

# The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



## Emerging Faith for Emerging Challenges

with Brian McLaren

Big ideas from this session:

- Practical theology in a postmodern world
- Jesus as a model for how to save religion in time to save humanity from hell on Earth
- Why God includes reality, scripture includes evidence, and theology includes ecology

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Michael: Brian, thanks so much for being part of this conversation series on The Future is Calling Us to Greatness.

Brian: I'm really glad to be part of it and I'm glad for all the good work you do.

Michael: Thank you, Brian. Believe me, the feeling is mutual. Before we actually get into the meat of this conversation, it's just been fascinating. I've already interviewed almost half of the participants in this. It's just such a wide range of thought leaders and scientists and theologians and activists, it's just extraordinary.

Before we get into that I don't want to assume that all the people viewing this or listening to this will know who you are or what you're best known for so I invite you to please not be bashful but to really share who is Brian McLaren and what brings you to this conversation series around The Future is Calling Us to Greatness.

Brian: Great, well I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian background. I grew up with literal six-day creation, Biblical literalism, the whole deal. Something you and I have a lot in common about is I was very interested in science from a young age. I loved animals and plants and stars and dinosaurs.

I remember being a junior high kid, my favorite thing was to go to the library and I read every book on science in the children and youth section. Then I went to the adult section and I started

checking out high school biology textbooks. I was just hungry for more knowledge about science.

I remember when my junior high Sunday School teacher said, “You can make a choice, you either believe in God or evolution,” I remember thinking I’m 14 years old, in a few years and I’m out of here.”

This theme that’s been such a big part of your work also was a big part of my own life. I didn’t really expect that I would become a pastor. I loved music and I loved teaching and I loved literature so my plan was to become a college English teacher.

I did have a very dramatic, spiritual conversion experience later in my teenage years that really grew stronger through the years and I ended up leaving teaching. I’d done my graduate work on Walker Percy. Some people might be familiar with him, a southern philosophical novelist.

I ended up leaving teaching and became a pastor, actually helped form a new congregation. I was a pastor for 24 years. While I was a pastor I started asking a lot of questions. I kind of moved from that fundamentalism to a more moderate I guess you could say Evangelicalism. Still was asking bigger questions.

I started writing about my own struggles with faith and the struggles with faith of other people I was in contact with. I think my newest book is my 14th solo book. I left the pastorate about eight years ago, eight and a half years ago, just to work full time writing and speaking.

I live in southwest Florida. I love the outdoors. I’m an avid outdoorsman and still a birder and a fisherman and a wildlife person and do a lot with the environment and ecological concerns. That’s kind of my story.

Michael: That’s great. Actually I’m going to ask you a question. I don’t think I’ve asked any of the other participants this, but because of what you’ve just shared in terms of both your fascination for science as a young person but also because of our shared experience of having a transformational experience in the late teenage years, anything that you’d be willing to share about that?

In my experience there’s not a lot of support for seeing evidence as modern day scripture. Within the Evangelical world particularly, in my experience, there hasn’t been. Certainly not enthusiastic support, but not a whole lot of support in general in terms of really deeply integrating science in one’s faith or spirituality or theology. Anything that you’d be willing to share about that experience or about how that was for you? Then how have you continued to hold these two together, both science and faith?

Brian: Well, actually, Michael, as you know people from an Evangelical background love to share their testimony story. I actually never liked to share mine very much. Partly because I felt that it was such a powerful experience, every time I shared it it became a little less of a valid memory and more of a story that I told.

I would like to share it and it's sort of very relevant to the kind of work that we are both engaged with now.

Michael: Part of it, too, is because the nature of this conversation and this series and this context that we're in. I don't need to tell you this but certainly don't tell it in the way that you have typically in the past because that's often been in a particular context with a particular outcome in mind that's very different than the outcome of this conversation.

Brian: That's right. I should also say that people like you and me who are scientifically alert and thoughtful, I'm aware that any experience I share can be deconstructed psychologically, maybe psychiatrically, biologically. There are 100 different ways to deconstruct it, but there it is.

I was a teenager struggling with which was I was going to go in this whole religion thing. I was at a retreat with a southern Baptist church. I didn't go to that church but a friend of mine did. This was in the time before southern Baptist had exactly the reputation that they have today.

The leader of the retreat on the Saturday afternoon of the weekend said, "We're going to take an hour for everybody to go out and have quiet time, just between you and God." I went out and climbed up in a tree and was sitting up on a tree hoping I would have some kind of spiritual experience. Really I only had an experience of ants and mosquitos crawling up and down the tree and all over my body.

I do remember I prayed. I said, "Before I die I hope I can experience the most beautiful things and hear the most beautiful sounds." I was sort of an artistic young kid so I was interested in beauty. That was it. I was swatting mosquitos and all the rest and I don't know how I spent the rest of the hour.

Ironically, later that night after everybody had gone to bed actually in my little cabin on this southern Baptist retreat we were all in bed. The guys were telling dirty jokes. Such is life of junior high or high school kids. A couple of us snuck out of the cabin, a couple friends of mine and I.

