

Marcus Borg Lecture Series Wesley-Knox United Church London, Ontario 2009 June 5–6

Reimagining the Christian Faith...

A LECTURE SERIES BY MARCUS BORG

Jesus scholar, author and leading voice in Progressive Christianity

Friday and Saturday, June 5 and 6

Friday, June 5

7:30 p.m. keynote lecture
An Emerging Christianity

Saturday, June 6

9 a.m. lecture
Meeting God Again

10:30 a.m. lecture
Meeting Jesus Again

1:30 p.m. lecture
Rethinking Christian Life

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open minds...



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An Emerging Form of Christianity

Prologue: A Time of Change and Conflict in North American Christianity. A time of change and resistance to change – a “tale of two Christianities.” The division is both theological and political. The great divide is between “the Christian right” and “progressive Christianity,” with many Christians “in the middle.” **In this setting, a crucial task is adult theological re-education at the congregational level.**

Part I. The Change: A New Form of Christianity Emerging in Our Time

- Quite different from the “**common Christianity**” of a generation or two ago. By “common Christianity,” I mean nothing negative or pejorative, but simply what most Christians took for granted not so long ago – the beliefs that most Christians shared in common. The emerging form has taken root in the last twenty years or so among many clergy and laity in mainline denominations (including Catholics).

- It involves a **paradigm shift** – from **an earlier Christian paradigm** (the “common Christianity” of not long ago) to **an emerging Christian paradigm**.

Paradigm: a way of seeing a whole; a comprehensive way of seeing that affects how the particulars are seen; a large framework that shapes our seeing

Illustration from history of astronomy: from the Ptolemaic to Copernican paradigm

Naming the difference:

- Liberal versus conservative. Yes – **but** “liberal” has become a negative term, at least in the U.S. And there is much about the earlier form that is not “conservative,” but innovative and recent – the product of the encounter between Christianity and the Enlightenment that began in the 17th century.

- Emerging versus earlier. Yes – **but** “earlier” does not mean ancient or/ traditional; it is “earlier” in the sense that it is the “common Christianity” of the last few centuries.

- For example, biblical inerrancy/infallibility is first mentioned in the 17th century, and an emphasis on interpreting the Bible literally is also modern

- Moreover, the emerging paradigm involves **a recovery of tradition** so that it has significant continuity with pre-modern Christianity.

- Transformation-centered versus belief-centered. The earlier paradigm emphasized “believing” as foundational to Christianity; the emerging paradigm emphasizes transformation through a deepening centering in God as known in Jesus. Of course, the earlier paradigm spoke/speaks about transformation as well – but it sees believing a set of doctrinal claims as indispensable (about the Bible, Jesus, and so forth).

Part II. Major Features of Emerging Christianity (to provide “the shape” of “the whole”)

1. It's about this life more than the next life – about transformation in this life rather than about an afterlife. No denial of an afterlife, but little emphasis on it.

- Compared to when I grew up: the afterlife was central
- What is the gospel? In a sentence?
- Then, at the end of my childhood: Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven. Being Christian was about believing in Jesus now for the sake of heaven later.
- Now: “the kingdom of God” (Jesus); life “in Christ” (Paul)
 - Both are about transformed life on earth, here and now

2. It's intentional rather than conventional – in both motive and emphasis.

- **Motive:** until recently, there was a conventional expectation that everybody would be part of a church. Thus many were Christian because of this cultural expectation. That convention began to disappear in most parts of America about forty years ago (in Europe and perhaps Canada, earlier)
- **Result:** increasingly, mainline denominations will be made up of **intentional** Christians
- **Emphasis:** Intentionality leads to an emphasis on recovering spiritual practices, for practices are central to intentional Christianity. The purpose is transformation.

3. It's progressive theologically and socially/politically. Theologically:

(1) It understands much of biblical and theological language metaphorically and symbolically – and thus problems associated with biblical literalism disappear.

“Common Christianity” took it for granted that the Bible was uniquely inspired by God in a way that no other sacred scripture was. For many Protestant Christians, this led to a belief in biblical inerrancy and/or infallibility, and to literalist and absolutist interpretation: if the Bible says something happened, it happened; if the Bible says something is wrong, it's wrong

(2) It sees no fundamental conflict between Christianity and science, and considerable complementarity. They can be reconciled.

