

Summary:

Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope
by Brian D. McLaren

The book is founded on the author's concern with two fundamental questions. Questions #1) What are the biggest problems in the world? Question #2) What does Jesus have to say about these global problems?

So first before we get into the book proper I want to prevent people from panicking prematurely. Let me put the title in context. The author was invited to Burundi to talk with a group of religious leaders representing Tutsi and Hutu tribes from Rwanda and Burundi. Over a million people have died in Burundi and a million more in Rwanda in a series of genocides starting in 1959. That's the scope of their tragedy.

The local leader who invited the author asked the group how many sermons did they think he had heard in his life. He was the son of a preacher so they were surprised when he said - one. The sermon was essentially: You are a sinner and you are going to hell. You need to repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus might come back today, and if he does and you are not ready, you will burn in the fires of hell forever.

He went on to explain that the missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa brought this message but had somehow not conveyed the essential message preached by Jesus of the kingdom of God. That is, a message not so obsessed with escaping the present world and its problems by going to heaven after death but instead focused on how God's will could be done on earth.

Now imagine that you were hearing this revelation for the first time and your country was trying to emerge from a period of incredible brutality and violence. The author noticed a woman exactly in this predicament. She sat with her head on a table motionless. He went to ask her if she was OK. She said she was although she was a bit shaken up. She went on to say that she wasn't certain if other people had had the same realization that she had. She got it. She understood that the kingdom of God was being made manifest here and now, not yet fully realized, but she was being called to change the world - not to escape into her church. She added if Jesus' message of the kingdom of God is true, then everything must change. Everything must change. So that's the context of the title.

OK so to go about setting up question #1) what are the biggest problems Mr. McLaren sets up a model of how society works. He's really into this machine image where there are three components: a prosperity system, a security system, and an equity system (draw diagram). The prosperity system motivates us to achieve to get more stuff to be happy to thrive. The security system is to protect our prosperity system. I don't want anybody takin' my stuff away from me. And then the equity system seeks to fairly distribute the cost of the expensive security system and maintaining the infrastructure of the prosperity system.

McLaren then uses this framework to describe how problems can come up in our idyllic little societal machine. First the societal machine does not exist in isolation. It actually exists on earth where we have finite resources. The contention of the author is that we have let our societal machine get out of control. In fact we've turned our societal machine into a suicide machine in that our present course is unsustainable. We're chewing through our resources faster than they can be replenished if they can even be replenished at all. Schematically instead of our societal machine being scaled appropriately it is way too big for its britches. McLaren details a number of the negative ramifications that I'm sure you are aware of to some extent.

Next McLaren addresses the second question, what would Jesus do? But here he makes the important distinction that you can't just rip the words and actions of Jesus out of a two thousand year old culture plunk them down in present day and expect them to mean the exact same thing. So he introduces the concept of a framing story (I've heard this said another way as a world-view). McLaren wants us to recognize Jesus came on the scene when the Jewish people were living under the rule of the Roman Empire. There were several factions each with their own framing story: The Zealots who wanted to revolt in an armed uprising, the Pharisees who were concerned that the Jew's lack of piety was preventing God from sending a warrior to free them from Roman oppression, Sadducees who wanted to accommodate and coexist peacefully with the Romans, and then the Essenes who just ran away and hid.

Now Jesus comes on the scene and everybody wants to make sure that he doesn't mess with their idea how God's plan should work. The Romans don't want another deity interfering with their god Caesar and their imperialist framing story. The zealots want a warrior king to lead the fight. The pharisees want a fight as well as someone to tell them how good a job they were doing being the moral police. The Sadducees were looking for approval for being dualists obeying the Romans in public but being Jewish in private. And the Essenes were off in the woods somewhere. But guess what? Jesus wasn't going to accept a misguided human framing story he was going to demonstrate God's framing story of a kingdom on earth - as it is in heaven.

If we contrast the Roman framing story where you obtain peace through victory, peace through the destruction of enemies or peace through domination with Jesus' framing story where peace comes from nonviolent justice, peace comes through the forgiveness of enemies, through reconciliation, peace comes through embrace and grace the difference can inspire hope.

In the second half of the book the author turns his discussion to the present day, here and now. The most challenging aspect of this book comes when we have to examine our society and how we are complicit with its actions. For me personally the chapter detailing defense spending and how small fractions of that total expensive could achieve tremendous things for the poor and needy in the world is a bitter pill to swallow. I'm a civil servant working for the navy. But I was impressed that through out the book after each chapter the study questions don't assume you necessarily agree with every idea presented. An example is p147 #4.

McLaren addresses the issues with each of the security, prosperity and equity systems by suggesting how Jesus would approach the problem. For the security system, violence begets violence, blessed are the peacemakers. McLaren contends our prosperity system, for which he borrows the title theocapitalism (i.e. we raise capitalism to a religion), obeys the following four laws

- 1) The law of progress through rapid growth
- 2) The law of serenity through possession and consumption
- 3) The law of salvation through competition alone
- 4) The freedom to prosper through unaccountable corporations

Jesus' take would be

- 1) The law of good deeds for common good.
- 2) The law of satisfaction through gratitude and sharing.
- 3) The law of salvation through seeking justice.
- 4) The law of freedom to prosper by building better communities.

Addressing the equity system we are to help the poor, petition the rich and work to improve the system. McLaren provides plenty of figures to emphasize the point that there is a vast disparity between the rich in the world and the poor.

What's the answer how do we do this? If you thought the above was a bit pollyannaish then you are exactly right. I had to look up how to spell pollyannaish and I discovered that the term originates from the best selling book Pollyanna (1913) about a girl who was taught by her father to always have a positive attitude. She is orphaned and moves to Vermont with an Aunt. Her sunny personality, sincere and sympathetic soul brings so much gladness to her aunt's dispirited New England town that she transforms it into a pleasant place to live. In a matter of speaking that is exactly what McLaren is suggesting. He says that there is one great step we can take to dismantle the suicide machine and the framing stories that legitimize it: to stop believing in it, and to believe, in its place, a different story, the story of the kingdom of God. With this belief can follow personal action. Building on that can come community action. When the people begin to see that it becomes public action. And when it reaches a large enough scale it becomes global action.

Understand that this is the abridged version, I just compress 300 pages down to 3. There is lots of good material to talk about in this book whether you agree with some, all, or none of it.