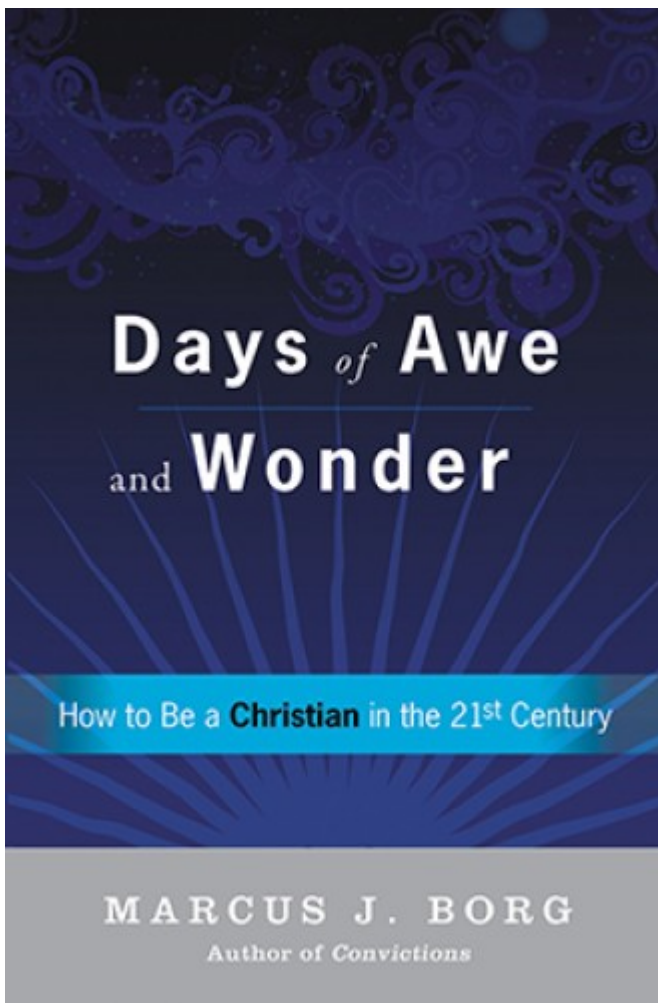


The binary Christianity of Marcus Borg

Borg knew the way out of authoritarian faith. But did he know the way home?

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Days of Awe and Wonder

How to Be a Christian in the 21st Century

By Marcus J. Borg

HarperOne

When the celebrated New Testament professor Marcus Borg died in 2015, he left behind a legacy not only of scholarship but also of devotion. One prominent pastor called him “a great prophet” and said of him, “Marcus Borg changed forever the way we think about God.” Another pastor called him “a breath of fresh air in the musty halls of Christian scholarship.” Borg won praise like this mainly because his account of the historical Jesus and the nature of Christianity were seen as a bridge leading out of brittle orthodoxy into a more open, intellectually honest, and compassionate form of faith. “Marcus Borg,” trumpeted a progressive blogger, “is the reason I fell back in love with Jesus,” alluding to the title of Borg’s most popular book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

For much of his academic career, Borg taught religion and culture at Oregon State University. His more than 20 books have sold hundreds of thousands of copies, he lectured around the world both in houses of worship and at scholarly symposia, and he was a significant figure in the Jesus Seminar and a pioneer in the loosely held movement that is sometimes called “progressive Christianity.”

The appearance of a posthumously published collection of Borg’s essays, lectures, and sermons, *Days of Awe and Wonder: How to Be a Christian in the 21st Century*, affords the opportunity to review the span of Borg’s thought and to assess its cogency and lasting impact. Most of the chapters are highlights from Borg’s earlier books, combined with several sermons and lectures and two new pieces: a tenderly written foreword by his widow, Marianne Borg, and the moving eulogy delivered at Borg’s memorial service by Barbara Brown Taylor. Speaking for many, Taylor said with appreciation, “Marcus poured himself into many books and talks, all seeking to move us from secondhand to firsthand religion.”