We went and just sat on this hillside and it was one of those incredibly clear October nights. I moved away from my friends a little bit just looking up at the sky. All I could say is that I think the things I had asked for a few hours earlier actually happened.

I just had this deep sense of maybe the sense of being a creature on this planet and looking up at the sky. Not having to fit it into all the images of God that I'd been taught but just sensing that I'm in the presence of something mysterious and great and grand and that I'm actually a part of it, I'm connected to it and I'm loved and I'm known and I belong here.

It was so powerful I began to cry. I just felt an experience of connectedness that I'd never felt. Interestingly, my friends who were 20 or 30 feet away, they didn't know anything that was going on with me. They ended up in this deep conversation with each other. I overheard my friends speaking of their love for one another.

High school kids are just getting to the point where they ever express that kind of thing. I remember them being deeply overwhelmed by the sense of human love and friendship. Somehow that whole package was a formative experience of my life.

Michael: That's great. Thanks for sharing that. This is, again, a thought that just came to mind. Given who you are and what you've been committed to for now so long I'm just curious, how would you describe sort of in a nutshell what you see as your own mission, your legacy? What would you like on your tombstone? What does your heart and mind and body, in terms of your work in the world what do you hope to accomplish? What do you have your sense of your mission or your ministry?

Brian: Well, let me say it humorously and then a little more seriously. I travel a lot and I wish I traveled the way you do, but I often travel by plane. You know what happens on a plane when you say, "What do you do?"

My elevator speech or my plane seatmate speech is, "Well, I'm a former pastor and I try to convince religious people to stop killing each other and destroying the environment."

Michael: That's good, that's a good one. That's at least a bypass. If you have anybody who has sort of a knee jerk reaction, that's going to bypass wherever they're coming from and then open up for genuine conversation if that's what you all want to do.

Brian: It's true. I've had a chance to say that often enough now that people usually go, "Well, there's certainly a need for that." "I'm sure business is good," they say.

I've had this sense that I am one of many people contributing to the Christian faith as a community going through a transition from what it has been to what it will be. I very much like the way you talk about it, Michael, when you talk about religion 3.0. 1.0 being when religion was determined by authoritative people. Religion 2.0, authoritative texts. We're moving into a new stage beyond individuals and texts being we might say hierarchies and sacred texts being the soul determinants of our pursuit of truth. I feel like I'm contributing to that.

Michael: I do, too. That's great. Moving into this whole theme, it's a mythic frame. Obviously it's not literally true that the past is rooting for us, nor is it literally true that the future is calling us to greatness. Yet as I think about practically true ways of thinking about reality such that I'm inspired to be in action, that I'm motivated to give my gifts to contribute to a healthy world now and in the future, I find that to be one of the most useful frames in terms of the past rooting for us and the future calling us to greatness.

Anything that you'd like to say about that theme before we get into some of the specifics of the challenges that seem to be on the horizon and are already occurring?

Brian: Well, I think the impulse to situate ourselves in a story between the past and the future is one of the really significant changes we're going through right now. In that religion 1.1 we had to situate ourselves in a hierarchy or a power structure where there were people who could reward us and punish us, both human beings and a divine who were the punisher, to try to get us to behave.

Then in religion 2.0 we were situating ourselves in sort of a timeless system of doctrines and so on. To situate ourselves in a story is a big deal. I think that's very, very wise.

I speak about this quite often in the last couple of years because I ended up becoming very involved in the debate in the Christian community over LGBT equality. I had sort of been drawn into this as a pastor and then I didn't know I had skin in the game in the sense that one of my sons is out gay now and I have a lot of close relatives who are gay as well now, as so many of my dearest friends.

I often tell the story that I think relates to this struggle and challenge and quest that you're addressing in the series. After my son came out a close friend who also had a gay son came to me, who also is from a very religious family. He just wept and wept and wept. He said, "Brian, if I accept my son I reject my father. If I'm loyal to my father, I reject my son. It's tearing me apart."

What his statement reminds me of is that if we only think about being loyal to the tradition of our ancestors then we will betray the legacy of our descendants. Taking both of those seriously I think is a step toward maturity and adulthood and responsibility.

Michael: Yes, Amen. One of the things also that reminds me of, Brian, is that it often takes personal experience to move us beyond a particular bias or world view that we have. My mother lives down in Miami, actually Key Largo. She was rabidly anti-gay for decades.

Then, I don't know, seven or eight years ago, sometime in the last decade I was visiting her. Something came on FOX News, which is what she watches all the time. It mentioned something about homosexuality. She said something about it but there was no edge, her tone of voice was

shocking. I looked at her, I said, “Mom?” She said, “Oh yeah. Sandy, my best friend, came out as gay and some people are just born that way.”

Brian: Here’s a classic. She got a little evidence and she’s willing to change her mind based on that.

