

Marcus Borg: Eight Selected Columns from the Washington Post

Yes and No

Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, Lord and Christ; the Light of the World and the Bread of Life; and the Way, Truth and Life. He is all of this for me, as a Christian who is also a historian of early Christianity.

And yet I do not think that Jesus spoke of himself with these grand terms and phrases.

Together with most mainstream scholars, I see the gospels as containing earlier and later layers of Christian traditions about Jesus as they developed during the first century. The gospels (and to some extent, the New Testament as a whole) contain the early Christian movement's memory of Jesus and its testimony to what Jesus had become in early Christian experience, conviction and thought.

In shorthand that I often use, the gospels are about both the pre-Easter Jesus (Jesus as a figure of history before his death) and the post-Easter Jesus (what Jesus became after his death).

As a historian who is also Christian, I do not think that the pre-Easter Jesus spoke about himself as the Son of God, or as Lord, or as the Light of the World, and so forth. Of course, I know that the gospels attribute this kind of language to him, so it is not a refutation of this position to quote the gospels against it.

But—again with the majority of mainstream scholarship, a point that I repeat not to give my perception authority, but to indicate that it is not eccentric or peculiar to me—I see this language as the early Christian movement's testimony, their witness, to what Jesus had become in their lives.

I see the pre-Easter Jesus as a Jewish mystic who knew God, and who as a result became a healer, wisdom teacher, and prophet of the kingdom of God. The latter led to his being killed by the authorities who ruled his world. But I do not think he proclaimed or taught an extraordinary status for himself.

The message of the pre-Easter Jesus was about God and the kingdom of God, and not about himself.

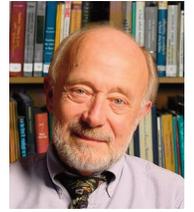
Rather, I see the grand statements about Jesus—that he is the Son of God, the Light of the World, and so forth—as the testimony of the early Christian movement. These are neither objectively true statements about Jesus nor, for example in this [Advent] season, about his conception and birth. To speak of him as the Son of God does not mean that he was conceived by God and had no biological human father. Rather, this is the post-Easter conviction of his followers.

Is that enough for me as a Christian? Yes, it is. To be Christian is to affirm that Jesus is the Son of God and Lord, and that the would-be lords of this world are not.

So, even as I do not think that Jesus' status as Son of God is because of his conception, I affirm the early Christians conviction that he is, for those of us who follow him, the Son of God, the Lord, the Light of the World.

He is all of this for Christians—and we do not need to negate the other enduring religions of the world in order to say: for those of us who are Christian, he is the decisive revelation of God's character and passion. He is for us the Son who discloses the Father, the light who shines in our darkness, the

Lord who comes each Christmas. Yes, there are other revelations of God. But affirming Jesus as the Son of God means that this is who he is for those of us who follow him. (December 21, 2006)



Prayer Transforms Us

I pray all the time. I do not mean "every minute," but many times a day.

My understanding and practice of prayer are grounded in my understanding of God, the Sacred. I see God as a presence, as the one "in whom we live and move and have our being," to quote words attributed to Paul in Acts 17.28.

For me, prayer—addressing God, paying attention to my relationship with God—is about reminding me of the reality and presence of God in the course of my day and days. It is about centering more deeply in God and about "opening" to God. It helps me to be more centered, more present, more appreciative.

What about prayers in which we ask for something—prayers of petition and intercession? To speak personally (and how else can we speak?), I do not think of God as an interventionist—that God "decides" to answer some prayers. To imagine that God sometimes intervenes leaves all the non-interventions inexplicable.

And yet I "do" both petitionary and intercessory prayer. I pray for help for myself. As Anne Lamott remarks in one of her books, the two most genuine prayers are "Help me, help me, help me," and "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

I also pray for help and health and protection for family, friends, and "the world". Doing so is a natural expression of caring. For me, it would be unnatural not to do this. And not to do so because I can't imagine how it works would be an act of intellectual arrogance—if I can't imagine how something works, then it can't work.

