

A theological commentary on his JESUS A NEW VISION: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship (H&R/87; HarperCollins papercover/91)

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1 The conventional wisdom of U.S. presidential politics is that what'll win the election two months from now is the **compassion** pitch. The Republican Convention was so good at tear-jerking more-compassionate-than-thou that Wm. Safire suggested the Demos would be wise to bring on that mama gorilla that cradled that 3-year-old boy who fell into her cage on his head. Pres. Bush's "kinder, gentler nation" is still only promissory, but activable in the people's heart by compassion appeals.

Irony: While Borg more than a score of times (according to his Subject Index) scores "conventional wisdom," his modernized Jesus is Compassion On Legs & preaches the "Spirit" of (& the "Spirit" as) Compassion. Reminds me of a Greenwich Village friend who some years ago gave up religion, to preach (his neologism) "Compassionlife." No wonder Borg's "new vision" is so popular. His "new vision" of Jesus as the Compassionate One is the conventional religious wisdom of America's mainline churches. Compassion, the way (an alternative consciousness); transformation, the goal (an alternative community).

2 I'm not entirely unsympathetic with the scholarly tradition (esp. since D.F. Strauss, 1835) **designing**, for differing times/places, a **usable Jesus** (my phrase, on the model of Martin Marty's "a usable past"). Human beings are here-&-now creatures & can't hear now what makes no contact, has no tangency with, their now-here. But there's a difference between being personally adaptable so as to communicate (Paul's "all things to all men" [KJV]), on the one hand, & on the other presenting, as a responsible scholarly product, a Jesus so adapted to a particular people's perceived needs at a given time/place that the Jesus-consumers believe they're eating the *real* Jesus. That is as though the Jesus core were a tailor's dummy to be dressed "custom-tailored" (or as the Republicans are saying about our highly adaptable president, "Will the real Clinton please stand up?").

3 It's been a blessing for me to have known, eye-to-eye a number of great NT scholars who've resisted the temptation to mock up a usable Jesus--e.g., A.Schweitzer, H.J.Cadbury, A.N.Wilder. Here's something pertinent from Cadbury (THE PERIL OF MODERNIZING JESUS [Mac/37]--from which the title of this Thinksheet--102): "Nowhere [in the Gospels] do I find unmistakable appeal to the rights or needs of the other party or even to the interests of society in general." Yet our whole liberal religious & political traditional focus on needs, rights, entitlements, equality, justice, tolerance, institutionalized compassion--is it not, the whole of it, focused on what Jesus does not call attention to, viz. "the rights or needs of the other party" & "the interests of society in general"? If Borg wants a model for the latter focus, Marx would be a better choice than Jesus.

4 For Borg, Jesus is more usable (1) if he doesn't embarrass by calling God "Father" & (2) if he doesn't go along with "conventional wisdom's image of God as the judge and compensator" (123, n.78). Let's contrast Wilder in his classic ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS (H&B/39):

On (1), Wilder regularly refers to God by Jesus' favorite title, Father. How many times does Borg's book do so? *Never* discursively, i.e., as Jesus used the title for divine identity, & accordingly as Wilder (e.g., "the secret disposition of the Father as ultimately determinative," 124; "the glory and power of the Father," 156; "the will of the Father," 160, 245). Of course Borg uses "Father" in biblical quotes (3-4) & in referring to it as a Jewish divine title (45); but otherwise "father" is lower-case ("father, mother" as ways of speaking of God "as personal," 27-28; "the image of God as father...in stories about Jewish charismatic holy men," 49; quoting Dodd's "Like father, like son," 144, n.22). As for "Abba" (Aramaic, "father"), Borg admits that Jesus' use of it indicates "the intimacy of Jesus' experience of [sic] Spirit [on which see below], 45, 49; cp.50: Jesus "uses father-son imagery to speak at least indirectly of his relationship to God"). But Borg finds the whole father/Father business embarrassing, & prefers other ways--esp. "Spirit"--of referring to the deity, i.e. other ways than Jesus' main way. This clashes with the discipleship theme, e.g. this on 16-17: "To follow Jesus means...to take seriously what he took seriously." Obviously Jesus did, & Borg doesn't, take

seriously addressing God primarily as "Father." Why doesn't he? Equally obviously, the likes of Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza have gotten to him (143, 146). As we can see even more clearly in his later writings, Borg wants us to see Jesus, have "a new vision" of him, through the liberationist lens of God-redesigning gender feminism. No strain on him, for it's a continuation of his decades-long modernizing-Jesus personal project.

