

Conditions for the Great Religion Singularity

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Abstract: Applying the Buddhist “law of interdependent origination,” which states that if the conditions are right, a particular phenomenon may exist, Brian McLaren provides ten conditional factors that he believes have contributed to Ken Howard’s “religion singularity” (i.e. the multi-faceted collapse of institutional Christianity). Each condition falls under two main categories: either a lack of rapid adaptability in religious institutions or the moral failure of institutional leaders. The ten conditional factors include authoritarian centralization, betrayal of the religious founder’s non-violence, a history of unacknowledged atrocities, military imperialism, white supremacy, scandals, reaction against scientific inquiry, doubling down on dualism, integrated and change-averse institutional systems, and paralysis and nostalgia.

Keywords: Religion Singularity, Interdependent Origination, Institutional Christianity, Adaptability, Moral Failure

Introduction

ONE OF BUDDHISM’S MANY gifts to the world is the principle of *pratityasamutpada*, which is sometimes named negatively as the “law of no independent origination” but is, perhaps, better translated positively as the “law of interdependent origination.”¹ Like profound Christian mysteries such as the Trinity or *creatio continua*, or the transforming power of faith, this Buddhist teaching has many levels of meaning and has engendered all kinds of controversy. But one incontrovertible dimension of the teaching can be simply stated: if the conditions are right, something may exist. If the conditions are not right, it will not exist. In other words, the existence of anything is dependent on the conditions that produce it or on the conditions that it requires, and everything that exists is interdependent with its environment.²

Jesus articulated something similar in his parable of the soils (Mark 4:3–20). Even good seed will not grow unless the conditions are right, such as fertile soil, sufficient depth to retain moisture, absence of weeds that would compete for nutrients and sunlight, and so on. The parable goes beyond Paul’s dictum that we reap what we sow, suggesting that even if we sow good seed, unsuitable external conditions can preclude a good harvest. The teachings of both Jesus and the Buddha invite us to step beyond our simple linear concepts of causality in order to think in deeper terms of sufficient conditions and, deeper still, in terms of webs or systems of interdependent conditions.

¹ For a brief summary of this principle, including why, in Buddhism, it is often linked to atheism, see Barbara O’Brien, “The Principle of Dependent Origination in Buddhism,” ThoughtCo, April 5, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/dependent-origination-meaning-449723>.

² Cf. Ewing Chinn, “Nāgārjuna’s Fundamental Doctrine of *Pratīyasamutpāda*,” *Philosophy East and West* 51, no. 1 (January 2001): 54–72, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2001.0005>.

The “religion singularity,” as predicted by Ken Howard, is based on two observations, and each observation is interdependent with a number of interactive conditions that contributed to it. First, traditional religious engagement is declining in most parts of the West. Second, as engagement has been declining, the number of religious institutions has been rising. These two seemingly contradictory realities create the conditions for a new predicted reality: a religion singularity when religious institutions collapse or implode in large numbers.³

The first observation regarding the decline in religious engagement in the West has been widely researched and theories abound as to its causes. The second observation regarding the rising number of religious institutions has, to my knowledge, received less attention. Keeping the principle of interdependent origination in mind, I would suggest that a complex and dynamic set of conditions has led to these two observations, rendering the *Great Religion Singularity* (i.e. a multi-faceted collapse of institutional Christianity) not only possible, but virtually inevitable, barring the sudden rise of other radically disruptive conditions.⁴

These many specific and complexly interrelated conditions can be, I believe, organized under two general headings:

General Condition A (GCA): Institutional Brittleness; the lack of rapid adaptability in all major religious institutions, coupled with a rapidly changing environment, has led to a growing sense of cultural irrelevance and unfitness, resulting in declining religious retention in each generation, with cascading effects.

General Condition B (GCB): Moral Failure; the notable moral failures of religious leaders, members, and whole communities, leading to a fresh analysis of moral failures across history, which has made claims of one religion’s spiritual supremacy over others literally incredible and ethically reprehensible.

Below, I will survey ten more specific examples of these general conditions.⁵ I will also include “GCA” or “GCB” in parentheses to indicate which general condition is most linked to each example. Obviously, these specific examples could be explored to more and more granular levels of specificity. Here are some of the conditions that I see creating the backdrop for a *Great Religion Singularity* in the near future.

1. Authoritarian Centralization

Relatively early in its history, Christianity experienced a centrifugal force as charismatic leaders arose in response to political, economic, and other conditions. These *ad hoc* leaders formed various sects that decentralized the young faith. For example, in addition to a center in

³ Kenneth W. Howard, “The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity,” *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 77–93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

⁴ Such disruptive conditions might include nuclear, biological, or chemical warfare, an unforeseen planetary catastrophe, or something else entirely.

⁵ I focus my attention here on Christianity (or Christianities) as the West’s primary religious heritage, although conditions that affect Christianity often affect other traditions, as well.

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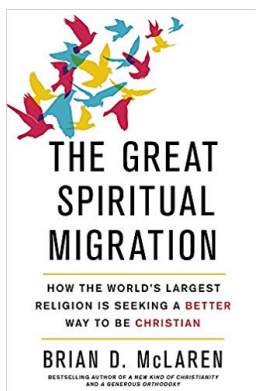
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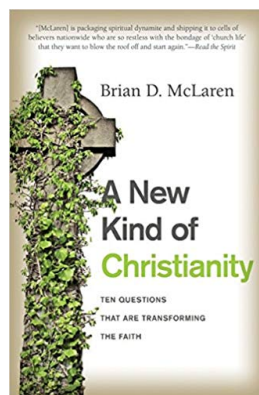
Brian D. McLaren is an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. He is an Auburn Senior Fellow and a leader in the Convergence Network, through which he is developing an innovative training/mentoring program for pastors, church planters, and lay leaders called Convergence Leadership Project. McLaren works closely with the Center for Progressive Renewal, the Wild Goose Festival, and the Fair Food Program's Faith Working Group. His most recent joint project is an illustrated children's book (for all ages) called *Cory and the Seventh Story*.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian
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