(3) It affirms religious pluralism – not just out of tolerance, but conviction

(4) Socially and politically:

- Socially: it moves toward inclusiveness. In the last forty years: ordination of women and, more recently, the full status of gays and lesbians within the church
- Politically: it tends to be progressive – because of a recovery of the political passion of the Bible. The Bible is also religious and spiritual, of course. But it also emphasizes God's passion for a different kind of world. The Christian message is about loving God and loving what God loves.

Two Concluding Comments: (1) The Spirit of God can and does work through the earlier belief-centered paradigm, and has for millions of people. But there's a lot of “static” in it. For millions, it has become an obstacle, a stumbling block.

(2) The transformation-centered paradigm is **not** an accommodation or reduction of the Christian tradition to modern thought. Rather, it is “**neo-traditional.**” **Neo:** we haven't seen exactly this form of Christianity before. It is neo- **traditional:** a recovery, a retrieval, of what was most central before the collision with modernity.

Meeting God Again

Introduction:

Part I. Two different ways of thinking about God - the meaning (referent) of the word.

Both are ancient and biblical (and found in other religions as well). **Two “root concepts”:**

1. Supernatural Theism. God as a supernatural being – a super-powerful authority figure separate from the universe. God created the universe “in the beginning” as something separate from God. God is “out there,” not “here.”

- Affirms only the **transcendence** of God – God as “beyond”
- This God relates to the world through intervention (the only way a being who is separate from the universe can relate to it)
- The most widespread form of Western theism; this is what most people think of when they think of the word “God.”

2. Panentheism. God as the encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is. Examples:

- God is “the one in whom we live and move and have our being”(Acts 17.28)
See also Psalm 139
- Irenaeus (2nd century): “God contains everything and is contained by nothing”
- Julian of Norwich (14th century): We are not simply made by God, but made of God. And the deeper we move into our own being, the deeper we move into God.
- Affirms both the **transcendence** of God (the “moreness” of God) and the **immanence** of God (God is present everywhere). God is “right here” as well as “more” than right here.
- Does not affirm divine intervention, but divine intention, interaction, and presence.

Three Further Comments:

(1) The language of supernatural theism is **the language of personification: we speak of God as if God were a person.** This is the natural language of prayer, worship and devotion. Nothing wrong with personification as long as it is not taken literally. When it is, problems arise:

- Can make God remote and distant.
- Problems with the notion of intervention
- God’s reality becomes questionable. Much of atheism is rejection of **this** God (the current best-sellers). “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.”

(2)The “pluses” (value) of panentheism

- If supernatural theism gets in a person’s way, there is another option. Important for Christians and people in general to know this.
- Does not create the intellectual problems of supernatural theism
- Takes experiences of God/the sacred seriously
- It is orthodox Christianity: God is BOTH transcendent AND immanent...

(3) **If the word “God” is a problem.** There are other terms: “the sacred,” “Spirit,” “isness without limits” (Thomas Keating); “suchness,” “what is.” “Isness” is...

Part Two. Important Transition: According to the Bible, God not only “is” but has **character** and **passion** (sometimes called the nature and will of God).

Character: as when we think of a person's character, we think of what they are like at a deep level .

Passion: as when we ask of a person, "What is your passion in life?"

So, what is the character and passion of the God of the Bible, who was also the God of Jesus, and thus of Christians?

• **The Question Matters Greatly.** Illustrating its importance – consider: what is the character of **your** God? What is **your** God like? What do **you** think God is like?

The main options – "the grand metaphors" - variations on:

Indifferent/uninvolved. Primary secular view. Also "Deism."

Punitive/judgmental. The punitive God.

Gracious/compassionate. The life-giving God.

Each of these ways of thinking about God's character produces a different kind of Christianity.

So also one can ask, what is **the passion** of your God? What is your God passionate about? According to the Bible, God's passion is transformation – the transformation of ourselves and of the world.

Conclusion and transition. For Christians, our primary sources for knowing the character and passion of God are the Bible and Jesus, the two primary Christian sources of revelation. Of these two, Jesus is decisive – our next topic.