Michael: Exactly. One of the things that I’ve said actually just recently, a couple of months ago I was speaking in a relatively conservative religious setting and this whole topic came up in terms of what is your basis of authority, where do you go to for your best map, your authoritative map of what’s real and what’s important. Is it just the church elders or any elders? Or is it scripture? Or is it evidence, God, reality’s revealing through evidence?

You get very different answers to the question, for example, of the naturalness or acceptability of gay and lesbian behavior. If you look at what God’s been revealing through evidence, what reality’s been revealing through all forms of evidence, then if you look at how the Hebrews reported their understanding of reality years ago.

Brian: One of the great things about this is that once you have what you call an evolutionary and what I’ve been calling a narrative approach, is that then you realize that those authorities and those texts are also part of a story. We interpret them completely differently when we let them be narrative text, too.

As you know, I just had a new book come out called *We Make the Road By Walking*. The book is a reading of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Instead of reading it -

Michael: Hang on just a second. I’m just noticing the phone is ringing here. Start that again.

Brian: As you know, I recently wrote a book called *We Make the Road By Walking* and the book is an attempt to tell the Biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. Instead of trying to tell it as a collection of timeless truths it’s actually looking at the Bible as an evolutionary unfolding where there are different arguments and ideas and tension.

I think sensible people do the same thing with science. We go back and say, “Here’s how we used to think about the atom and here’s then how we changed our thinking.” In a sense, the history of science is the history of changing ideas.

I think there’s a very exciting way to read the Bible and any religious tradition as a history of arguments and different stories and narratives and ideas battling it out to see which ones would pass the test. Maybe it’s not the test of a controlled experiment, but it’s the test of what serves and works and helps people survive and opens them to new evidence.

Michael: Yes, Amen. Well, speaking of evidence and speaking of what reality is revealing through all forms of evidence today, what are some of the challenges that you see that humanity is now already dealing with and other challenges on the horizon?

Then sort of a second question beyond that, where do you find inspiration or hope in terms of what's being done to address some of these challenges and where do you think that we need to do something else? What might that be?

Brian: That actually was the subject of a book I wrote a few years ago called *Everything Must Change*. I, as a Christian, was setting out to answer two questions. First, what are the biggest problems in the world? Second, what does the message of Jesus specifically have to say to those crises?

It might sound a little bit morbid but it was a question I had had simmering really on the back burner for 20 or 30 years. You think there are a lot of problems out there and if I've got a bad wisdom tooth then dental care is the biggest problem in the world that day.

Standing back, what are the biggest threats? I had the wonderful luxury and pleasure of spending the better part of a year actually doing research and meeting amazing people. I came out of that saying I think there are three problems and there's an underlying fourth problem. Here they are, and it's easy to remember.

First is the problem of the planet. For the first time we human beings are sucking out more resources and pumping in more toxins than the planet can sustain. The problem of the planet is a huge, huge problem.

Second is the problem of poverty. What's happening is the way the economic system was developed and works, it rewards the haves at the expense of the have nots. The gap between the richest 1% or 0.01% and the rest grows wider and wider and wider.

When you take those two problems and put them together you just can predict there's going to be huge amounts of conflict among people. If the environment is destabilized, if agricultural lands turn to deserts people get hungry. Hungry people are scary.

The third problem is the problem of peace. When we have those first two problems in the presence of world destroying weapons, both existing ones like nuclear weapons and ones that we know could easily be developed, biological and chemical weapons, you put them together, those three problems and we've got it sounds like Biblical, apocalyptic potentials here.

That leads me to the fourth problem and that is that the source that we usually rely on to give us stories and resources and hope to deal with huge problems, those stories have

always come from our religious communities. What happens when our religious communities are actually making the first three problems worse? What happens when their stories have run out of steam to bring healing and they're not working?

This crisis of a story to help us live by I think is the deepest crisis of all. Again, that's where you and I have so much affinity because we both believe that it's a failure on the level of a story that is our greatest need right at this moment.

Michael: Yes, wow. Thank you so much for sharing that. I like the concise way that you've articulated it. Actually, this sort of naturally wants me to sort of lean in with you to this whole notion. As you know, I recently did a TEDx talk called Reality Reconciles Science and Religion, which I think you've seen.

Also, I'm just now uploading to YouTube a five-part educational discussion series designed for church groups called God and Big History. Big history being, of course, the narrative of everyone and everything that at least I think has serious potential to value the other more ancient, traditional stories but hold them in a context that moves us all forward in a healthy way.

I don't know how much of that series yet you've been able to experience, but anything that you'd like to say on this whole topic, obviously Connie's and my main website is [TheGreatStory.org](http://TheGreatStory.org). We agree that having a narrative that's evidentially grounded, that values religion, that doesn't dis and put down the traditions but helps them evolve is perhaps our only way into a healthy future. Anything you'd love to jump in on any of that?

Brian: I've seen the TED talk and I've seen the first of the other videos and just a little bit beyond that. All I can say is I love what you're doing. I'm extremely impressed by it. I think you're right.