So I don't believe that God sometimes intervenes to answer prayer. But this doesn't prevent me from thinking that prayer sometimes has effects, even though I can't imagine how. I am very willing to think of other ways of imagining God's relation to the world, such as speaking of divine intention and divine interaction. At the very least, I am convinced that prayer changes us—that it transforms those who pray. This has been my experience. (February 2, 2007)

For God So Loves the World

Of course care for creation should be a priority, but when the Bible was written, there was no "environmental issue" as we think of it.

That there might someday be a human threat to the environment, to nature, did not occur to our ancient ancestors. Human "control" over nature was very modest, recent, and understandably seen as good. Only for about 10,000 years have some animals been domesticated for human use. Agriculture (as distinct from horticulture) is even more recent, originating in the fourth millennium BCE. With agriculture came

settled life, a stable source of food, and cities and towns with walls that provided some protection against the wildness of nature. It is no wonder that the “control” of nature was seen as a boon to human life.

Thus we do not find, and should not expect to find, “environmental issues” addressed in the Bible. But the Bible includes larger understandings that are relevant to the environmental crisis of our time.

One is grounded in an understanding of “the earth”, the natural world. The author of Psalm 24 asks, “To whom does the earth belong?” and then answers the question, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” The earth (and all that is) belongs to God—not to us.

The book of Job includes the most magnificent affirmations about nature. In Job 38-41, the author displays to the character Job the wonders of nature in all of its beauty and savagery. Then, in Job 42, the climax of the book, the character Job exclaims to God, “I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes behold you.” What Job the character has seen is the glory of God in nature. The glory of God is the radiance, the presence, of God in the created world. In this, Job is consistent with the prophet Isaiah’s famous vision in Isaiah 6: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is filled with your glory”—God’s glory, radiance, presence. Nature—the human world as well as the non-human world—is full of God’s glory.

And God loves creation. The opening phrase of John 3.16, perhaps the best-known verse from the New Testament, affirms this: “For God so loved the world....” What does God love? Not just Christians, not just humans, but “the world.”

We are called to love what God loves—the world, the whole of creation. Christians have sometimes been afraid of loving the world because of fear of “worldliness”. But worldliness and loving the world are very different.

So, should Christians be concerned about the environment? The answer is “of course”—even as we must recognize that many Christians do not think so. (February 12, 2007)

Easter is About Life, not Death

As I understand Easter, to the extent that Easter can be understood, it is not about something happening to the corpse of Jesus, but about the continuing experience of Jesus among his followers after his death.

And it is not just about experiencing him as one might experience a ghost, but experiencing him as “Lord,” as a divine reality who is one with God and who invites our allegiance and loyalty.

All of this is included in the early Christian post-Easter affirmation, “Jesus is Lord.” The lords of this world—a collusion of religious authorities with Roman imperial authority—said “No” to Jesus and executed him. Easter is the reversal of Good Friday: it means that God has vindicated Jesus, said “Yes” to Jesus and his vision over against the rulers of his world. God has made him “both Lord and Christ” as Acts 2.36 puts it. “Jesus is Lord” is the most common post-Easter affirmation of his significance. He is Lord—and the would-be lords of this

world are not.

Were the skeletal remains of Jesus to be indisputably identified, it would not matter to me. To think that the central meaning of Easter depends upon something spectacular happening to Jesus’ corpse misses the point of the Easter message and risks trivializing the story. To link Easter primarily to our hope for an afterlife, as if our post-death existence depends upon God having transformed the corpse of Jesus, is to reduce the story to a politically-domesticated yearning for our survival beyond death.

Rather, what mattered for his early followers was that they continued to know him as a living figure of the present after his death—not just during the forty days of appearances that the author of Acts mentions (Acts 1.3), but in the years and decades (and centuries) ever since. And to affirm, as Christians do, that the living presence of Jesus is Lord is to commit oneself to the story of Jesus as the central revelation of God’s dream for the world. It means to stand against the powers that killed him and to stand for the vision of God’s kingdom that he proclaimed.