Meeting Jesus Again

Prologue: Based on my recent book: Jesus (with the subtitle Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary)

- **Memories from childhood:** “Tell Me the Story of Jesus” and “I Love to Tell the Story ...of Jesus and his glory; of Jesus and his love.”
- **It matters greatly how we tell the story** – for more than one reason
 - It can make the story of Jesus difficult to believe, or persuasive and compelling
 - Because of Jesus’ significance for Christians: he is for Christians the decisive disclosure or revelation or epiphany of the character and passion of God.

Part I. Ways of Telling His Story in Contemporary Christianity

1. Jesus as the Dying Savior: As Substitutionary Sacrifice for Sin

- The Jesus many of us grew up with – and still hear about
- Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”

2. Jesus the Divine-Human and Thus a “Superhuman.” Usually goes with the first one. The earthly Jesus was more than human – he was also divine, super-human. Familiar and widespread.

- Jesus as “Superman”: quote from Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, p. 90

3. Jesus as Judge at the Second Coming

- A contemporary manifestation: the Jesus of *The Left Behind* novels by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. The Jesus of “the rapture” and “the second coming.”
- The “**killer Jesus**” who will destroy most people and condemn them to eternal torment.

4. Jesus as a Great Teacher. Example: “The Jefferson Bible.”

- Yes – but inadequate and often banal

Part II. A Historical-Metaphorical Way of Telling his Story. Affirmed by mainstream historical scholarship. **Its three foundations:**

- (1) The gospels are a developing tradition, written in the last third of the first century. As such, they combine **memory and testimony**
- (2) Much of their language is metaphorical: **memory and metaphor**
 - Metaphor refers to the more-than-literal, more-than factual, meaning of language
- (3) Distinction between **the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus**
 - Pre-Easter: What Jesus was like before his death:
 - Post-Easter: What Jesus became after his death:

• **Two seemingly negative results:**

(1) Language referring to the exalted status of Jesus – as Messiah, Son of God, Lord, etc., is post-Easter testimony and does not go back to the pre-Easter Jesus

(2) So also language referring to the saving significance of his death is post-Easter

So: What was the pre-Easter Jesus like? His message, activity, intention?

Part III. My Sketch of the Pre-Easter Jesus

1. The Shaping of Jesus: The Importance of Context/Matrix

- Grew up in a Jewish peasant village in the Roman Empire
- A pre-modern domination system: politically, ruled by a few; economically, half to 2/3 of wealth went to the elites; religiously, legitimated by “royal” theology; and chronically violent (systemic violence and warfare)

2. The Shaping of Jesus: His Experience of the Sacred/God

- Jesus as a Jewish mystic. Mystics are people who have vivid and typically frequent experiences of God/the sacred, and who are deeply shaped by such experiences

3. A “Profile” of Jesus: Mystic, Healer, Wisdom Teacher, and Prophet

4. His Message/Activity: Proclaimer of “the Way” and “the Kingdom”

- His audience: primarily the peasant class, “the people”

(1) “**The Way**”: the path of centering deeply in God. A path/way that was egalitarian in a twofold sense: open to everybody, apart from status and institution; and producing an egalitarian community. NT metaphors for “the way”: “dying and rising with Christ” (Paul); “born again”(John)

(2) “**The Kingdom of God**”: its centrality (Mark 1.15 – and “Ask any one hundred...”)

- It’s for the earth: the Lord’s Prayer
- It’s a theo-political metaphor, both religious and political. It’s both religious and political. “Kingdom” as a political term/image in his world.
- It’s about what life would be like on earth under God’s kingship/lordship, instead of under the lordship of the powers that rule this world
- : • God’s kingdom is about justice (economic justice) and peace (non-violence as both means and goal)
- The Kingdom of God is “the dream of God” for the earth, God’s passion for the earth

5. Execution and Resurrection. Jesus’ passion for the kingdom of God – his challenge to the powers that ruled his world and his advocacy of an alternative vision of how life in this world should be – led to his last week, execution, and vindication by God.

Concluding Comments:

1. The Christian Life: “Believing in Jesus”? Or “Following Jesus”?

- The **modern** (post 1600) meaning of “believing in Jesus” – to believe statements about him, biblical and doctrinal
- “Following Jesus” – discipleship – is quite different. To follow his way, his path, to follow him and his vision. And this is the pre-modern meaning of **believing** in Jesus: it meant “to be love” Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to be love him and follow him.

2. What Would His Message Be to Us?

- Center in God – the God of the Torah and Prophets
- Participate in God’s passion for the world. Change the world.