I remember one comment, I think it's from the first video. You made the comment that as a preacher it didn't matter what you said, at the end of the day people were going to act in their self-interest. What we need is a story that raises people's sense of self-interest.

Back in the early days of capitalism they talked about enlightened self-interest, but it wasn't enlightened enough. We've got to get more enlightened than the enlightenment because we have to understand now that self-interest means the well-being of the planet. I cannot eat if the bees are not doing well. The bees are not doing well if there's any number of other issues.

Self-interest suddenly expands to the common good in terms of our humanity. I can be a Christian. Christian's make up about 33% of the population. If some Christians want to kill the rest of the Christians or everybody else, or if some Christians don't care about the

environment suddenly I can say, “I’m not in their denomination,” but it doesn’t matter. My wellbeing is tied up with their wellbeing.

Then if you add 24% of the world’s population are Muslim, suddenly you realize I’ve got to not only care about my religion, I’ve got to care about other people’s religion. You start to get this sense of connectedness. I think it’s very powerful.

That idea that there is a story that can help us expand our understanding of self-interest to the common good and the good of all, my goodness that’s important. Ironically, I think this is very much of what is at the heart of the story of Jesus with this proclamation of the kingdom of God.

When you think of kingdom, kingdom is the largest, most comprehensive reality. It’s the largest social, economic, political reality that anybody could conceive of in Jesus’ day. To talk about this larger reality that’s embracing, that calls people to reconciliation, solidarity, my gosh it’s exactly what you’re talking about.

Michael: I’m so glad you got into that because it reminds me actually of I was pastoring my first church in western Massachusetts. Here I am, 29 years old, fresh out of seminary. I’m the pastor of the only church in a town of 1,400 or 1,500 people. I was the town parson. I married, buried and baptized everybody who wanted it.

I forget how I first encountered the work of Gene and Joyce Marshall, but Gene Marshall at that time had written a book called *The Reign of Reality*. He was using that as sort of a modern day way of getting at what Jesus might have meant when he talked about the kingdom of God, the reign of reality, where reality reigns.

There was an essay in that where he summarized the work of really sort of the core thinking of Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most influential theologians and Biblical scholars of the 21st century, certainly of the first half of the 21st century. To this day, that essay is still one of the most influential ones. If somebody were to ask me what were the top 10 or top 20 most influential things you’ve read, that chapter and I think the title of it is something like What Are We Pointing To When We Use the Word God?

If we think of the word God, when we use that word we’re thinking of pointing to some other worldly being who blesses some and smites others. You could end up with a very different worldview and a very different practice in the world than if you realize that the word God can’t be divorced from what we today mean by the word reality. God is, at the very least, God may be more, however people imagine but God can’t possibly be less than a synonym for what we today mean when we use the word reality.

The reign of reality, that whole notion, in fact I think on the Evolution of Christianity, if people just put evolution and Christianity in Google you'll get to the blog. I think the latest blog post was I got Gene's permission to reprint that and I typed it all out.

I find one of the things that I've been fascinated by what you do is that you are one of the most respectful and certainly I think one of the most effective bridges from this evidential, ecological, evolutionary science celebrating world view to traditional Christians in a way that people who still deeply value both the scriptures but also the Jesus story and the person of Jesus as an inspirational figure.

Anything that you'd like to say in terms of how you do that? You've done that in so many different ways in your writings and you do it in your ministry. You're one of the few people in my experience who has the kind of broad appeal that Connie and I have actually enjoyed for over a decade now. We do the same programs in every kind of religious and non-religious and sometimes anti-religious settings as you can practically imagine.

You're one of my closest colleagues in that ability to speak to a wide range of philosophical and theological and metaphysical viewpoints with a solid grounding. There are Christians who sort of throw you out because you're too liberal or whatever, but by and large I think you've been effective in that. Anything you'd like to say about how you do that and what inspires you in that process?

Brian: Well, I think this is one of the struggles I know that you face and you I think deal with quite graciously and gracefully. Let me tell you what's hard for me in this, that might be the best way to respond to your question.

Science, traditional science, is I think intentionally and maybe necessarily reductionistic. If you come up with a powerful scientific theory your hope is that it explains everything. To reduce things is part of what traditional science has done.

That bird out there becomes a specimen of kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. The fact that we developed this taxonomy and you can account for every single bird and every single insect and everything else, to reduce it to that kind of taxonomy is what science has thrived in.

The problem is that reductionism can have a toxic effect. Someone called it nothing buttery. That's nothing but **clemmies and sculpta**, that's nothing but this or that. This reductive effect can have huge implications.

Let me mention three. Personally it can have a reductive effect where I think I'm just a bunch of protoplasm, I'm just a bunch of atoms and molecules, nothing really matters. The psychological effects of that, there was the thing I loved about the existentialist philosophers in

the middle of the 21st century when I read that as a young college student. I thought at least they're being honest about the loss when things are reduced.

It has a huge effect ecologically because if there's no higher value than all I'm doing is describing things that can be exploited for technology and corporations and profit and so on. I have no moral lever to say that should not be done.