Casting a shadow over *Days of Awe and Wonder*, indeed over all of Borg’s work, is his childhood memory of a rigid and authoritarian Christianity, which he experienced in a small Lutheran church in North Dakota. This version of the faith was replete with God as a distant cosmic Father, a God who promised to care for his children but who was reduced by human sin into an angry and punitive deity, a “‘finger shaking’ God whom we disappoint again and again.” “At the end of childhood,” Borg said, “I would have said that the heart of the gospel, the Christian good news, is that Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven if we believe in him. That was

the impression that I received growing up in a 'mainline' Protestant denomination."

Borg was a textbook example of embodying a religious predicament shared by many. As described by philosopher Charles Taylor, people today often feel caught between resentment over "the unacceptable faces of orthodoxy: the authoritarianism, the placing conformity before well-being, the sense of human guilt and evil, damnation, and so on," and the equally unacceptable alternative of outright atheism. "In the face of opposition between orthodoxy and unbelief," says Taylor, "many, and among them the best and most sensitive minds, were cross-pressured, looking for a third way."

Days of Awe and Wonder encapsulates Borg's lifelong career of seeking and helping others find that third way, and, as such, presents Borg's proposals for rethinking several key aspects of the life of faith—the character of God, the nature of the Bible, prayer, eschatological hope, and ethics. Included in this volume is "My Conversion to Mysticism," a chapter that originally appeared in Borg's 2014 book *Convictions*, in which he becomes explicit about his own mystical experiences.

One of these experiences, which happened to Borg in his midfifties, is reminiscent of Thomas Merton's famous vision at the intersection of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky. Borg was on a transatlantic flight when suddenly the light in the plane assumed a golden glow. To Borg, everything—the fabric of the seats, the trays of food, the other passengers—became exquisitely beautiful. "Everything was glorious," Borg wrote, "filled with glory." For Borg, such mystical experiences underscored his move away from the supernatural theism of his childhood and toward panentheism, a term Borg defines as "everything is in God." This was a move away from the question of whether God "exists" and toward a quest to understand the "is-ness" of the "radiant and glorious more" that suffuses life.

But the central and strongest theme in this book and throughout Borg's career is his desire to present an alternative vision of the historical Jesus. A leading figure in the so-called "third quest" for the historical Jesus, Borg constructed a picture of Jesus as a "spirit person," one rooted in "the charismatic stream of Judaism." Like the prophets before him, Jesus was an advocate for social justice, and he was thrown into pitched battle with the religious authorities primarily because he took on what Borg calls the "purity system." Over against the Pharisees, Jesus taught that God desires mercy and compassion, not holiness and purity. Jesus was also a sage, a teacher of spiritual wisdom applicable in the present, and not the future-oriented

eschatological preacher fabricated by the later tradition.

Borg refined David Strauss's distinction between the "Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith" into the "pre-Easter Jesus," that is, the historical Jesus, and the "post-Easter" Jesus, the Jesus who continues to be experienced spiritually by people of faith. Although he attempts to value both of these Jesuses, Borg, like the 19th-century "questers" before him, clearly tilts toward the Jesus that historical criticism can tweezer out of the Gospels. This is a completely human Jesus, one who "did not have a divine component that made him different in kind from the rest of us." Though only human, Jesus was, in Borg's view, still a striking person, "one of the two most remarkable human beings who ever lived." (Borg does not name the other.)

