

Life after Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart

By Brian D. McLaren

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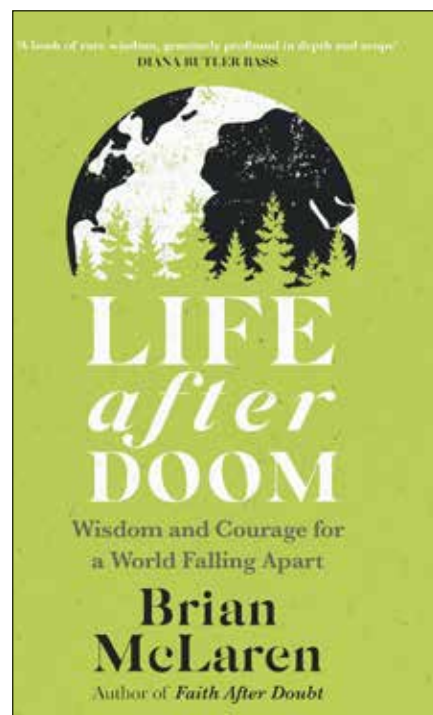
This is a very different text to that of Bill Gates, *How to avoid a Climate Disaster. The Solutions we have and the Breakthroughs we need* (London: Penguin Books 2022) reviewed in a previous edition of FiBQ. Bill Gates sees hope of avoiding doom in technological advances, but Brian McLaren is more pessimistic. He reflects that the world has passed certain tipping points and that a tide of doom is inexorably rising. This feeling creates a deep inner divide, a tension between a sincere and hopeful commitment to action for the common good on the one hand, and on the other, a feeling that no actions can prevent the arrival of an undesirable or even dystopian future.

He notes a sense of despair amongst his students, such as that which I found amongst my students in exploring the relationship of science and faith. When I presented the predictions of global climate change for the world in my lectures at Cardiff University in the early 2000s, one student in a Q & A session asked: 'Is slitting my wrists the only thing I can do?'

In a similar way to my own resolve to consider hope in the face of environmental catastrophe, McLaren provides a sober analysis of the current climate crisis and then proceeds to explore the challenge of living well, maintaining resilience and growing in wisdom and love in the face of nations, ecosystems, economies, religions, and other institutions in disarray.

He states that humans do not have an environmental problem; the environment has a human problem.

The problem at the heart of this crisis is us (p.34). McLaren rehearses the suicidal spiral discussed in his



book *Everything must change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), in which he describes three sub-systems that make up a global suicide machine: **The prosperity system**, which fulfils our desire for more and more happiness, which is achieved by consuming more and more. But there isn't enough for everyone and so there will be jealousy and violence. So we need protection, although we can't protect ourselves from the panic of the money markets. **The security system** protects our prosperity system with weapons, intelligence, border controls, police and surveillance, for

which we need personnel and weapons, at a significant cost. This cost must be shared. But it is impossible to protect ourselves from random acts of violence. **The equity system** shares the cost of the security system, making sure that everyone has the possibility of happiness. But this is not equality, and the few have the greatest chance of growing in prosperity. And even when we have our wealth and security it is no guarantee of happiness. In this work he relates this global 'suicide machine' to the environmental crisis.

McLaren states that 'it's a feeling that catastrophe of some sort is inevitable, that we are on a moving pavement to the end of the world.' He then asks why we are failing to address the climate crisis, as without a healthy planet, there will be no healthy people, and certainly no healthy businesses, congregations, denominations, or religions. He points to Darwin's misunderstood 'survival of the fittest,' and reflects that it meant survival of those who are best fitted to live within their environment. If we fail to preserve the Earth's ecosystems we will become extinct.

McLaren presents four scenarios: collapse/avoidance; collapse/rebirth; collapse/survival; collapse/extinction (pp 32–34), and concludes that whatever environmentalists do, our best efforts are insufficient. Those in power are hell-bent on destroying the planet, and most people don't care.

Both optimism and despondency can lead to complacency, which is a poor survival strategy. The danger of hope is that it can lead to complacency, Greta



Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Johann Wenzel Peter,
1820-1829,
Vatican Museum

Thunberg said: 'I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic ... and act as if the house is on fire. Because it is.'

McLaren bemoans our rose-coloured glasses with which we see a world of unlimited possibilities to make money and for self-enjoyment and success. But doom is present across all of life. He draws our attention to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) where the Bible continues its theme of hope for the oppressed and the meek. Their hope of liberation is inseparable from the defeat or collapse of the civilisation that oppresses them.

In considering the Bible, the beginning is of two naked human beings living in a garden, in harmony with each other, with themselves, with all their fellow creatures, and with the Earth itself. They are given dominion, but this word has been captured by the colonisers as a licence to kill, exploit, torture or drive to extinction instead of its biblical meaning of sharing the same tender, loving, responsible care as the Creator (Genesis 2:15). It is the grasping of godlike power by human beings that is the route to disaster of the dominating civilisation we know (Genesis 3).