Love God, and love what God loves – the world.

Rethinking and Educating About The Intentional Christian Life

Part I. What does the Christian life look like?

- Not intrinsically about believing a set of statements to be true. To suppose that it is about beliefs is to imagine that Jesus purpose was to bring a true set of doctrines – “Believe these and you’ll be saved.”
- Rather, Christianity is about “a way” – the earliest post-Easter name of the movement, according to Acts 9.1 – a way or path of leading to a transformed life
 - Consistent with a definition of religions as “means of ultimate transformation”
- The Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms us – it is about a deepening and transforming centering in God as known in Jesus (and this, “as known in Jesus,” is what makes it Christian, as distinct from Jewish, Muslim, etc.)

Part II. Expressions of the Path of Transformation in the New Testament

Jesus, according to the synoptic gospels: “If any would be my disciple, let them take up their cross and follow after me” (Mark 8.34; Luke 9.23 adds “daily” to this saying). The path: dying to an old way of being and rising into a new one

Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ – it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2.19b-20b)

- We all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the likeness of Christ, from one degree of glory to another” (II Cor. 3.18)
- “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation” (II Cor. 5.17)

John: The way is “being born again,” being “born of the Spirit” (John 3)

- “Jesus is the Way” (John 14.6). Jesus is the incarnation of “the way.” And what do we see in him as the embodiment of “the way”? Dying and rising...

Part III. Practices and Intentional Christianity: Living “The Way”

- Intentional Christianity involves practice, for practice is how we pay attention to our relationship with God and allow for the transformational work of the Spirit in our lives.
- **Educating about the purpose of Christian practices, a theology of practice**
- **Worship**. The most important collective practice is **worship**. Its purpose: it’s for us. It’s to God, of course, it’s worship of God; but it’s for us...

1. Draws us out of ourselves
2. Opens us up
3. Formative – it forms us, in-forms us
4. Subversive. Doxology as subversive (Brueggemann)

- **Prayer**. The most important individual practice: **prayer** and its purposes. Richard Rohr: the church that does not teach its people how to pray has virtually lost its reason for existence.
 - What prayer meant to me as a child: asking for something

- Now, what it means to me in a non-interventionist context: prayer is about paying attention to our relationship with God. Our relationship to God is in one respect like a human relationship: it grows, deepens, by attending to it.
- Two primary kinds of prayer: verbal and non-verbal
 - Verbal: talking to God, whether silently or aloud
 - Non-verbal: prayer of internal silence, contemplative prayer
- Petitionary/intercessory prayer. Do our prayers affect God?
 - Do they change God's mind? Or call God's attention to something God has overlooked? I'm skeptical.
 - Do they affect God in a much more mysterious way that we don't and perhaps can't understand? Possibly...
- But without doubt, prayer affects us, changes us. Prayer transforms those who pray (Jim Wallis)

Part IV. Communities of Participation in God's Passion for the World.

- What is God's passion? Transformation – of ourselves, and of the world
 - There is a political dimension to the Christian life – politics is about the shaping of the world, for good or ill
 - The Dream of God** (Verna Dozier), **God's Dream** (Desmond Tutu)
 - The Kingdom of God** – justice and peace on earth..
- Communities of education and consciousness-raising:
 - About the political passion of the Bible.....Jesus....and God
 - About systems and how they affect people's lives
- Communities active for compassion, justice, and non-violence (peace)

Part V. The meaning of faith within this vision of the Christian life: Faith is this deepening centering in God, marked by (1) commitment, loyalty, allegiance, faithfulness; and (2) deepening trust (the opposite of anxiety). Faith not as "believing a set of claims to be true," but faith as "beloving" (the pre-1600 meaning of faith and believing)

Concluding Comments: This is the way forward – the "market niche," the vocation of mainline denominations

- To be communities of participation in God's passion --- which is twofold:
 - (1) Our transformation through a deeper centering in God
 - (2) The transformation of the world. For God so loved the world – and yet God has a lover's quarrel with the world. We are called to participate in God's passion for a different kind of world.

Desmond Tutu: God without us will not; we without God cannot.

Resources

About Marcus Borg

Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Borg

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Beliefnet articles and videos <http://www.beliefnet.com/Search/Site.aspx?q=Marcus+Borg>

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