

Recognizing Our Biases

Richard Rohr, with Brian McLaren

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CAC faculty member Brian McLaren has done thoughtful and helpful research about what makes us see things so differently from one another. He identified thirteen biases that we outline today. Being a former pastor and an excellent communicator, Brian found a way to make these complex ways of seeing simple and memorable. He writes: "People can't see what they can't see. Their biases get in the way, surrounding them like a high wall, trapping them in ignorance, deception, and illusion. No amount of reasoning and argument will get through to them, unless we first learn how to break down the walls of bias . . .

Confirmation Bias: We judge new ideas based on the ease with which they fit in and confirm the only standard we have: old ideas, old information, and trusted authorities. As a result, our framing story, belief system, or paradigm excludes whatever doesn't fit.

Complexity Bias: Our brains prefer a simple falsehood to a complex truth.

Community Bias: It's almost impossible to see what our community doesn't, can't, or won't see.

Complementarity Bias: If you are hostile to my ideas, I'll be hostile to yours. If you are curious and respectful toward my ideas, I'll respond in kind.

Competency Bias: We don't know how much (or little) we know because we don't know how much (or little) others know. In other words, incompetent people assume that most other people are about as incompetent as they are. As a result, they underestimate their [own] incompetence, and consider themselves at least of average competence.

Consciousness Bias: Some things simply can't be seen from where I am right now. But if I keep growing, maturing, and developing, someday I will be able to see what is now inaccessible to me.

Comfort or Complacency Bias: I prefer not to have my comfort disturbed.

Conservative/Liberal Bias: I lean toward nurturing fairness and kindness, or towards strictly enforcing purity, loyalty, liberty, and authority, as an expression of my political identity. *[Note from Amy Z.: this one feels a bit oversimplified to me.]*

Confidence Bias: I am attracted to confidence, even if it is false. I often prefer the bold lie to the hesitant truth.

Catastrophe or Normalcy Bias: I remember dramatic catastrophes but don't notice gradual decline (or improvement).

Contact Bias: When I don't have intense and sustained personal contact with "the other," my prejudices and false assumptions go unchallenged.

Cash Bias: It's hard for me to see something when my way of making a living requires me not to see it.

Conspiracy Bias: Under stress or shame, our brains are attracted to stories that relieve us, exonerate us, or portray us as innocent victims of malicious conspirators. [1]

Richard again: I don't know any other way to be free of all these biases except through the contemplative mind. I see almost every one of them within myself—at least at some point in my life. I also believe there are enough good-willed people out there who, if presented with a list of these biases, have the freedom to investigate, "How can I let go of that? How can I move beyond that?" [2]

[1] Brian McLaren, *Why Don't They Get It? Overcoming Bias in Others (and Yourself)* (Self-published: 2019), e-book.

[2] Adapted from Brian McLaren, Jacqui Lewis, with Richard Rohr, "Why Can't We See?," October 5, 2020, in *Learning How to See*, episode 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2020), podcast, [MP3 audio](#).



Image credit: U.S. Information Agency. Press and Publications Service. ca. 1953–ca. 1978, [Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C.](#) Two long lines of some of the buses used to transport marchers to Washington (detail), photograph, public domain.

Image inspiration: Much of the work of dismantling systems of oppression involves a continued willingness to learn new ways of seeing. The March on Washington in 1963, where this image was taken, became a major tipping point in the United States' collective story of learning how to see. May we continue the work of our ever-unfolding ability to see, understand, and act.