Even in the world of religion I think religious people are deeply afraid that if they encounter science, science is going to pull a fast one on them and reduce everything they're talking about to some level of zeros and blanks or whatever. The fear of reductionism is a huge, huge issue. On the science side we've got that.

On the religion side I think our religions will be in a better place in 30 or 40 years. I see this happening in Christianity, in Islam, in Judaism, Hinduism. I literally have had wonderful conversations with people in all these different religious communities and I can testify that they're in the same struggle. They're all trying to get to a way that they can have a narrative version of their own faith. They're trying to help their faith outgrow 1.0 and 2.0 without rejecting great leaders and rejecting great text.

The great struggle in the religious world is that we can't become enlightened about our own metaphor and our own metaphors. Even though I've devoted my life to theology and spirituality and church and so on, I have to admit when I see the word God there is an old man with a long, white beard sitting on a throne up in the sky.

Even though I know that's not what I mean when I say the word God that's part of my, the word philosophers use is it's my imaginary. If a library is a collection of books an imaginary is a collection of images.

I think science people are very nervous about religion because they feel we can't deal with these people without being sucked into their imaginaries. One of the great challenges of I think our generation and the next few generations is we have to find an imaginary to talk about God that is as relevant to our day as what was in the Bible.

In the eighth century BC when David or the tenth century BC when and if David was writing Psalms and he referred to God as a king, that was a different image in the tenth century BC than it is today. All that's to say those are the struggles that I think we live in. If we understand that as part of our creative challenge and opportunity it's kind of exciting. That's part of the great work that we're being called to.

Michael: You said you were going to say three things. You said science and gave the reductionism and then religion. I'm just wondering.

Brian: Then the problem in the zone in between those two is how do we negotiate that zone in the middle of those two when on both sides we have a lot of tension. It's not like we've got this new solution all figured out that we invite other people into. It's not that simple.

I think there are many different ways this could go. Some of my secular friends think as soon as we leave religion in the past, religion is like alchemy, let's just give up on that project, we're not going to make gold out of lead, let's just say we've outgrown that. There are certain people advocating that.

I think my preferred scenario is that our religious communities are like species that evolve and that they find in their DNA and in their potential for mutation great hope for adapting and not just adapting but then being vital, generative participants as we move forward.

Negotiating that middle space, we've got issues in science, we've got issues in religion and then we've got issues in that middle space that's just where we live.

Michael: It is, and certainly that's what I'm attempting to do. Only time will tell whether I'm successful or not. This God and big history sort of educational series that I'm trying to create and get feedback on, I'm hoping that big history as the epic of evolution or the universe story or the great story, this narrative that's grounded in evidence, but also for it to be as inspiring as creationists traditionally have been it has to deal with the realm of values and of meaning and of inspiration.

Of course, there's no one way, there's no singular way to interpret big history. In fact, my hunch is that there will be innumerable interpretations of big history that each religious tradition and each philosophical system will probably hone in on its own ways of interpreting that perhaps only that group finds to be inspiring on a scale of nine or ten on a ten-point scale.

Nonetheless, I think that's an important enterprise that we're finding different ways to interpret what evidentially is being given to us, recognizing that by the very nature of meaning making and the very nature of symbolic language there is no one right way or one inspiring way to interpret it.

Brian: In fact, the part of any vibrant and vital community is managing the tensions between those competing ways, just as in science we manage the tensions between competing theories. I don't think I've had a chance to tell you this story and I have to be very vague about this story because I want to protect the identity of the people involved.

Michael: That's fine, that's fine.

Brian: I've had some really interesting conversations in the last year with a group of people from a community that I'd rather not name, but who have been from what we might call

the reductionist science side of things in the sense that science without value. It's just the facts without any of the inspiration, meaning, etcetera that you're talking about.

A group of these science-oriented people had been meeting together and they had reached the conclusion in their conversation that they need God back. They need that word or that concept. They were doing it based on evidence.

They were saying if you look at the universe it seems like either we're an accident or there's a direction this thing wants to produce. I like how one of your quotes said it, that you start with hydrogen and you end up with an opera. There is this sort of urge or whatever.

It was just fascinating to have this group of people want to have a private meeting to say, "We're doubting the orthodoxy of our community. We want to talk about this other dimension." I so often have religious people come to me and say, "You're a safe person. I need to ask my doubts."

Michael: One of the reasons I've got such a big smile on my face, because I've spoken hundreds of times to humanists, Atheists, free thinkers, skeptics, and spoken hundreds of times to all kinds of Christian groups, liberal, conservative, Catholic, Protestant, you name it. Also hundreds of times to more new age, new thought, integral as well as Hindu and Buddhist groups. I often will have privately someone or a small group of people come up in a very similar way and express things.

It's a fascinating time that we're living in because the two halves of our brain work differently for really good reasons. Facts and values are not the same thing and yet we can't survive as human beings unless we attend to both. It's a fascinating time.