Easter is both personal and political. The lordship of Jesus is the path of personal liberation from the lords of culture, and the affirmation of a very different kind of world. To lose this emphasis in a debate about what happened to the corpse of Jesus is to be distracted by the lords who killed him. (April 7, 2007)

God Provides, Doesn't Protect

I believe that God is present everywhere, in everything—that the universe is shot through with the radiant presence of God. Thus we are always “in God”, even as God is more than the universe.

But to say that God is everywhere and in everything does not mean that God is the cause, directly or indirectly, of everything that happens. To say the obvious, utterly horrible things happen in the world, and with great frequency. To imagine that these somehow fit into the long-term purposes of God is blasphemous. Rather, we are creatures who are able to act (as we often do) in ways contrary to God’s purpose and dream.

And more: Tragedies like the shootings and deaths at Virginia Tech indicate, in my judgment, that thinking of God as an interventionist is impossible as well as unhelpful. If God could have intervened to stop this (or the Holocaust, or 9/11, or the war in Iraq, or the individual tragedies that never make the news), but chose not to, what kind of sense does that make?

We live in a world still under the sway of “the powers”—powers in individual and collective lives that lead us away from God and God’s passion for life on earth.

But in the midst of all this, there is a source of sustenance that can help us in the darkest night. The most concise expression of this that I have heard comes from the late William Sloane Coffin, who died a year ago this month. He said—and I am confident of his “gist”, if not his exact words: “God provides maximum support, but minimal protection.”

Does God as an interventionist protect us? No. Does God provide a means of support in the midst of our tragedies? Yes. (April 17, 2007)

God's Non-violent Revolutionary

Was Jesus a social revolutionary? In the ordinary sense in which we use the phrase “social revolutionary”, yes. Like the Jewish prophets before him, he was passionate about economic justice and peace, and advocated active non-violent resistance to the domination system of his time. He was a voice of peasant social protest against the economic inequity and violence of the imperial domination system, mediated in the Jewish homeland by client rulers of the Roman Empire—in Galilee, Herod Antipas, and in Judea and Jerusalem, the temple authorities. He spoke of God’s kingdom on earth, as the Lord’s Prayer puts it: Your kingdom come on earth, as it already is in heaven. Heaven is not the problem—earth is.

But he was not a secular social revolutionary. He was God’s revolutionary. And God’s passion—what God is passionate about, according to Jesus—is for an earth in which swords are beaten into plowshares, in which nations do not make war against nations anymore, in which every family shall live under their own vine and fig tree (not just subsistence, but more than subsistence), and no one shall make the afraid (Micah 4.1-4, with close parallel in Isaiah 2.1-4). This was the passion of Jesus, and for Christians, Jesus is the revelation of God’s passion.

Violent revolution? No. Non-violent revolution? Yes.

Of course, Jesus and the Bible are also personal as well as political. But we have not often seen the political meaning of Jesus and the Bible. It is there—and once one sees it, it is so obvious. Not to see it is the product of habituated patterns of thought, or of willful blindness.

Jesus was (and is) not about endorsing the rule of domination systems that privilege the wealthy and powerful. Jesus was (and is) about God’s passion for a very different kind of world. (May 11, 2007)

Blind Acceptance is Idolatry

Without questioning, faith is idolatrous. Just as patriotism without questioning risks becoming idolatrous nationalism, so faith without questioning risks becoming idolatrous religion.

To explain: When faith is defined as unquestioning acceptance of “tenets or traditions”, whether drawn from the Bible or doctrine or both, then the object of faith is no longer God, but the tenets and traditions themselves. Something other than God has been given an absolute status—which is what makes it idolatrous.