On (2), God as Judge grates on Borg's nerves, for it messes up his neat PhD-dissertation-onward program of elevating the compassion paradigm (& politics) & denigrating the holiness-purity paradigm (& politics). He cultivates the image of "Spirit" (or, he says, "God") as cosmic Grace, nonjudgmental (almost unconditional) Generosity (reading literally Jesus' nature-analogies about sun & rain [Mt.5.45; but contrast, in the same Gospel, 3.12; 7.11,16-20,24-27; 12.33-35; 13.47-50; 20.15; 22.10; 25.21-26,31-46--passages warning the interpreter to consider the rain/sun saying as situational rather than propositional, though some parables aim to shock against elevating, in the divine nature, judgment over grace])....My critical consciousness was raised on this scholarly perversion of history by early exposure to "the Chicago school" of social-gospel proponents/critics. Some years before H.J.Cadbury broke out in print against "modernizing" Jesus, Shirley Jackson Case exposed the phenomenon comparatively, in "Rival Efforts to Modernize Jesus" (JR.xv.1935, 82ff): Such modernizing authors "attempt to give vital reality to Jesus by depicting him in the religious imagery that accords most nearly with their respective tastes." Readers should "demur" when such authors are scholars purporting to present the historical Jesus (Borg being a clear instance of those Case was warning against)....Nowhere does Borg refer to God as "Judge," & only twice as "judge," & he sniffs at Christianity's "conventional wisdom's image of God as the judge and compensator" (123 & 155)--though he does concede that the OT prophets threatened the people with "the judging activity of God" (153). And while he concedes that Jesus used threats of judgment (156,161,164,187), nowhere does he mention Spirit-God as the agent of the judgment Jesus threatens: Borg is too leery of mixing any holiness/purity/righteousness/judgment into the Spirit/Jesus compassion interlock. Dozens of times we hear his PhD's leitmotiv, e.g. 130: "whereas first-century Judaism spoke primarily of the holiness of God, Jesus spoke primarily of the compassion of God."

5 Another way Borg modernizes Jesus into a more usable model is by portraying him as a charismatic, an **experiencer** of "Spirit." It's 1½ cs. ago that Kierkegaard analyzed cultural degeneration as a movement from religion (trust, belief) to ethics (character, behavior) to esthetics (from a Gk. wd. meaning "experience"). Borg (unconsciously, I believe) reads back into Jesus the modern hunger for "religious experience." Cadbury put it well (155): "In part this new emphasis [on "Jesus' own religion"] is due to a new place which religious experience holds in the modern thought of religion. Our scientific training has made us aim at actual empirical bases for religion. The older reliance on belief which some time ago gave place to a reliance on conduct has now been further replaced by a reliance on experience....for several modern forms of Christianity the central validating element is experience." (NB: "Women's experience" is the heart of the feminist revolution, including the degendering of the divine in leftwing churches, esp. Unitarian-Universalist & the United Church of Christ.)

But what can we know of the innerness of Jesus' religion? Long ago (Thinksheet #70!) I tried to sweat that one out, but we've little to go on. We're certain that the early church has a significant charismatic (Spirit-experiencing) component, but was some of this read back into Jesus in the canonical Gospels? Hear Cadbury: "The religion of Jesus emphasized the passive element in a way that we should find only partially congenial....Jesus' relation with God was not active and eager cooperation but loyal acceptance of what God determined. Akin to this is a quite different idea of divine guidance. It is not a search for God's recommendations, it is the recognition of his decisions....So prayer is not...for light but...for strength and obedience....God's will is known by interpreting what happens. In so far as you can foresee what will happen, you can anticipate that will; in so far as you can understand what has happened, you can acknowledge that

will. The species of resignation is typically oriental, we westerners would say. It was characteristically Jewish....the religion of Jesus is not introspective and subjective but rather objective. The part of religion one looks at within is one's own degree of fidelity in keeping the well-known standards of the divine will. The rest of religion is external. Probably Jesus neither taught nor felt the importance of a religious experience. He did not live in the ecstatic moment, nor glory in it, nor even in the more normal sense of abiding fellowship with God....Even when God is mentioned Jesus does not make him central in his teaching. That teaching is about human conduct....God then is not in the foreground of Jesus' thinking, but in the background....Jesus lived in a community that took God quite for granted....The religion of Jesus was not centered about a specifically religious experience. It was rather the religious interpretation of unspecifically religious experience--his homely knowledge of men and of nature, his native and forthright sense of good and evil, and his personal acceptance of the life that befell him with its twofold prospects of success and failure as the divine will for him" (183-190).