One of the chapters in *Days of Awe and Wonder* consists of a response Borg made to a reader who wrote a letter asking if Borg believed Jesus was God. Borg replied,

No. Not even the New Testament says that. It speaks of him as the Word of God, the Son of God, the Messiah, and so forth, but never simply identifies or equates him with God. . . . He is the Word incarnate—not the disembodied Word. . . . He shows us what God is like—reveals God's character and passion. But none of this means that the New Testament teaches that Jesus was God—as if all of God was in Jesus during his historical life. To use the language of the Trinity, God the Father did not cease to be while Jesus was alive. Jesus was "God's Son," not God the Father. Was the Son like the Father? Yes. Was the Son the Father during the life of Jesus? No. Are they in an important and complex sense one? Yes. But to equate God and Jesus during his historical lifetime is bad history and bad theology.

If we are to give any weight to Borg's use of trinitarian language here, two things become clear. One, Borg unsurprisingly finds it important to distinguish his vaguely Arian view of the pre-Easter Jesus from traditional trinitarian thought (which he would undoubtedly have seen as an unfortunate development of the post-Easter view of Jesus), and two, Borg misunderstands classical formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. He seems to assume that claims about the divine nature of Jesus carry the implication that Jesus was God the Father walking around in history and that divinity is a zero-sum formula such that, were Jesus to be divine in any sense, then God the Father would have to cease being so. The result is a misrepresentation and

a reduction of the Christian tradition.

Borg is at his best when he honestly shares his own faith journey, confidently reassuring anxious readers who, like himself, do not wish to leave the house of Christianity, but who feel trapped and intellectually stifled by the conservative Christianity in which they were indoctrinated. Borg's voice is gently authoritative, patient and compassionate, almost grandfatherly. "I know the way out," he seems to say. But when he ventures onto theological ground, it becomes apparent that he knows the way out better than he knows the way home.

Borg's mind tends to work in binaries. For example, there are two views of Jesus, pre- and post-Easter; two kinds of Christianity, the "old" kind with its inerrant Bible, its purity-hungry God, and its emphasis on dogma, and the "emerging" kind with its emphasis on relationships and personal transformation; and two kinds of salvation, one that focuses on the forgiveness of sins and getting into heaven and one that focuses on compassionate and just living in the here and now. Much of Borg's work can be seen as a longish Lutheran law-gospel sermon, with a poisonous view of old-time religion as the law played off against Borg's open-ended emerging paradigm as the gospel.

However useful these distinctions are as rhetorical ploys, they inevitably harden into caricatures and false dichotomies. If the only choice is between being a devotee of Borg's softly demythologized Jesus and adhering to the disfigured description of the Christian tradition as a severe orthodoxy with William Blake's Nobodaddy God, a bloody revenge-soaked view of atonement, and an earthly existence despised in favor of a remote heavenly reward, then who wouldn't sign up for the "emerging paradigm"? What gets washed out, of course, is the fact that this is not a simple two-handed game. The Christian tradition is a rich, lively, multifaceted, and sustained conversation affording countless intellectually and experientially sophisticated understandings of the Christian reality.

Also lost in the misleading dichotomy between trust-centered, experiential faith and belief-centered orthodoxy is the capacity of ancient creeds to serve as navigational beacons in the still-moving river of faith seeking understanding. Borg's theology doesn't have the bandwidth to see a creed as much more than a demand for belief, an encrustation of dogma. (He quotes Bishop John A. T. Robinson's line about "believing 49 impossible things before breakfast.") This diminished view of creeds as checklists of abstractions is a far cry from the Dominican theologian Herbert

McCabe's statement that on Easter the church sings "with special enthusiasm the Creed: that great hymn of joy."

Unhappy memories of a rigid, authoritarian Christianity shadow Borg's theology.

One of Borg's binary choices is between the supernatural God of popular theism whom Borg met as a child in that little Lutheran church—a God who created the world but who stands outside of the world, reaching in from time to time to intervene in earthly affairs—and the God of panentheism, who is close at hand. Indeed, Borg writes, the "universe—everything that is—is in God, even as God is 'more' than the universe." Panentheism is, of course, a large house with many corridors and rooms, but Borg remains content to stay pretty much in the entrance hall. Borg's panentheism is not a well-developed theological position but mostly a condensed image that allows him to slip the noose of supernatural theism while still affirming that God is both immanent and transcendent.

