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MODERN DISTRACTIONS

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Encountering **Jesus**: An exchange

While attending a conference recently I had the chance to get to know Marcus **Borg**, one of the best-known participants in the **Jesus** Seminar and author of Meeting **Jesus** Again for the First Time. **Borg** is refreshingly different from some of the self-promoting, sensationalist members of the **Jesus** Seminar. And he rises above the spurious claims of some biblical scholars who claim to work "nonconfessionally"--which usually means that they have no church other than the academy. **Borg** is a church member (his wife is an Episcopal priest). He also has a disarmingly irenic spirit about him. To my mind, however, most of the efforts of the **Jesus** Seminar suggest the last gasp of modernity--it's the 19th-century "quest" redivivus, one last hurrah for the liberal **Jesus**.

I have just finished teaching an undergraduate course called "**Jesus** Through the Centuries." The students read selections from such authors as H. S. Remarus and D. F. Strauss. They liked **Borg's** book best, though they had difficulty figuring out what is so new about the allegedly "new quest" of the historical **Jesus**. Remarus despised the church as much as anyone in the **Jesus** Seminar. Moreover, the act of letting modernity set the rules for evidence and then noting that little in the Gospels' account of **Jesus** passes muster is by now a rather old story.

Borg has certain postmodern tendencies that set him apart from some of his **Jesus** Seminar colleagues. **Borg** regards **Jesus** as a "spirit person," a challenging, enigmatic teacher who is peculiarly in touch with God. **Borg's** colleague, the founder of the seminar, Robert Funk, seems by contrast like an unreconstructed modernist, determined to fix **Jesus** within the limited categories of modernity. **Borg** wants a richer-textured portrait of **Jesus**, a **Jesus** who does not have to submit to our positivistic, materialist criteria. Thus the term "spirit person."

Borg rejects the reductionism of those who want us to choose either the meager historical **Jesus** or an uncritical affirmation of the church's canonical **Jesus**. As he puts it, "I am a **Jesus** scholar and a Christian." Yet his severance of the "pre-Easter **Jesus**" from the "post-Easter **Jesus**"--a fairly typical move for those who can't place Easter within their systems of thought--seems overdrawn and unjustified. If God raised **Jesus** from the dead, then it is going to be terribly difficult, even for biblical scholars, to get back to **Jesus** before Easter. Resurrection, if it happens, would obliterate our limited notions of "past" and "present," "possible" and "impossible." Resurrection would, by definition, transform **Jesus** from being an object of historical study to being an actively revealing subject. Of course, if **Jesus'** resurrection did not happen (**Borg** himself does not deny that it happened), then I can't imagine why anyone would care about recovery of **Jesus** anyway.

I certainly resonate with **Borg's** picture of **Jesus** as a subversive who challenged the "domination systems" (to use Walter Wink's term). In any account of **Jesus**, we must account for the most solid historical facts about him, namely that he was Jewish and that he was crucified. The **Jesus** Seminar has been roundly criticized by Richard Hays and others for being fixated on the words of **Jesus** and ignoring his deeds. The seminar's list of stories and aphorisms attributed to **Jesus** cannot account for **Jesus'** martyrdom. Nor, by the way, does it account for why he attracted followers who were themselves willing to be martyred.

The nonwonder-working, nonapocalyptic teacher who emerges from much of the seminar's work is not the kind of figure who fits with the history of what happened to and after **Jesus**. I hear that the seminar is working on a volume about What **Jesus** Really Did. **Borg** suspects that it was **Jesus'** cleansing of the temple that led to his arrest, so he can't be accused of focusing only on **Jesus'** words.

In a number of his books and lectures, **Borg** shares his own spiritual autobiography, including his escape from the clutches of midwestern Lutheran orthodoxy. But when he falls back upon his own experience of the Christ, I am inclined to mutter, "He thought he met a new **Jesus** when in reality he met Methodism!"

That's not quite fair. But surely there is a way out of dogmatic Protestant scholasticism that doesn't lead into experiential, expressive liberalism. I grew up with the **Jesus** whom **Borg** has discovered, and I think that figure is too limp either to account for what we know (from history and the church's experience) of **Jesus** or to foster discipleship today. **Borg's** summation of **Jesus'** teaching is, to my mind, too large and too vague, needing too much qualification. To focus on "compassion" strikes me as one more attempt by liberalism to reduce **Jesus** to a universal ideal. **Borg** has said that he could as well have spoken of **Jesus** as pushing "Spirit and Kingdom," which might help, particularly if he would more carefully link this to Israel's peculiar ideas of "Spirit."

Thousands of **Borg's** readers testify that his work has helped them to rediscover their faith, to return to **Jesus**, to give Christianity another try. At heart **Borg** is a Christian apologist. I wish he were more of an evangelist. I wish that rather than reinterpreting **Jesus** in order to help us not be so scandalized by him, **Borg** instead would ponder what we limited, violent, modern people might do to follow **Jesus**, to have our lives changed by him. In my experience, we'll do almost anything to avoid being changed by **Jesus**, including studying history.

In considering the traditional, substitutionary view of the atonement, **Borg** says that while this is one valid metaphor for what **Jesus** did for us, it is a symbol so problematic for modern people that we might as well jettison it. He suggests that the Christus Victor theme might be more comprehensible. But if we can get modern people to believe that **Jesus** was a triumphant warrior, why would we have greater difficulty getting them to believe that he was a slain lamb?

My point is that **Borg** worries far too much about what modern people can or cannot believe about **Jesus**. Rather than be so compassionate about life in modernity, why not try to convert us to a more nuanced view of the world, a wider rationality than we currently possess? Though **Borg** wants to make room for signs and wonders in his picture of **Jesus**, he can't get much further than these as helpful metaphors for something that happened between **Jesus** and the world. Again, why should we concede so much to modernity?

Borg notes that **Jesus** was subversive, political, a "social prophet," a "movement initiator." Yet he tends to speak of **Jesus'** subversion in terms of his challenging ideas, without much mention of the church. **Jesus** comes off as someone who had a significant religious experience and who encourages other sensitive persons to have similar experiences.

Perhaps **Borg** would say that when he wants to write about the practical, political embodiment of **Jesus'** way, he will talk about the church. Yet I see **Jesus** as political in the sense that he called disciples and formed a subversive group, a messianic community of people whose visible presence challenged the powers-that-be. **Jesus**, like Israel's prophets, was using words and deeds to reconstitute Israel. I expect that **Borg** would agree that a messiah without a messianic community is unthinkable. **Jesus** didn't just lay some interesting ideas on us. Rather, he invited us to come out and be part of a people whose presence, and whose eating and drinking with **Jesus**, was a sign of the kingdom of God. Here is where the lack of an apocalyptic element in **Borg's** vision of **Jesus** is most notable.

When **Borg** speaks of **Jesus'** challenge to the domination systems of his day, I wonder if he would include Western liberalism and rabid individualism in his list of the principalities and powers which are thrown into crisis. As **Borg** says, Easter means not only "**Jesus** lives," but the more politically charged "**Jesus** is Lord."

I expect **Borg** would agree that the test of anyone's **Jesus** is the sort of people he is able to produce. The **Jesus** Seminar, having spent so much effort debating how the Gospel texts were produced, has not yet given enough attention to the more difficult (political, pastoral, ecclesial) question, How do we produce a people worthy to hear this text?

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