by actively disassociating from its roots in conservative, evangelical Christianity” (Marti and Ganiel 2014:ix), and even by calling for a post-Christian Christianity (Rollins 2015). Thriving on the margins of Protestantism, the movement resists definition, eschews labels, and rejects institutionalization (Bielo 2011), just as its “radical deliberative democrats” (Burge 2015) are averse to hierarchical authority (Jones 2011). More conversational than doctrinal, the movement avoids rationalism of belief as it “embraces irony and contradiction” in both ideology and practice (Marti and Ganiel 2014:5).

Consequently, as an advocate of progressive and postmodern Christianity, McLaren, along with the entire emergent church movement, has been severely criticized, even vilified, by evangelicals. Writing from the perspective of the Gospel Coalition, Denny Burk (2010) demanded that McLaren be ignored because his affirmation of homosexuality contradicted traditional Christian moral condemnation of it. In response to McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christianity* (2010), Southern Baptist theologian Jim Hamilton avowed that “It’s a new kind of Christianity that is no Christianity at all,” and evangelical author Bruce Ware added that “I’ve thought of Brian McLaren for years as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but I think in this book, he took the sheep’s clothing off” (Hagerty 2010). Indeed, panelists on a discussion chaired by Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, described McLaren’s work as a “rejection of the gospel,” and “a new kind of apostasy” (Garrett 2010). This is why it is best to no longer speak of Christianity in the singular, but rather of Christianities in the plural, and not just the three historic Christianities – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant – but emerging Christianities (Kollman 2012), and even evangelical Christianities (Forster 2019).

Regardless of his theological standing, or perhaps even because of it, what is striking about Brian McLaren is the sociological imagination consistently present and practiced in his work. For example, in *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*, he employed “the image of a suicide machine that co-opts the main mechanisms of our civilization and reprograms them to destroy those they should serve” (2007:5). Tracing “our plethora of critical global crises” to “four deep dysfunctions,” he addressed a) the prosperity crisis: environmental breakdown caused by our unsustainable global economy, b) the equity crisis: the growing gap between the ultra-rich and the extremely poor, c) the security crisis: the danger of cataclysmic war, and finally d) the spirituality crisis: the failure of Christianity to provide a framing story capable of reducing the three previous crises. The only source of realistic hope, he argued, is reframing and reintroducing Jesus.

The Justice Project (2009), which McLaren co-edited, is comprised of sections on The God of Justice, The Book of Justice, Justice in the U.S.A., A Just World, and A Just Church. Building on the definition of justice offered by Gary Haugen of the International Justice Mission, McLaren defined justice as “the right use of power in our relationships with others” (2009:22). Notably, the great philosopher of the 20th century Bertrand Russell observed that “The fundamental concept in social science is power, in the sense in which energy is the fundamental concept in physics” (1938:10). As such, McLaren’s sociological imagination could not be more fundamental to his thinking about justice, or more evident in his thought. And as he elaborated,

The Christian faith isn’t all about getting to heaven. It isn’t all about the church. It isn’t all about the individual spiritual life or “personal relationship with God.” It is about all of these things, but they aren’t the whole point, or even the main point. The main point is God’s saving love for creation, God’s faithfulness to all of creation, God’s ongoing mission of healing a world torn by human injustice so that it can fulfill God’s original dream. It is about God’s kingdom coming to earth, and it is about God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. (2009:18)

McLaren repeatedly writes about growth, maturation, and change in personal faith, most recently in *Faith After Doubt* (2021) where he offers a four-stage theory of faith development – Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Harmony. He did the same earlier in *The Great Spiritual Migration* (2017), but there he also wrote about current socio-cultural change from religiosity to spirituality, what philosopher Charles Taylor described as “the massive subjective turn of modern culture” (1991:26). McLaren distinguished between three types of migration: a) a spiritual migration of moving away from defining self by a system of beliefs toward a way of life defined by love, b) a theological migration away from a violent God of domination to a non-violent God of liberation at work in the world for the common good, and c) a missional migration away from organized religion concerned with self-preservation to organizing religion likewise responsively at work in the world for the common good. Regarding the latter, he devoted a whole chapter to what is essentially social activism, Christians as agents of social change. Beyond intrapersonal change, he advocated for interpersonal change, structural or institutional change, and cultural change. In light of the ecological crisis, the economic crisis, the socio-political crisis, and the religious crisis, he called for boycotts, buycotts, corporate protests, social entrepreneurship, ethical divestment, ethical investment, and corporate social responsibility in general.

Most recently, McLaren posed the question *Do I Stay Christian?* (2022), and answered it with ten chapters of “No,” ten chapters of “Yes,” and eight chapters of “How?” But nowhere does he address the core propositional truth claims of Christianity and the philosophical apologetics that defends them – the virgin birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Instead, he offers social reasons based on the historical (mis)behavior of Christians, psychological reasons based on personhood, and theological reasons based on the evolution of Christianity.

For example, his section on “No” cites anti-Semitism, Christian violence against Christians, crusader colonialism, institutionalism, subservience to money, white patriarchy, constricted intellectualism, and lack of transformation. Regarding lack of transformation, he makes the very sociological move of collecting statistical data on the five American states that have the highest rates of church attendance: Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Noting that they all rank in the bottom ten states in longevity, education, happiness, and median household income, and the top ten in teen pregnancies, he assesses Christianity in those states to be a “failed religion.” Though he does not connect these quantitative data with the qualitative data collected by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) in her field work with Louisiana Tea Party activists, the latter goes a long way in explaining why these states, feeling “left behind” in political and economic life, also massively mobilized that year to elect their messianic figure descending a golden escalator, Donald Trump.

