

Group Discussion & Study Guide

Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?

(Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World)

by Brian D. McLaren

Introduction: Fomenting Discovery

Thanks for your interest in *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? (Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World)*.

I put my heart into all my books, but *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* has felt special from the very beginning of the writing process. I learned so much as I wrote the book - and I hope that sense of discovery will enrich your reading as well.

Two things make a writer like me feel especially gratified. Sometimes people show me a book full of underlinings and notes in the margins, showing they entered into conversation with me page by page. And sometimes people tell me about using the book to stimulate needed conversation with others.

Writing and reading are solitary practices - but learning is also a team sport, so I'm thrilled when people come together around one of my books. A book might be used in a seminary class, a small group, or an online community. It might be shared among a circle of friends who have dinner each week and discuss the book over dessert. It might be the basis of a retreat or seminar. Whatever the format, when a book brings people together to talk, learn, share, and grow, I couldn't be more grateful. I feel that the group organizers and I have entered into a kind of partnership to foment discovery.

This book is especially well-suited for group conversation. And it is urgently needed as well. There are several ways you can engage with it. Your group could discuss one chapter per week and complete the book in about eight months (with a pre-meeting and a post-meeting). At two chapters per week, you'll complete the book in about four months. Since the book is divided into four parts, you could also move quickly through the book in four or five sessions.

In this readers/leaders guide, you'll find two kinds of resources:

1. General guidelines for a good group conversation.
2. Chapter-by-chapter questions as prompts for conversation.

I hope that all the resources here will help you create space for greater learning and understanding, and I pray that through the conversation, real friendships will be born and grow. Thanks for this partnership!

Part 1: General Group Guidelines

A study group can be surprisingly easy to organize and lead. You can invite some avid readers to engage with a book at home and encourage them to underline, write notes in margins, or maybe even journal responses to the assigned chapters. Then you gather together and simply share your responses. Then, you could ask a simple question at the end of your allotted time together: what difference can what we talked about today make in our lives?

You'll find an array of general guidelines in the pages ahead to help you. You can't use all these guidelines at once, of course, but you can select those that feel more natural, helpful, and appropriate to your context.

Guideline 1:

Begin and end each session with a check-in and check-out.

Check-In: You can begin each sessions with a prompt like one of these:

1. If your life today were a weather report, how's the weather?
2. What has been a high point and low point for you since we last met?
3. What is your favorite _____ (vacation spot, breakfast food, dessert, TV show, movie, book, plant, animal, room in your house, piece of furniture, hour of the day, etc?)
4. Did insights from last week resonate with any of your experiences since we met?
5. Have you seen or heard headlines or news items relating to themes in this book?

* You may also want to begin with a prayer like the Lord's Prayer, the Prayer of St. Francis, or the Serenity Prayer, or a time for silent prayer and meditation.

Check-Out: You can conclude each session with a prompt like one of these:

1. One very interesting thing I heard today from one of my fellow participants is ...
2. As a result of today's meeting, I feel ... and here's why....
3. Today's conversation makes me want to
4. I'm thankful because this conversation is helping me to ...

* You may also want to conclude with a prayer like the Lord's Prayer, the Prayer of St. Francis, or the Serenity Prayer, or a time for silent prayer and meditation.

Also - remind everyone what the reading assignment will be for the next group meeting.

Guideline 2:

Good open-ended questions can get the ball rolling.

Here are some examples:

From what we read for this meeting ...

1. Here's the paragraph I liked best, and here's why I liked it
2. Here's what _____ (troubled, intrigued, confused, challenged, disturbed, angered) me most, and here's why....
3. Here's an experience from my life that relates to this week's reading assignment
4. Here's what I'd like to talk about more with all of you based on this week's reading assignment

If your group shows up and it's clear that nobody did their "homework" (that happens sometimes!), you can read a paragraph, page, or whole chapter aloud and then use one or more of these questions to help participants engage.

Guideline 3:

Be sensitive to your audience.

This book is about Christian identity, and it written with a Christian audience in mind, but many if not all the insights in the book could easily be translated into other faith contexts. And if people “get” the message of the book, they’ll often want to invite people of other faiths to be part of their conversations - with the book’s primary focus in mind, of course. These questions could be especially helpful for participants from faith traditions outside of Christianity.