Of course, there are different kinds of questioning. Some is unproductive, trivial and silly: “If God is all-powerful, can God make a square circle?” Only slightly more serious is the sophomoric, “If God made everything, who made God?”

Some questions are based on misunderstandings that can be corrected. And sometimes perpetual questioning becomes a justification for eternal fence-sitting and indecision.

But questioning also serves a necessary religious function: it prevents us from thinking that there can ever be a final formulation of “the way things are”. Our words and concepts, no matter how sacred or scientific, can only point to a stupendous and wondrous Mystery beyond all language. That is their function: they are pointers, and some point better than others.

Sometimes language can even mediate the Mystery, the sacred.

But none of our “tenets or traditions” can be the last word, the final word. They are creatures, creations. To think of them as absolute is to give them a status that belongs to God alone. (June 14, 2007)

Agnostic About the Afterlife

I am a committed Christian and a complete agnostic about the afterlife. I use “agnostic” in its precise sense: one who does not know. Moreover, I know that I cannot resolve “not knowing” by “believing”. Whatever we believe about an afterlife has nothing to do with whether there is one or what it is like.

There is more to say. I think that conventional Christianity’s emphasis on the afterlife for so many centuries is one of its negative features. I have often said that if I were to make a list of Christianity’s ten worst contributions to religion, it would be its emphasis on an afterlife, for more than one reason.

When the afterlife is emphasized, it almost inevitable that Christianity becomes a religion of requirements and rewards. If there is a blessed afterlife, it seems unfair to most people that everyone gets one, regardless of how they have lived. So there must be something that differentiates those who get to go to heaven from those who don’t—and that something must be something we do, either believing or behaving or some combination of both. And this counters the central Christian claim that salvation is by grace, not by meeting requirements.

Another problem: The division between those who “measure up” and those who don’t leads to further distinctions: between the righteous and the unrighteous, the saved and the unsaved.

Another problem: An emphasis on the afterlife focuses our attention on the next world rather than on this world. Most of the Bible, on the other hand, focuses our attention on our lives in this world and the transformation of this world. At the heart of the Lord’s Prayer is the petition for the coming of God’s kingdom on earth: Your kingdom come on earth, as it already is in heaven. There is nothing in the Lord’s Prayer asking that God take us to heaven when we die.

As yet another reason for my agnosticism about an afterlife: Does it involve the survival of personal identity and reunion with those we have known in this life? Are family reunions part of the afterlife? For some people, this is much to be desired, for family has been the primary source of love and joy in this life. But for perhaps an equally large number of people, family has been the primary source of pain and unhappiness. So, are we going to be with those people forever?

What I do affirm about what happens after death is very simple: When we die, we do not die into nothingness, but we die into God. In the words of the apostle Paul, we live unto the Lord and we die unto the Lord. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.

For me, that is enough. My not knowing anything more does not bother me at all. And I am very wary when the Christian gospel becomes a message about the afterlife. I am convinced that it invariably leads to distortion. This is not the Christian gospel. (October 10, 2007)

Mystical Experiences of God

My most formative religious experiences were a series of mystical experiences. They began to occur in my early thirties. They changed my understanding of the meaning of the word “God”—of what that word points to—and gave me an unshakable conviction that God (or “the sacred”) is real and can be experienced.

These experiences also convinced me that mystical forms of Christianity are true, and that the mystical forms of all the enduring religions of the world are true.

My experiences were what scholars of mysticism call “extravertive” or “eyes open” mystical experiences (the other type is “introvertive” or “eyes closed”). I saw the same visual “landscape”—a forest, a room, the inside of an airliner—that I normally see. There were no extra beings, no angels.

For a minute or two (and once for the better part of an hour), what I was seeing looked very different. Light became different—as if there were a radiance shining through everything. The biblical phrase for this is “the glory of God”—as the book of Isaiah puts it, “the earth is filled with the glory—the radiance—of God”. The world was transfigured, even as it remained “the same”. And I experienced a falling away of the subject-object distinction that marks our ordinary everyday experience—that sense of being a separate self, “in here” while the world is “out there”.