Later in *Do I Stay Christian?*, in addressing the “How?”, McLaren argues for the need to re-cycle, re-purpose, and redeem everything about Christianity, and ultimately “re-consecrate everything.” As the loyal opposition, or those defecting in place by working for change from the inside, he uses the sociological language of deconstruction and re-construction, though he never speaks directly of the original social construction of Christianity, or the social construction of Christian reality. This is consistent with what he said twenty years ago that he purposely avoided using sociological concepts explicitly so as to save his readers from stumbling on sociological language that may be foreign to them. Yet his sociological imagination is frequently implicit in his discourse, and clearly evident to those who share it. When asked this year about his personal familiarity with the field of sociology, he wrote the following:

One of the most influential courses in my whole university experience was a senior-level course called “The American Society.” It introduced us to, among other things, a Marxist critique of American society and entailed integrating some aspect of original research and/or social activism with our readings and classroom discussion. I am so glad I was introduced to Marxist dialectics before being told that it was worthless, evil, unpatriotic, or unChristian.

As someone who grew up Evangelical, I was also deeply influenced by Tony Campolo, who brought sociological insight to his writing and teaching. Later, I was introduced to the work of Rene Girard, whose anthropological/sociological insights have influenced my thinking deeply. His influence shows in all my books since 2010.

All my work on modernity, postmodernity, and the emerging culture has had a sociological slant, especially since a friend offered me a really insightful critique of my work in around 2006. He said, “I think you are too influenced by intellectual history, as if history were driven by ideas. I think you need to pay

more attention to social history, because ideas are often driven by social struggle, conflict, disruption, and change.” (personal correspondence)

When asked which of his books he considered most sociological, he replied as follows:

I'm a bit surprised to say that I think my book *The Galapagos Islands: A Spiritual Journey*, has an important sociological dimension, because in the writing of that book, I took seriously the fact that Darwin and Marx were working on their major books just a few miles from each other, seeking to make sense of the same sociological moment. But probably my three most recent books are the most sociological in spirit. In *The Great Spiritual Migration*, I engaged with sociological theories of institutions and movements. In *Faith After Doubt*, I put individual faith struggles in a social context, where gatekeepers and authoritarians insert their agendas in the worlds of theology and spirituality. And in *Do I Stay Christian?*, I look at Christianity in its many forms as a sociological phenomenon, not simply a personal or theological one. (personal correspondence)

When asked about his thoughts on science-religion debates in general, he ventured that

Beneath the science-religion debate is, I think, a terribly unhelpful assumption (of) dualism between natural and supernatural. That fundamental dualism has a lot of analogues – general revelation and special revelation, for example, or nature and grace. These dualisms have never made sense to me. If God is Creator, then creation is natural and sacred, needing nothing "higher" to give it meaning and value. "Natural" matter and energy are wonderful enough in themselves without having to be given value by some other category of supernatural.

And in that way, nature is fully revelatory. It doesn't need supernatural Scripture to give it value. Light and gravity and octopi and giraffes aren't less than words in their revelatory power: they are greater than words. In the end, I tend to think words are (as the Buddhists say) like pointing fingers, grunts and gestures summoning ourselves and others to notice the depth of what is there.

I sense that modern Western science became reductionistic, and didn't realize that was happening. The goal of a theory is to explain as much as it can -- perhaps even everything! That ambition can lead to the false conclusion that what is observed is reduced to "nothing but," nothing but an example of whatever theory applies. Religion has been defensive, in part because it tries to say, "Not so fast. Just because you notice a predictable pattern doesn't mean the places you notice the pattern are nothing but the pattern. There could be many more layers of meaning and depth there. Your theory is good. But don't let it become a totalizing metanarrative, seeking to be the sole and absolute explanation of something."

I remember asking an astrophysicist who was a member of my congregation, "Do you guys understand what gravity is?" He laughed. "We name it. We measure it."

We develop models or metaphors to help us conceive of it. That doesn't mean we understand it or know what it actually **is**. Beyond our names and measurements and models, gravity remains a mystery to us. It's quite humbling." (personal correspondence)

And finally, when asked what he thought sociology could best contribute to Christian faith, he offered these reflections:

Christian faith needs critical thinking in its many forms at this moment, in my opinion, to escape from what I called (in *Do I Stay Christian?*) constricted intellectualism. Sociology provides a set of critical thinking skills that take power, money, gender, group dynamics, politics, and social psychology seriously, and we need these skills at this dangerous time. When one looks at the Bible and at Christian history without considering power, money, gender, politics, group dynamics, and social psychology, one misses a lot and, frankly, easily becomes a tool of powerful economic, gendered, and political interests. This is especially dangerous after centuries of Christianity in its many forms being more or less recast as a personal matter. Christianity has become preoccupied with getting one's individual soul into heaven after death, and before death, experiencing what Francis Schaeffer captured in the phrase "personal peace and affluence." Christian institutions today often support (unwittingly or consciously) degradation of the planet, exploitation of the poor, and the promotion of patriarchal systems of domination. If that is to change, Christian leaders need to have a sociological awakening. (personal correspondence)

Overall, regarding the debate in some Christian circles about whether Brian McLaren is still Christian, McLaren himself would undoubtedly today reaffirm his endorsement on the back cover of ethicist David Gushee's autobiographical *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism* (2017). There could also be debate in some academic circles about whether McLaren is truly sociologically minded, even if only in a popular folk sense. Folk art is developed by the spontaneous effort of anonymous ordinary people as part of their everyday life, whereas high art is developed deliberately as art by talented and creative people highly recognized for it – grandma's crocheted blanket versus da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Similarly, Brian McLaren's sociology may not be professional, academic sociology, or even the public sociology of professional sociologists taking their analyses to the streets (Burawoy 2021), but his work is infused with an active sociological imagination, and contrary to his evangelical critics, is still deeply Christian. We need more like him.

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