A problem with Borg's version of panentheism is that it is not clear what God actually does vis-à-vis creation, history, and personal experience apart from providing mystical glows and spiritual experiences. So eager is Borg to avoid any notion of divine intervention that he becomes vague about any sort of divine agency at all. Borg, claims New Testament scholar Leander Keck, "tacitly posits an inert deity who at best provides a formal warrant for a class-based cultural criticism and who apparently has allowed the covenant-commitment to Israel to lapse, for there remains neither promise nor fulfillment."

As theologian Janet Soskice has argued, the idea of divine providence does not necessarily entail an interventionist view of God's agency, and the exclusion of a God who is a "tin-pot 'occasional fixer' is precisely what classical philosophical theology means to achieve in insisting that God is not a creature among creatures." Time, Soskice reminds us, is created, and, since God is Creator and not a creature, God is not limited by time. Even though human beings have no other way to speak of God's action except in terms of past, present, and future, we should be cautious in literalizing temporal language regarding the action of God. She writes:

For God as Creator, creating and sustaining may be the same eternal "movement," so if, for instance, God were to create a world in which a man was raised from the dead or in which intercessory prayers were efficacious, this need not be an insertion or a manipulation on God's part.

It would be one with his eternal act of creation, not a revision in the scheme of things.

For Borg, God “dreams” of a politics of compassion and justice on the earth, but for the biblical prophets, including Jesus, God wasn’t just dreaming. God was constantly adventing in history, forever promising to “do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle.” Unfunded by the action of God bringing healing to creation, and not defined by an eschatological vision of God’s shalom, Borg’s notion of justice hangs in midair and finally becomes simply the self-defined and self-enacted righteousness of liberal elites. Thus, the moralistic religion of Borg’s childhood conservative church comes roaring back, only in more refined and enlightened dress.

Another problem with Borg’s broadly painted panentheism is that the difference between God’s transcendence and immanence becomes tissue-thin. In fact, for Borg immanence is the only real working category, and transcendence, rather than opening up the God who stands over against the powers of death and human pretense, who calls us to mission and courage, who judges us and saves us, who brings the whole creation to Sabbath rest, is essentially a warning label, a foghorn steering us away from confusing God with the creation, an assertion that panentheism is not pantheism. When a fellow New Testament scholar accused Borg of having a fuzzy, New Agey theology lacking many of the virtues associated with God’s transcendence, Borg responded with surprised protest, saying that he “apparently does not take seriously that I affirm both the transcendence and immanence of God.” Yes, but the mere affirmation of transcendence is not substance.

Like many of the third questers, Borg shows a strong confidence in his ability to discover at least a glimpse of the real historical Jesus hiding behind the fig leaves of the New Testament. The problem, of course, is that, with few exceptions, the New Testament is our only source, a document thoroughly inflected by, to use Borg’s term, post-Easter faith. Trying to construct a detailed and reliable portrait of the pre-Easter Jesus is like trying to derive a Hubble telescope photograph of the galaxy while gazing at Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*. A lot of wagering and guesswork are involved, and it is not surprising that scholarly reconstructions of the historical Jesus vary wildly. “Whatever consensus may exist,” writes New Testament scholar Dale C. Allison Jr., “it remains mostly boring.”

One of those “boring” agreements is that the historical Jesus was a Jew, and Borg concurs. “Jesus,” he assures us, “was deeply Jewish.” Yet, the Jesus who emerges in Borg’s writing has his Jewishness rubbed smooth, if not effaced. For example, Borg’s Jesus is cut free from the apocalyptic and eschatological ethos of first-century Judaism. Borg again posits only two options—an eschatological, apocalyptic Jesus, who inevitably gets a starring role in the doomsday nightmare preached in places like that little Dakota Lutheran church, or a noneschatological, present-tense, this-world-affirming Jesus. But this latter Jesus flies in the face of much of the New Testament evidence. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza said, “exegetes agree that it is the mark of Jesus’ preaching and ministry that he proclaimed the *basileia* of God as future and present, eschatological vision and experiential reality.”