In fact, I rarely do what I'm about to do which is to actually recommend a book in the course of this conversation series, but right now I'm about halfway through a book that was just recently recommended to me by a leading philosopher of religion, JL Schellenberg called *Evolutionary Religion*. It's Oxford University Press.

He takes a deep time understanding, not just the deep time past but deep time future. He says if what religion is about, which is as the whole field of evolution and religious studies shows that it is, it's about helping us live in right relationship to reality as reality is experienced at that time and place and that sort of thing. Then it's inconceivable that there won't be forms of religion as long as there are self-reflexive creatures, even if it's not humans.

If we think about how recently we've been sort of cultured and rational thinking, self-reflexive consciousness, and if we look out hundreds of thousands or millions of years even the challenges, the enormous challenges that we now are experiencing with things like global warming and peak oil and these things, the likelihood of any of these challenges destroying

humanity as a whole, that there's not being at least a remnant that is able to repopulate over thousands and tens of thousands of years, it seems likely that's the case.

He's taking a look at what would religion be, what would an evidentially-grounded not just a religion but sort of a meta-religious perspective that nourishes all different religious traditions, what would that look like, feel like, sound like? I'm finding it to be a fascinating book. I'm sure I'll be in conversation with him about all this.

I'm curious, this leads me to think how do you see or what do you imagine Christianity? So much of your work has been within the Christian tradition. How do you see the Christian church evolving now and do you even venture to think how it might evolve in another thousand years or further?

Brian: One thought that comes to mind right now is to say that in our lifetime we have seen two main survival strategies in religion. One is the liberal survival strategy, the other is the conservative survival strategy.

In general, the conservative survival strategy has been don't question doctrine but become completely flexible in methodology. Religious conservatives are the first to go on the radio, the first to do religious broadcasts, for better or worse. The first to do websites, the first to embrace rock and roll music.

Then you have religious liberals who were very open in their thinking. Their seminaries you could read anything, you could discuss anything, a lot more freedom of thought but it's still got to be an organ, it's still got to be a piano, it's still got to be a liturgy that follows this and that line.

It's sort of interesting to say that each group has allowed itself flexibility in one area. That in some ways they bought permission to be flexible in one area by being rigid in another area.

Michael: That's interesting, yes.

Brian: I think as we move forward what's going to happen is the two flexibilities are going to have to come together. I think that's happening. I see signs of that happening.

A lot of us we've used words like emergence and convergence. When you have emergence from those liberal and conservative mindsets, the people who have emerged then start to converge. I see that as a hopeful sign, I see that as happening.

Christianity has some older brothers and sisters, one of them of course is Judaism. Judaism has figured out how to do this. Judaism, they take their texts seriously but the tradition

of midrash is the tradition of saying to be a faithful person is to, A, argue with the text and, B, to notice the arguments within the texts. I think Christianity's going to have to do that.

One of our older brothers and sister is Buddhism. What I think has happened in Buddhism is that to be devoted to the Buddha is to take that story of his life seriously and to take the legacy of his teachings seriously. You might say, "We don't even know how much of this actually happened in this or that way." The fact is that whatever happened became encoded in stories and those stories had a period of time before they were written down.

In a sense, when you write something down you stop its evolution. In some ways the most important part of a tradition is the part of tradition before it's written down.

The fact that between the time of Jesus and the time of the gospels written down, some people see that 40 to 60 year period as, what a shame, we lost accuracy. You could also say, no, that's the period where the stories evolve and have a life and thank God for that period of time of evolution of the stories that varying different versions compete and better ones survive and so on.

All that's to say I think as Christians, learn how to cherish our traditions the way Jews and Buddhists have, I think we'll be better Christians. Does that make sense for you?

Michael: It makes a lot of sense, Brian. The succinct way you just articulated it I think is helpful because I agree, if you get around to watching the other videos, number five one evidential profits I actually get pretty bold there. I say can we legitimately say what are some things that reality, God, is saying to us today? Like thus save the Lord kind of language.

One of the things that I think has kept we Christians, and I'll speak as a Christian at this moment, I'm a Christian naturalist, an evidential Christian or evolutionary Christian, however you want to speak about it. For me, as part of this tradition it's like one of the things that's kept Christians from fully celebrating evidence as divine revelation is we've been I think blinded to what God, to what reality's been revealing through all forms of evidence. In part because I identify what I call the triple idolatries.

Idolatry of the written word where we think God's best guidance is frozen in any ancient text. Idolatry of the other worldly where we think God resides, ultimate value, ultimate reality resides outside time and nature. Idolatry of beliefs, where we think any one belief system is the only one right way to a proper relationship and a healthy relationship to reality.

I think those three idolatries have in some ways made what my mentor, Thomas Berry, used to say, that we've been spiritually autistic. We've been so living in our own world that we haven't been present to the voices. What is the climate telling us? What are the rivers telling us? What are the other species telling us? Not in English words, of course.

If we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear we can discern reality speaking rather clearly in ways that we're not present to if all we do is think of other worldly God revealing Himself in ancient texts and that my belief system is the only one right way.