When we get to the New Testament we find Jesus with his radical challenge of the choice between God and money. Money is the currency of the Roman civilisation that is oppressing the poor and the

vulnerable. But Jesus proclaims that the civilisation of God runs on a different currency – love. The Bible ends with a work of apocalyptic fiction in which civilisation collapses in an orgy of economic desperation, religious corruption, desperate political violence and ecological catastrophe, where the writer of the Book of Revelation calls empire 'the Beast', and the religious structures that support it 'the Whore'. From his North American perspective, McLaren sees this in our current world order.

He quotes the *Serenity Prayer*: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference*, acknowledging that when it comes to climate change we can't fix everything.

In seeking an answer, he suggests taking a leaf out of Alcoholics Anonymous' Twelve Steps; step one recast as: *Our civilisation is powerless over our cheap energy addiction; our civilisation has become unmanageable and needs to be restored to sanity* (p.185).

Like every addict we need the serenity prayer, and to recognise the importance of AA's step two: *Come to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity*.

McLaren notes that every civilisation has followed the pattern of growth/exploitation; stability/conservation;

release/collapse; and reorganisation (p. 201). He challenges his readers to consider how to navigate turbulent times and land in a better place.

Although climate crisis denial and scepticism are losing ground, many still refuse to take our situation seriously. During times of decline and struggle, demagogues, authoritarians, scammers and other deceivers smell fear and resentment; they see an opportunity to gain wealth and power by exploiting these emotions. We will have to pursue strength of character, radiating courage and grace. He says that we will need courage to differ graciously, setting a courageous and gracious example; a toughness that requires agility as constant change is here to stay. Millions will have to relocate, change jobs, change diet, and change our recreation. In all of this we will have to discover new depths of human spirit.

Overall this is a challenging and helpful text. Some readers may rightly feel that there is a deal of repetition as the author seeks to emphasise the points that he is making.

I agree with McLaren's conclusion that while the news is ugly (politicians, profit-focussed businesses at the expense of the voiceless, religious extremists, media sensationalists), we can look at the natural world and our human companions and find

The Rich Fool

Photo: Answered Faith



beauty. We have set our world and our civilisation on fire in a number of scary ways, and none of our trusted social institutions are inspiring confidence that they can put the fire out. McLaren offers the hope that a new, humbled, wiser humanity can only be born as the old, arrogant, foolish human civilisation is collapsing. Even if that new humanity is short-lived, even if it doesn't succeed in turning things around, at least it will have flowered in us. Our only choice is what we do with the time that is given to us. He considers Jesus' parable of the rich fool who is the hoarder of wealth who dies. But for us Jesus' words about worry and faith (Luke 12:22–34). 'If you love God and neighbour, you love what matters – unlike the rich fool, who loved only himself and his money' (p.282).

For business leaders and executives, the MBA oath of 2009 may be a good starting point (see Ian Arbon & John Weaver, *Sustainability and Ethics*, Industrial Christian Fellowship & John Ray Initiative, 2014). The MBA Oath

is a voluntary pledge developed by the 'Class of 2009' Graduates of Harvard Business School for graduating MBAs and current MBAs, around the world, to 'create value responsibly and ethically.' Its mission is to facilitate a widespread movement of MBAs who aim to lead in the interests of the greater good and who have committed to living out the principles articulated in the oath. The opening promise is:

As a business leader I recognise my role in society.

My purpose is to lead people and manage resources to create value that no single individual can create alone.

My decisions affect the well-being of individuals inside and outside my enterprise, today and tomorrow.


And therefore, I promise that:

- *I will manage my enterprise with loyalty and care, and will not advance my personal interests at the expense of my enterprise or society.*
- *I will understand and uphold, in letter and spirit, the laws and contracts*

governing my conduct and that of my enterprise.

- *I will refrain from corruption, unfair competition, or business practices harmful to society.*
- *I will protect the human rights and dignity of all people affected by my enterprise, and I will oppose discrimination and exploitation.*
- *I will protect the right of future generations to advance their standard of living and enjoy a healthy planet.*
- *I will report the performance and risks of my enterprise accurately and honestly.*
- *I will invest in developing myself and others, helping the management profession continue to advance and create sustainable and inclusive prosperity.*

(The MBA Oath: see <http://mbaoath.org/>)

I believe that this would be a significant step forward in 'behaviour change' for any professional business leader in the face of the climate crisis. 



After serving as a Structural Geology lecturer John Weaver was called to be a Baptist minister where he experienced factory activities in the shoe and printing trade. He then returned to academic life writing three major texts on Science and Faith focusing much of his work on Environmental Theology, and its implications for Corporate Social Responsibility of business and industry. John is an editor of this journal.