1. What from this chapter seemed most applicable to your faith tradition and experience?
2. What from this chapter seemed least applicable to your faith tradition and experience?
3. Did anything in this chapter make you feel uncomfortable? Was anything especially helpful?
4. Did you learn something new about Christianity through this chapter?
5. What is the most important take-away from this chapter, in your opinion, for people of your faith tradition?
6. Based on your experience with Christians from various denominations and traditions, what from this chapter do you most wish more Christians would pay attention to?

Guideline 4:

Clarify expectations at a pre-meeting.

My friend Richard Rohr says, “Expectations are simply resentments waiting to happen.” That’s why it’s important to establish ground rules or shared expectations for your gatherings. These questions could help you:

1. When and for how long would you like your group to meet? Who else would you like to invite?
2. What ground rules would you like to establish? (Examples are provided in under Guideline 5.)
3. What would you as an individual like to get out of this group? What would you like to contribute?
4. What will be your reading assignment for your next meeting? How many chapters or sections or pages?
5. If problems come up in the group, how will we deal with them?
6. Do we want to make any commitments to confidentiality?
7. What questions, concerns, curiosities, and hopes are raised for you by the book’s title?

Guideline 5:

Consider some communication ground rules.

A few years ago, some friends and I created ten guidelines that you might want to go over with your group.

The Ten Communication Commandments

We need deep change in our lives and communities, but the way we communicate our desire for change often sabotages our efforts to bring about that change. Many of us are searching for ways to create safe space for conversation so change is made possible and gently encouraged.

During your gatherings, you can choose to practice some of these communications guidelines, humorously presented as ten commandments. You can review them weekly, or when needed.

Listen. Connect. Report. Assess progress in following the process. Set “success” not as arriving at agreement but as practicing respectful communication. Expect to make mistakes - and be eager to learn and grow when you do.

1. Thou shalt listen actively, ask questions, and refrain from giving advice.

Ask open-ended questions allowing people the right to pass. Listen to understand before you seek to be understood or reach agreement. Put what others say in your own words in order to test your understanding. Ask them to do the same. Thank people for clear and honest communication.

Can you tell me more about that?

Let's see if I understand you. You're saying...? Thanks for sharing that.

2. Thou shalt engage both thy heart and thy head, emotion and reason.

Listen for emotion. Respond to a feeling with a feeling. Remember, feelings are neither right nor wrong. Respond to emotional intensity with non-anxious presence. Help make the emotional content of communication overt and legitimate rather than covert and illegitimate. Be empathetic.

It sounds like you feel ... Wow. That must have felt ...

How does that make you feel? How do you feel about what I said?

3. Thou shalt make it easier for others by self-reporting openly and honestly.

Check in by naming your feelings, your observations, your reactions, your fears, or your energy level—anything that would help your colleagues understand you. If you need something, ask for it clearly, explaining what, how, when, and why, if possible. Don't expect others to read your mind. Monitor body language and emotional tone and report what you observe. Make your requests or needs overt, using “I” statements.

You could help me by ... Would you be willing to ...?

When I see or hear _____, I feel _____, because my need for _____ is/is not being met. Would you be willing to _____?

As I hear you speak, I feel (enthusiastic, hopeful, discouraged, insulted, confused...).

4. Thou shalt play for win-win, not win-lose or lose-lose.

Based on awareness of the interdependence of all, let your motto be win-win. Avoid attacking or defensive reactions and us/them thinking. Keep short-accounts – bring out your mistakes and ask for forgiveness, and bring out your hurts and ask for understanding.

I feel a bit defensive at this moment, which is a sign that we may be miscommunicating. I'm sorry ... I think I made you uncomfortable by saying ...

When you said ____, I felt ____. Can you understand why I would feel that way?

5. Thou shalt not blame, shame, or demonize others, or victimize yourself.

Sarcasm, personal insults or name-calling are marks of desperation and should never be used, even when referring to people or groups everyone considers wrong.

6. Thou shalt avoid absolutizing.

“They always...” “They never...” “You always...” “You never...” or even “I always or never...” are more than likely false statements and are rarely helpful.