They were experiences of wonder—not of curiosity, but of what the 20th century Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called “radical amazement”.

They were also experiences in which I felt that I was seeing more clearly than I ever had before—that what I was experiencing was “the way things are”. And they were also experiences of complete peacefulness, marked by a sense that I would love to stay in this mental state forever. Anxiety and distraction utterly disappeared. Everything looked beautiful.

When I had these experiences, I had no intellectual understanding of mysticism. Indeed, whenever I tried to read mystical writings, they seemed like gobbledy-gook. I had no idea what they were about—they were completely opaque. But after these experiences, mystical texts became luminous. I recognized in them what I had experienced.

The effect was to transform my understanding of the word “God”. I began to understand that the word does not refer to a person-like being “out there” beyond the universe—an understanding of “God” that ceased to be persuasive in my teens and twenties.

I began to understand that the word “God” refers to “what is” experienced as wondrous and compelling, as, to use William James’ phrase, “the more” which is all around us. Or to use a phrase from the New Testament, the word “God” refers to “the one in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17.28) “God” is not a hypothesis, but a reality that can be known.

Thus, to argue about whether God exists seems to me to be based on a misunderstanding of what the word points to. If “God” means a person-like being “out there,” completely separate from the universe, then I am an atheist. I do not believe there is such a being. But if the word “God” points to a radiance that pervades “what is”, as I now think, then of course,

God is real. Not just the God of Christianity, but the God of all the enduring religions. (January 5, 2007)

American Christians Are Deeply Divided

The United States has more Christians than any country in the world, both in numbers and as a per cent of our population. Roughly 80% of Americans identify themselves as Christian. Only about half are actively involved in the life of a church, but this is still a large number. But are we a Christian nation?

I leave unaddressed whether a nation can (or should) be Christian. Instead, I point to a deep division among American Christians about what it means to be Christian.

On one side of the divide are what might be called “absolutist” Christians—those who believe that Christianity is the one absolute revelation of God and the only way of salvation. Commonly, this view is accompanied with belief in biblical (or papal) infallibility, a literalistic interpretation of the Bible, and a right-wing political orientation. This is the most publicly visible form of Christianity in our time.

On the other side are Christians who see their faith as one of the world’s great religions, but not as the only adequate revelation of God. Rather, all of the enduring religions are seen as culturally-shaped responses to the experience of the sacred. These Christians commonly see the Bible as the ancient testimony of our spiritual ancestors to God and life with God, recognize that much of the language of the Bible is symbolic and metaphorical, and affirm religious pluralism. Politically, they tend to be moderate or progressive.

And, of course, there are many Christians “in the middle”. Some are unaware of or undecided about this conflict. Or they may be leaning one way or the other, but are not passionately committed to either side.

So are we Americans a Christian nation? No. Rather, we are a nation in which there is a struggle going on between Christians for the heart and soul of Christianity—about what it means to be Christian, and about what it means to be an American Christian. (December 14, 2006)

Don't Tell Them Anything They'll Need to Unlearn

Our children deserve to know the stories that matter to us. So tell them the stories of your tradition—and of other traditions, when appropriate.

If and when they ask, “Is that a true story?”, they may be asking, “Did that really happen?” But you don’t have to answer that question. You can say, “I don’t know if it happened that way or not, but I know this is an important and truthful story.”

We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that children are concrete thinkers who can’t grasp metaphor. But think of the stories children are fascinated by: tales of talking animals, talking trains, fairy tales, the Harry Potter books. Children don’t reject these stories because “things like that don’t happen”.

Of course, the Bible and other sacred scriptures are not fairy tales. But we make a mistake when we think that stories must be factually true in order to be true and truthful.

And what about God in particular? Ask them. Very young children often have fascinating things to say about God. (December 6, 2006)