Brian: Again, for me as a Christian here's where it gets interesting. The fact that there's no Buddhist Catholic church, there's no Buddhist hierarchy. Obviously there are, there's Theravada Buddhism, there's all kinds of hierarchies. There's no sort of single group that gets to say what it is.

What has happened in Buddhism is that the Buddha becomes more central than the ism. There's a right balance of form and freedom there, I think. I think something similar has to happen in the Christian faith. You take those three idolatries, idolatry of the text, and then you imagine Jesus saying, "You have heard it said, but I say to you." It's not what goes into a person that defines a person, it's what comes out of a person. Well, no, the text says it's what goes into a person. There's that.

The other worldly part, well the prayer is not, "May we go to your kingdom when we die." It's, "May your kingdom come when we will be done on Earth." There's the confrontation of that.

Then the idolatry of beliefs. To challenge the belief of who is clean and who is unclean, who is in and who is out, many of the first will be last and last will be first. Suddenly this, to me, is a great treasure for people who are Christians to say right in Jesus you have the iconic class of those three idolatries you just mentioned.

Michael: Amen, wow. Really glad you covered that. On this theme, The Future is Calling Us to Greatness, I'm curious, Brian, what do you see as the biggest challenges that we are currently facing? What would you offer as sort of the most important things that we need to do to come back into right relationship to reality?

I sometimes say that we're experiencing the great reckoning where humanity has been out of right relationship to reality and that we're not allowed to experience the consequences of that. I think it's also likely to be seen, assuming we survive this, as the great homecoming, the prodigal species waking up to our predicament after we've squandered our inheritance and coming home to our reality.

What do you see as the biggest challenges that we're now facing and will be facing in the coming decades and what your prescription or suggestion or advice would be in terms of how to most effectively move forward?

Brian: Well, if I take the planet, poverty, peace and then the underlying problem of story or religion or spirituality, if I say that's sort of my given and then I say how does that translate into a very real problem in today's world, I think one of our great challenges in the next few decades is going to be that our political systems seem to not be able to solve problems.

Our political system has now become the place where our conflicts are played out to a stalemate and that we don't actually find the ability to solve problems. Then you think how are we going to get to that ability to solve problems?

This is where I think there's a multi-stage process. People like you and me are very early in the process, I think. We're trying to help people get that imaginary set of images, a narrative, and then hopefully practices that help form the kinds of people who actually inhabit this big story which I think another name for it is good news. We inhabit that story, but then that has to get translated into organized and sustained political action.

I think there is possibilities for that to happen. I worry that our political structures are just going to fail on us. I had an interesting experience. Again, I'm out to protect privacy but my books have not sold millions of copies and I'm unknown by seven billion people. A President of a country apparently read my book *Everything Must Change* that talks a lot about the environment. He was deeply impressed by the book and he bought copies for all of his staff in this country, it's not a huge country.

I was in that country. He sent one of his aides to meet with me. Basically the aide said, "My boss is in on the center of concerned about the environment. You just need to know that we're failing. Our political systems are only equipped to deal with urgent problems, not with long-term problems."

Michael: Yes, yes.

Brian: He said, "If there are going to be solutions we're going to have to imagine different kinds of solutions." I'll just mention quickly one area that I'm somewhat excited about, I think has enormous potential. If money controls politics then we have to work on the level of economic power rather than just political power. In other words, the power of the ballot is really important, but so is the power of the credit card or the dollar.

What would happen if we were to mobilize the world's largest religion, let's say even ten percent of the world's largest religion, and we actually said we're going to establish a set of economic principles. Any companies that will abide by these principles we will start doing business with those companies. We consider it will be an ethical violation for us to do business with companies on this other list.

Suddenly we start using our power in where we spend our money day by day. I think that could be one of the most powerful, moral movements that could make the biggest difference in years ahead.

Michael: I agree, and what you just said so resonates with me. Either during this conversation or afterward or next week or whatever, I want to further that conversation with you.

Brian: Great. I think it's really important. This is one of the big takeaways I came up with after I finished the book *Everything Must Change*. I'm just looking around. Yes, I don't have a great example here. Actually, I do, just a second. Here is a bottle of vitamins. On the back of the bottle of vitamins is this thing, the nutritional information thing.

When you and I were kids no product had that little box on it with nutritional information. Now, every food item has that box. In our lifetime I had nothing to do with it but some smart people figured out a way to say no food product should be able to be sold that doesn't have nutritional information.

I think it's possible that by the time our children, our grandchildren, finish their lives you can say, "You cannot buy a piece of lumbar, you cannot buy a computer, you cannot buy a musical instrument, you cannot buy a house without it being transparent what the ethical and environmental impacts of producing that product were." It's doable.

Michael: Yes, well and what you're pointing to is there's not only the move to integrate true cost into things which is, of course, what some kind of a fee and dividend or tax on carbon or whatever would do. You're also talking about integrating the knowledge so that people then will be motivated to do the right, just, ecological thing by simply being aware of what is the true cost both to the human community and to the natural world and to people, workers and that sort of thing, in everything.