7. Thou shalt seek to like “the other.”

Communicate to win friendship and understanding. Others are far more apt to listen to you if they like you and sense you like them. Remember that diversity, including diversity of opinion, is an opportunity to grow and learn.

8. Thou shalt dance, not fight.

In Western culture, people most often think of argument as being like war. Battle lines are drawn, thoughts are shot down, people set up their defenses. However, a far better metaphor is to think of conversation as a dance. Share the lead. Say “Ouch,” if someone steps on your toes. Feel the rhythm of the conversation.

9. Thou shalt separate content from process.

Having agreed to follow these Communication Commandments and others you may have added, when people move outside of these boundaries, respond by saying:

I feel uncomfortable with what just happened.

Let's stop for a moment, review our guidelines, and adjust our conversation.

10. Thou shalt respectfully establish areas of disagreement.

Try to achieve disagreement agreeably by beginning statements of disagreement or confusion with a positive statement:

We both value and believe ____, but disagree on _____. We share a concern for ____, but differ on a solution.

Leonard Swidler has written a similar Dialogue Decalogue especially for interfaith groups (you can learn more here: <http://www.interfaithdialogueassociation.org>). His guidelines are useful for any group. In constructive dialogue:

Our goal is to learn, change, and grow - not to change others.

Our goal is to share with others and receive from them.

We must share with honesty and sincerity - and trust the honesty and sincerity of others.

We can't compare our best ideals with the worst failures of others any more than we would want them to compare their best ideals with our worst failures. We can only compare ideals with ideals and actual practice with actual practice.

We define ourselves through dialogue - and learn how others define themselves. We must test our understandings ("Is this what you're saying?") and not make hasty assumptions.

We must not bring outside assumptions or prejudices to our dialogue.

We must treat one another as equals, or no meaningful dialogue can happen.

Without trust, there can be no real dialogue.

Without a willingness to be self-critical, there can be no real dialogue.

Our goal is to be able to see our partner's beliefs "from the inside."

Here are some simple and practical guidelines that often help groups work together more smoothly:

Nobody should speak twice until everyone has had the chance to speak once. Or - after you have spoken, ask others for their input before offering your input again.

Each person will have the chance to respond to a question and then others may ask questions about the person's comments.

Introduce disagreement with the words, 'I see that a little differently.'

All of these guidelines, of course, can be summed up very simply:

Treat others as you would be treated. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Part 2: Chapter-by-Chapter Questions

Feel free to skip or adapt any of these questions, and, of course, to add your own. If you are the group leader, be sensitive to pace. On the one hand, you should try to keep things moving - better to have people ask you to slow down than for them to feel things are dragging and wish you would speed things up. On the other hand, sometimes in long pauses of silence, important discoveries happen. After asking a question, you might want to say, "It's OK for there to be a period of silence for us to reflect before answering. Silence is a good thing. Whenever you feel ready to answer, please speak up."

Based on your available time, decide which questions to use and be firm - but flexible - to help your group make good use of that time. Ask a few members for feedback privately after each meeting. They'll help you improve as a group leader:

How do you think things went in our meeting today?

Do you have any suggestions for me as a leader? I'm always eager to learn and improve.

How was our pace? Too fast? Too slow?

If one member is very talkative while others hold back, try privately asking the more talkative member to help you draw out the less talkative members next time. Say something like, "You are so comfortable speaking up, but some other participants are really shy. Could you help me to draw them out more so that we hear more from everyone next time?"

If a member is offensive to others, it may be necessary to interrupt them. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we agreed to some guidelines or ground rules for our group that I need to re-clarify right now." Whenever possible, this can be handled privately between meetings or during a break.

Usually, these kinds of problems won't come up if you follow the guidelines in Part 1.

Section 1: The Crisis of Christian Identity

Chapter 1

1. As you begin this book, what are you hoping to learn? What experiences in your life make you interested in this subject?
2. The author describes two common kinds of Christian identity: strong-hostile and weak-tolerant. Where have you encountered these two kinds of Christian identity?
3. Based on your knowledge of Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed, describe an imaginary meeting among them.
4. Why do you think the author chose the title for the book?