Borg’s Jesus not only proclaimed mercy, love, and compassion, he preached these qualities over against Old Testament understandings of holiness and purity, views held dear by his fellow Jews. For Borg, it’s either the “purity paradigm” or the “mercy paradigm.” Again, this is a false choice. “Is it true,” Nicholas Wolterstorff asks of Borg,

that we find in Jesus “opposition to the quest for holiness”? Granted that Jesus was opposed to the *Pharisee’s* search for holiness. . . . Nonetheless, it would be extraordinary, if he who taught us to pray, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name” meant to repudiate all concern for holiness.

One gets the feeling reading Borg that the de-emphasis of certain features in Jesus’ Jewish background is not so much a neglect of Jesus’ Jewishness as a yearning to see him as more like “us.” Indeed, the Jesus we “meet again for the first time” in Borg’s work could easily step out of the pages of the New Testament and slide into the pews of many liberal mainline churches.

As has been pointed out many times, attempts to describe the “real” historical Jesus are almost irresistible invitations to self-projection. Theologian George Tyrrell once said of Adolf von Harnack’s picture of the historical Jesus, “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” Just so, I am not sure that Borg’s Jesus—a mystical “spirit” man who spoke wisely of mercy and compassion, who avoided eschatological scenarios of a coming apocalypse and

instead advocated for social justice in the here and now, who displayed early feminist instincts, and who was not concerned a whit about the holiness code—ever walked the hills of ancient Galilee, but I am confident that just such a sagely and mystical person walked the halls of Oregon State University.

Like Rudolf Bultmann before him, Borg demythologizes the New Testament, except for an existential bridge traveled by faith. When the assumptions behind demythologizing are accepted, it becomes a tough bulldozer to stop. Once it has demolished the three-storied cosmos, the empty tomb, and naive belief, there is no reason it should stop at the outskirts of faith. “It is striking,” noted Paul Ricoeur, “that Bultmann makes hardly any demands on this language of faith, whereas he was so suspicious about the language of myth.” The same could be said of Borg. He insists that through faith we can have access to a “spirit world” in contrast to the visible world and that Jesus was a “spirit person.” But in a world where the acids of rationality and skepticism have eroded any vigorous understanding of myth, this faith will succumb as well, and this spirit world finally seems more like a vague “is-ness” resulting from nostalgic piety than an encounter with the living God of Abraham and Jesus. When the mist lifts, we are left with only one reality frame—the immanent—and at the end of the day, Borg’s “way out” appears to lead only into a cul-de-sac.

The kind of narrow and inflexible religion Borg remembered from his youth has always been a disfigurement of the Christian faith. But the way out need not be a thinned-out spirituality. The truest expression of Christianity is a ministry of reconciliation, not because we are more righteous than others, but because God was truly in Christ, reconciling the world to God. The Christian faith springs forth not only from the memory of the “historical” Jesus but also from the astonishment and overwhelming joy of Easter. The tomb was empty not because of a magic trick, but because the powers of death have truly been broken. The risen, glorified, and embodied Jesus stood before his followers, not to test their credulity with a one-off suspension of the so-called laws of nature, but as testimony to the ways things really are in the life of God and as a validation of his, and our, embodied lives. The scripture, a human creation with the fingerprints of history and culture all over it, becomes in the loving work of the Spirit a word of exhilarating and demanding truth. The way of faith is marked by boldness and confidence, not because of generalized spiritual experiences, but because the God who fell in love with Abraham, who led the Hebrew people out of bondage, and who keeps covenant with Israel has now in

Christ granted access to all.

A version of this article appears in the July 19 print edition under the title "Out of unbelief."