Integrating true cost and integrating the knowledge so that you've got that, I love that. I'd like to see that happen and I want to in some way help make that happen or participate or at least be in the conversation of others who agree that this is something that we need to move toward.

Brian: Especially if we just throw up our hands about how dysfunctional our political systems are, that's not going to help. We have to say, okay, if they're going to screw up, if they're going to miss the opportunity, if they're not going to be part of the great work then we'll have to find some other ways to do it.

Michael: I mentioned this in several of these interviews so if somebody's watching all of these they're going to be saying, "There goes Michael saying that again," but I can't help it, these are one-on-one conversations. One of my heroes in the climate world is Bob Inglis, a

Republican who he says he speaks mostly to conservative audiences. He's actually strongly in favor of an approach that doesn't promote big business or big government.

He says it's real simple, we need to put all the costs in all the fuels and remove all the subsidies and then watch the free market enterprise solve the energy and climate crisis. It's moving it away from regulation and saying let the power of the global market move us in the right directions, but we have to integrate true costs into things for that to be the case.

Brian: Exactly right, yes.

Michael: Brian, just winding down here I know we've got limited time. I just want to ask you a question that's off the wall. I don't ever ask anybody ahead of time or tell them what I'm going to ask, but Connie, my wife, is the one that suggested this. It's been fascinating to hear the responses.

If you were to invite any three people in human history to either a one-on-one over a beer or a glass of wine or a cup of coffee or a dinner party where these three people throughout human history and you are in a conversation all four of you together. Either one of those. If you were to have that conversation who would those three people be and why would you invite them?

Brian: Well, I'm partly thinking about the title of a book I wrote. My first thought and probably if I thought about it for eight hours it would be my last thought, I would like to get Jesus, the Buddha and Mohammad in a room, especially if we could suck them out of their time and let them get what's going on in our time. The brilliance of their analysis of their own setting could be applied to our setting.

The minute you get the three of them talking together with the different kinds of minds and the different kinds of intelligence they have, that would be a pretty exciting dinner.

Michael: I'm with you. I love that one, I love it. Brian, just in conclusion any last words? Any words of encouragement? One of the questions I often ask is if you're speaking to a young person who's just freaked out about the world and climate change or peak oil, whatever the challenge is, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, some of these large scale, species extinction.

If you're talking to a young person who's just freaked out and just scared shitless or whatever, what would you say that would be encouraging, that would be supportive, that would be helpful? Then just any last words that you have that you would like to share in this conversation?

Brian: Well, one thing I would say is if a person isn't tempted to despair they don't know the gravity of the problem.

Michael: They don't get it, right.

Brian: The first thing I'd say is if you're tempted to despair, that's fantastic. That says you're facing the gravity of the problem. The second thing I'd say is if you succumb to despair then you have now become part of the problem. If the gravity of the problem bothers you, you have no choice but to in a certain sense have faith.

I like what my friend Jim Rollins says. He says faith is believing something, this relates to our discussion, against the evidence and watching the evidence change. What that says is that when I take all the evidence into account and then I'm willing to act in a way that's constructive and creative and productive and hopeful and morally guided, I dare to believe that my actions and the actions of others can create a different scenario.

Despair is very much buying into the idea that we are not protagonists in our own story. Part of the empowerment of telling a story is to say, "Here we are." We've got a lot of great examples in the past to go back and say a whole lot of people in the past had the courage to say, "You know what? Slavery is not an inevitability. You know what? The superiority of men over women is not a foregone conclusion. You know what? Domestic violence is the norm now, it can become the exception."

We look around and say fossil fuels are incredibly cheap now, but do you know what? There are better ways. We can find better ways to do this. I think that's a kind of faith that you and I know something about from our ministry background. It's like it comes from this fullness.

The evidence, in this sense, can beat me down but there's this other source of evidence that leaves a possibility. That, to me, is a big part of what faith is about. It's why your work and your writings and my work and my writings and so on, we're hoping to give people a story that they can live in and live by that will help change the story of the future.

Michael: Yes, Amen. Wow, that's a fabulous note to end on. Brian, if somebody wants to learn more about your work what's your website or where would you suggest that they go?

Brian: If they go to [BrianMcLaren.net](http://BrianMcLaren.net), it's B-R-I-A-N M-C-L-A-R-E-N dot net. Then there's a link to my Facebook and Twitter, my books and all the rest. That'd be great.

Michael: Fabulous. I look forward to hopefully in the not too distant future catching up just on a more personal level. If you get around to watching the rest of the -

Brian: I will, I definitely will.

Michael: Okay, cool. I value your input. Thank you so much for this series, for being part of this. I think it's just great to have your voice here and as always it's wonderful.

Connie and I are going to be in Fort Myers I think the first week in January. If you're around let's make sure we get together.

Brian: We'll do it. That's fantastic. I am around, look forward to it.

Michael: Thanks, Brian. Bye-bye.