Chapter 2

1. C.R.I.S. - what is it? Do you have it? What has the worst case of it in your circle of family and friends?
2. What adjectives do you normally use with the word "Christian?"
3. How have you seen hostility used to strengthen identity - in a religious, ethnic, political, or other group to which you belonged?
4. Do you see examples of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or others struggling with CRIS?

Chapter 3

1. Have you experienced an encounter like the author's with Aatif? How did it challenge or enrich your religious identity?
2. What are some of the ways we "lock the door" to keep "the other" out of our lives? What are the consequences of locking - or not locking - the door?
3. The author speaks of "ignorant stereotypes." What stereotypes of Christianity do you think people of other religions have about Christianity, and vice versa?
4. At the end of the chapter, the author lists several questions he believes we must deal with. Which of them are most important to you, and why?

Chapter 4

1. Describe strong-hostile religious identity in your own words. Where have you encountered it?
2. Describe weak-tolerant religious identity in your own words. Where have you encountered it?
3. Describe strong-benevolent religious identity in your own words. Where have you encountered it?
4. Why do you think strong-benevolent religious identity is so rare? What role do you think family, church, and media could play to encourage strong-benevolent religious identity? Who exemplifies this identity for you?

Chapter 5

1. Describe one or two of your mentors in life so far, and if possible, share an experience where one shocked or surprised you.

2. Where have you been on the liberal-conservative line (from the first diagram) at various points in your life (childhood, adolescence, in your 20's, 30's, etc.)? How much have you moved along the line over time, and why?
3. What would make it difficult for people at points A, B, and C in the second diagram to move towards area D?
4. Describe how hostility can be related to love.

Chapter 6

1. Why can your friends be more dangerous than your enemies?
2. If you have experienced persecution or vulnerability in relation to "us," share that and experience and how you coped (or are coping) with it.
3. "There are costs either way," the author says, costs for challenging "our" hostilities and costs for not challenging them. What might some of those costs be?
4. "Uncritical loyalty to our ancestors may implicate us in an injustice against our descendants," the author says. How do you respond to this statement? Where have you felt it in your own life?

Chapter 7

1. Describe how religious differences can lead to hostility and war.
2. The author suggests that the greatest cause of religious violence is not religious differences, but rather something all religions hold in common. What is that commonality and how can it lead to hostility and war?
3. The terms strong, weak, hostile, tolerant, and benevolent are all very important in this book. Have one or two people define each term in their own words. Then define and discuss identity, groupishness, the identity tent (or canopy), sameness and otherness, hostility.
4. Take two of the key terms from the previous question and share your experiences with them.

Chapter 8

1. The author imagines a world without strong religious identity. He proposes that consumerism would replace those identities. Do you agree? Do you see this process happening already?
2. What other consequences would you anticipate if strong Christian identity were to weaken and disappear over the next few centuries?
3. How did you score on the ten-item identity test? Respond to the experience of taking the test - and to what happens when you substitute solidarity for hostility.
4. Talk about the roles clergy and laity can play in transforming Christian identity towards strength and benevolence.

Section 2: The Historical Challenge

Chapter 9

1. Respond to the ideas of “nkali” and “the single story” in the chapter’s epigram (and if possible, watch the video it comes from - listed in the footnotes).
2. Had you heard this version of the Columbus story before? How does it affect you?
3. Describe “the big complex difference” between “what actually happened” and how we “interpret, understand, and recount what actually happened.” Why do you think this distinction is so important to the author?
4. How might this distinction play a role in either reducing or intensifying hostility between religions?

Chapter 10

1. Recount the story of Constantine’s vision. How does this version resemble or differ from the versions you have heard in the past? What details were previously omitted? What difference do they make?
2. Describe the relation between the phrase “conquer by this” and the idea of “Roman imperial Christianity.”
3. The author associates the term “imperial” with domination, subordination, expansion, and assimilation. How do you see these four characteristics in Christian communities today? Describe the author’s idea of “Imperial Christian hostility.”
4. Why might this be one of the books’ most controversial chapters?

Chapter 11

1. What is the version of Muslim history that you have heard?
2. How does understanding Constantine’s legacy influence your understanding of Mohammed’s dilemma?
3. Recount some “high points” in the history of Christian hostility.
4. Describe your encounters with both the “imperial majority report” and the alternative “minority report” about Christian identity.

