

A Review of Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: “Rediscovering a Life of Faith”*

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Borg MJ 2004. *The Heart of Christianity: “Rediscovering a Life of Faith”*. San Francisco: Harper Collins (234 Pages).²

Marcus Borg, Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture, an endowed chair at Oregon State University, is considered by many to be one of the most influential voices in what is referred to as Progressive Christianity, a movement founded in 1996 by a retired Episcopalian priest, James Adams, in Cambridge, MA. It currently represents the most liberal established Christian group within Christianity.

Borg’s philosophy is simply that one does not have to take the Bible literally to take it seriously. He teaches that a historical-metaphorical approach to the Bible has more meaning for today’s world than is the historical-grammatical approach or that of biblical literalism. Borg summarizes his description of the historical-metaphorical approach by stating that the Bible is the Word of God metaphorically.

Although I approached this book with an open mind, and having read a couple of his other books, I have always struggled with his approach. There were some chapters that I found to contain views that I could not adopt. One was his view of religious pluralism (like many liberal Christians, he has real trouble with the idea that Jesus is the only way to salvation), and another was his view of the Bible and the inerrancy of Scripture.

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² The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Besides this, Borg clearly seems to reject that the miracles in the Bible really happened, such as Jesus turning the water into wine. He instead reads a metaphorical meaning into it (as do other liberals who cannot accept Biblical miracles as literal). Borg claims that when we read the Bible as a literal document, we miss the metaphorical meaning (the meaning for life).

His argument is simply that we diminish our faith stories by making them merely literal. He pushes for the “more-than-literal” meanings in the Christian scripture. In my view, it is a growing modern Western mind-set that he portrays. Sadly, there are many theologians holding prominent positions in academia, who hold fast to this approach to Scripture.

As one reviewer of his work bluntly stated:

Evangelicals beware—this is the same Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar, the one who has categorically stated that he does not believe that Christianity is the only path of salvation, that the Bible is the Word of God, that Jesus experienced a bodily resurrection, or that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God.

That said, Borg never degrades those who do hold to a strong doctrinal stance and a literal interpretation of the Bible, much of which he considers to be metaphorical. But while many evangelicals dismiss him outright, Borg is obviously trying to build a bridge between the conservative and liberal factions in the church. For example, Borg talks about the “earlier paradigm” of Christianity and an “emerging paradigm”. He discusses the history of the “earlier paradigm” and provides useful insights such as the recent notions of Biblical infallibility (post-Enlightenment) and Papal infallibility (1870), which many may assume have always been a big part of the Christian tradition.

Some may be surprised at some of his thoughts, like his suggestion that liberals begin using the term “born-again” to describe their transformation from an old way to a new way of being Christian. He also strongly stresses how important it is to have an intimate relationship with God, and he tries to encourage those who have become disillusioned with conservative Christianity to give it another chance, because the times have changed, and from those changes a new, inclusive paradigm has emerged.

If one could summarise Borg's theology, it would be something like this. As we live a life in God, and take seriously what God takes seriously, which we see in the person of Jesus, we are transformed in this life, saved in this life, so that we bring about the kingdom of God on earth. For Borg, and many of his persuasion, that is what really matters, not believing in a set of propositions so that we can get to heaven. Borg cares little for traditional Christianity with its salvific and exclusivistic functions, and rather sees historical, metaphorical, and sacramental richness in the practices of Christianity, which, in his view, is seriously lacking in the church today.

Clearly, his books, and this one in particular, are not for 'fundamentalist Christians' unless they are willing to reconsider some of their most strongly held views. However, for those who are willing to take a deeper look at the philosophy of Progressive Christianity, this book is an interesting read.