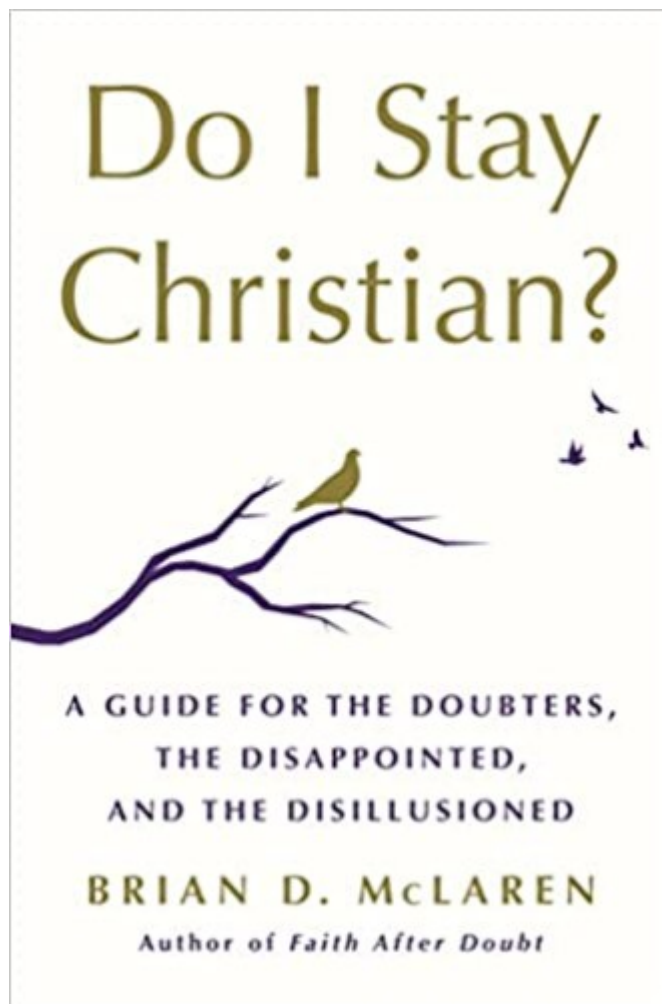


Brian McLaren offers 10 solid reasons to abandon Christianity

And 10 reasons to stay.

by [Martin Thielen](#) in the [June 15, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Do I Stay Christian?

A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned

By Brian D. McLaren

St. Martin's Essentials

I often encounter people who are struggling with big questions about faith. Is God personal? Does God intervene in the world? Was Jesus divine? Do miracles occur? Is the Bible still relevant? Is it time to give up on institutional religion? I often see lurking behind these questions a bigger and more frightening question, one that many Christians ask themselves privately but are afraid to name in public: Can I remain a Christian? Brian McLaren openly and courageously asks this question in his new book.

McLaren begins by laying out ten solid reasons for abandoning Christianity. These include historic (and current) antisemitism; the church's habit of crushing dissenters; a history of "Christian colonialism" that includes support of slavery, White supremacy, and White Christian nationalism; toxic institutionalism; financial greed; White patriarchy; rigid theology; the failure of Christianity to transform lives; an anti-intellectual streak that rejects science and encourages poisonous politics; and an aging demographic in the church that trends toward regressive views.

More reasons could be added, including the reality that traditional theistic theology no longer rings true for a growing number of people. But the section is compelling as it is, and if readers finish it with the thought, "Case closed, I'm done with Christianity," it would be difficult to fault them. As McLaren clearly spells out, there are many good reasons for giving up on the Christian faith and the institutional church.

However, he is not yet finished. Next he lays out ten reasons for remaining Christian. He argues that leaving Christianity hurts the people who are trying to transform it into something better, that they need our help rather than our abandonment. If we stay, he continues, we can fight for a better faith from the inside, providing critique and energy for reformation. Also, rather than going it alone, we need the help of a global network of like-minded people to make the world better. He notes that Christianity is still young, historically speaking, and needs more time to mature and improve.

McLaren also encourages readers to stay Christian because of our love for Jesus—and because all religions (like all humans) are imperfect. While he believes that traditional theism ("that old Big White Guy on a Throne in the Sky") has to go, he is convinced that Christianity can evolve into something far more beautiful. If we

stay, he says, we can participate in that evolutionary movement toward a more enlightened faith. He offers several other reasons to stay Christian, and even more could have been included—such as the deeply felt human need for the friendship, support, and belonging of Christian community.

This section of the book will receive mixed reviews. Some will find McLaren's case for remaining Christian and staying connected to the church compelling; others will not. A good number of readers will likely find his arguments for staying more aspirational than realistic, concluding that the kind of Christianity he envisions is not likely to happen, at least not in our lifetime. Those who do resonate with his reasons for staying may wish he'd offered more pragmatic strategies for implementing the kind of faith communities he aspires to—although the appendix provides a modest start.

As a clergyperson who communicates with religious skeptics on a regular basis, my instinct is that most people struggling with faith will find the first section (leave) more convincing than the second (stay). However, for those on the fence who are looking for reasons to stay, the second section will prove helpful.

After laying out reasons to leave and stay, McLaren, in the third and final section of his book, begins by reframing the questions: "*Will we stay Christian? and Will Christianity survive?* are less important questions than these: *How shall we humans survive and thrive? What good future shall we strive for? How can we align our energies with the divine energy at work in our universe?*" In this section, McLaren lays out an agenda that humanists both Christian and secular will likely agree on.

McLaren ends the book by calling for a radical redefinition of Christianity to match his humanist vision: "I could not stay a Christian if my only option was the old way, the old way of white Christianity, the old way of patriarchal Christianity, the old way of Theo-Capitalistic Christianity, the old way of violent, exclusive, and authoritarian Christianity with its suppressed but real history of cruelty." Lest his readers begin to lose hope at this point, he moves forward into a positive vision for Christian faith:

I have found the permission and freedom to be a new kind of Christian, a progressive Christian, a contemplative-activist Christian, a Christian humanist, or whatever you want to call me. I am learning to be content whatever I am called, as long as I remain passionately eager to embody a way of being human that is pro-justice, pro-kindness, and pro-humility.

You have that permission too, if you would like it.

Readers of McLaren's other books will recognize here a vintage McLaren "new kind of Christian" fare.

McLaren was once an evangelical preacher. So it's only fitting that the final paragraphs of his book have the feel of a revival meeting altar call. He invites his readers "to become the most just, kind, and humble version of ourselves that we possibly can, day by day" as we "practice a faith that expresses itself in love" so that we might "lean with others into a . . . new kind of humanity, open to every good resource that can help us, explicitly Christian or not." His closing words are, "A new humanity—humble, just and kind—can be born. Can you imagine that, fellow human?"

It almost made me want to walk down the aisle and get saved all over again. But as a new kind of Christian, not the old kind.