Section 3: The Doctrinal Challenge

Chapter 12

1. Describe 2 different ways the word “doctrine” is understood in this chapter.
2. How have you seen the doctrine of creation used to promote hostility?
3. How does this chapter suggest this doctrine can be used to promote harmony instead of hostility?
4. How do the words “let there be” or “and it was good” take on a new meaning for you in light of this chapter?

Chapter 13

1. How has the doctrine of original sin been emphasized in your religious upbringing?
2. How can the doctrine - as popularly understood - contribute to hostility?
3. Describe the author’s reformulation of the doctrine in terms of imitation, rivalry, anxiety, scapegoating, and ritualization.
4. What most struck you in the author’s reading of Genesis?

Chapter 14

1. Summarize the seven ways that “us” and “them” commonly relate.
2. Describe the idea of “greatness for the sake of others” as described in this chapter.
3. Describe how the idea of blessing can be either/or (exclusive) or both/and (universal) in its application.
4. What would it mean for you, like Abraham, to “venture out” from inherited hostile identities ... “not knowing where you are going?”

Chapter 15

1. If you have been able to put yourself in the shoes of a Jew, Muslim, Hindu, etc., to get a feel for what Christianity looks like from their perspective, share that experience and its impact on you.
2. Describe how the doctrine of the Trinity can be used as a litmus test and weapon or threat. Have you experienced it this way?
3. Describe how the doctrine of the Trinity can be used as a healing teaching. Have you experienced it this way?
4. When you think of God as a “One-Another” whose oneness is loving host to otherness, how does that affect your approach to “the others” in your life?

Chapter 16

1. Have you seen Jesus presented more as the “wolf of God” than “lamb of God” - and if so, where and how, and how did you respond?
2. Respond to the author’s imaginary encounter between Jesus and other religious leaders.
3. Read the Philippian and Colossian hymns the author refers to in their entirety. What most struck you about the author’s reading of these hymns?

4. How would you put into your own words the reformulations of the deity of Christ and the incarnation of Christ presented in this chapter? How do you respond to these reformulations?

Chapter 17

1. The author recounts an awkward moment in a multi-faith gathering after September 11, 2001. Have you had any awkward encounters of this sort yourself?

2. The author says that humanity, vitality, and sincerity are three of the greatest treasures of Pentecostalism (at its best). Do you sometimes see the opposite of those qualities in Christian communities, and if so, why is that the case?

3. The author suggests a number of “second thoughts” about the Holy Spirit. Which was most striking to you, and why?

4. The Holy Spirit is active “right here, right now,” the author says, in your experience of reading this book. How might that be the case?

Chapter 18

1. Do you know people who have “fled Christian orthodoxy as a lost cause?” Why did they do so? (If possible, ask them, and report to your group what they say.)

2. Respond to the term, “Great Reformation.” Do you think it is happening? What are its potential dangers and benefits? What criticisms should be expected, and how should they be responded to?

3. How do you respond to this chapter’s retelling of the story of the lost sons? Why is this a story about religious identity?

4. Where do you see traces of the older brother in your heart?

Section 4: The Liturgical Challenge

Chapter 19

1. How does the author define liturgy, and how does it relate to identity? What kind of liturgical tradition do you come from, and how has it affected your identity?
2. What most interested you about this chapter's depictions of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Holy Week?
3. What most interested you about this chapter's depictions of Easter, Pentecost, and Kingdomtide?
4. Could you imagine your faith community experimenting for a year with this approach to the Christian year? What would the obstacles be? What might the benefits be?

Chapter 20

1. How do you respond to this chapter's presentation of John the Baptist and the meaning of his ministry?
2. How can conventional understandings of baptism unintentionally promote hostility?
3. Put this chapter's reformulated understanding of baptism in your own words. Then try to explain it in terms an eleven-year-old could understand. (If possible, invite one to your meeting and let him or her respond!)
4. In your opinion, what is the difference between "in Christ" and "in Christianity" or "in the Christian religion?"

Chapter 21

1. Respond to the "lost verse" of "All Things Bright and Beautiful." What effects might this verse have on the rich? The poor? The middle class? Children?
2. Are there liturgical elements that you wish could be changed? What are they, and what bothers you about them?
3. The author is especially concerned about children's curricula. Do you share his concerns, and why or why not?
4. Describe the idea of hostile-reconciling pairings among Bible stories. Which of the examples most caught your attention? Can you think of others?

Chapter 22

1. "Picking and choosing" - are you for it or against it, and why?
2. How does Paul read the Bible, according to this chapter?
3. Why is the word "but" so important in the Sermon on the Mount? Where might you want to hear Jesus say, "The Bible says ... but I say...?"
4. Describe the difference between reading the Bible as a constitution and as a library.

Chapter 23

1. Have you ever seen the eucharist as "the scene of the church's food fight?"

2. Describe the idea of ritual as “bonding to meaning” for those who see the eucharist associated primarily with sacrifice and altar. Then do the same for those who see it associated primarily with table of fellowship and reconciliation.
3. The author describes two meanings of the word “sacrifice”: *appeasement of a hostile deity* and *sacred gift of love*. Which definition have you seen in action most, and what new insights into the word “sacrifice” did you gain from this chapter?
4. Which of this chapter’s many and lengthy footnotes most interested (or confused) you, and why? This chapter is probably the book’s most technical and theologically challenging. Was it worth the effort for you?

Section 5: The Missional Challenge

Chapter 24

1. Discuss the significance of Jesus as friend. Why did Moltmann say that friendship is the highest form of love? Do you agree or disagree - or a little of both?
2. Who was your first and/or best friend from another religion, and what impact has that friendship had on your life?
3. The author describes a friendship between a church and a mosque. Have you experienced such a friendship? Would you like to, and why or why not?
4. The author issues a dare at the end of this chapter. How might you take on the challenge?

Chapter 25

1. Describe Jesus' work as "a community organizing movement."
2. What most struck you in the author's reading of Acts 16?
3. What might the results be if more Christians understood salvation to be liberation? How might this change in understanding affect the relationship between Christians and people of other faiths?
4. If Christians were to focus on advocacy and opportunity for the other as well as charity, what would change in Christian mission work?

Chapter 26

1. Have you experienced worship with people of other religions? If so, what was the experience like? If not, what would you expect the experience to be like?
2. The author distinguishes strong-benevolent Christian worship from interfaith and multi-faith worship. What are the differences, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
3. Why do you think some people react so negatively to "withness?" Can "witness" and "withness" go together?
4. How might "withness" water down or weaken Christian identity? How could this be avoided?

Chapter 27

1. Respond to the idea that "there are only two tribes."
2. How does the author define "religion?" How do you respond to the term "organized religion" after reading this chapter?
3. What could you imagine happening if religious leaders followed this chapter's suggestions?
4. How would you put the term "kingdom of God" into contemporary words and images? How would you describe Christian mission in terms of the kingdom of God?

Chapter 28

1. Describe windmills in a colonial and postcolonial context.
2. Describe evangelism in a colonial and postcolonial context.
3. Which element of the author's "new evangelism" struck you most strongly - whether positively or negatively? Why?
4. How do you respond to the author's "alter call?"

Chapter 29

1. What were Gandhi's "four wheels" for Christian identity?
2. The author suggests that people on the road of strong-benevolent Christian identity won't fit into some Christian communities. How does this assessment relate to you? What should be done when this is the case?
3. If your group decided to form a faith community that promoted strong-benevolent Christian identity, how would you start? What would it be like? Who would you invite to join you?
4. What emotion do you feel as this study group comes to an end? What impacts has this study had on you? What next steps do you anticipate? To whom would you recommend this book and why?

Your Last Meeting

You may want to celebrate your group's completion of this book with a party or a special dinner. You could invite others to join you - which would give them a taste for what they missed.

At some point during the party, you could take a few minutes for participants to respond briefly to these prompts.

1. My favorite moment of our group was ... or, What I will remember most from are group is ...
2. What I will take away from this group is ...
3. I am grateful to my group participants for ...
4. Here's what I would like to do based on our group experience ...
5. Here's the biggest change this book and this group have made in my life ...

If your group is small enough, you could also go around to each person and let others express what they appreciate about this person's contributions to the group.

You may want to consider choosing another book to continue your conversation. Or some participants may want to become leaders and invite others to form a new group to engage with this book.