Now hear Borg, & ask yourself whether he can be talking about the same historical character you just heard Cadbury talking about: "Jesus sought to transform his social world by creating an alternative community structured around compassion, with norms that moved in the direction of inclusiveness, acceptance, love, and peace. The alternative consciousness he taught as a sage generated a 'contrast society,' an 'alternative community with an alternative consciousness' grounded in the Spirit" (142; n.74 on 149 says "Quoted phrases" are from Lofink's JESUS AND COMMUNITY & Brueggemann's THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION (Fortress/78, 80 & 96). The final sentence of the note tips you off to one of Borg's scholar-heroes: "Brueggemann sees the tension between 'alternative community' and dominant culture running throughout the Bible." Other such heroes are Wm. James for his VARIETIES OF [yes!] RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE (1902), Rudolf Otto's THE IDEA OF THE HOLY (1917), Mircea Eliade's THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE (1956), & Huston Smith's FORGOTTEN TRUTH: THE PRIMORDIAL TRADITION (1976; & his BEYOND THE POST-MODERN MIND, 1982). All these are religious **experience** emphasers. He uses them (& their lingo) to illumine his own religious experience (which elsewhere, he says, began with "nature mysticism" after getting his PhD in Jesus) & to bridge to his "new vision" of Jesus as primarily a religious experiencer ("charismatic" [+ sage + revitalization movement founder + prophet]). (Huston liked the result: On the cover of Borg's papercover edition, he says "The book about Jesus I have been waiting for.")

Am I complaining about Borg's doing his religious-experience thing on Jesus? No, I'm complaining about what in journalism is called the deliberate but unconfessed mixing of "news" & "commentary." It's bad journalism, & it's bad scholarship to control "the historical Jesus" (what news we can have of him, which isn't much) with one's particular theological "vision" paraded as a "new [!] vision" of Jesus (personal commentary). Bad scholarship & bad morality, whether or not bad theology.

I must fight off cynicism as I note the close fit between liberal Protestantism's religiopolitical agenda & the norms-values of Borg's new-model (claimed to be the original model) Jesus: "inclusiveness, acceptance, love, and peace."

6 Borg is, in religion, an **archaizer**. He wants to exhume "the historical Jesus" & be a disciple of his, instead of being a Christian. Rather, he virtually redefines being a Christian as being a disciple of the (recently recovered) Jesus, though in some other contexts he admits that "the historical Jesus" is unnecessary for Christian faith. But he's overgenerous: the logic of his position is that his "historical Jesus" is fact, leaving the Christian Jesus to be fiction based on such a false notion as the atonement (178-84)--so he smugly calls canonical-classical Christology "The popular [!] image of Jesus" (section beginning on 2). Obviously, his "historical Jesus" has a revelational leg up on the Lord Jesus Christ of the NT & the ecumenical creeds. The irony is that what his "historical Jesus" preaches is popular with Borg's audiences, who aren't about to badmouth "inclusiveness, acceptance, love, and peace."

At this point in my writing this Thinksheet, the phone rang & somebody with a self-reflective slant on Jesus said "He was an example of...." (These days, we say "spin" instead of "slant.") If Borg were to research "the historical Buddha," you can be sure it'd have less spin than his so-called "historical Jesus": he's "inter-

ested," has more personal investment in, his so-called "historical Jesus," who (another irony) gets less fair treatment in his hands than the Buddha would. Why? Because (the historical) Jesus, not Buddha, is central to Borg's scholarship & his religion, which can be simply & accurately stated: "Spirit" is compassionate; Jesus of Nazareth experienced Spirit & so became, & preached, compassion, which his disciples also are to become & preach. (The Buddhist form of compassion-religion: Gautama became "enlightened" [i.e., the "Buddha"] when he experienced Nibbana/Nirvana as compassionate anti-suffering; his disciples are to experience same & become bodhisatvas, centering their lives in dispassionate meditation & unselfish compassionate deeds. My Buddhist students in the U. of Hawaii would "recognize" Buddha in Borg's Jesus, & smile knowingly. Other students would call down the law of parsimony: "Since compassion is the message, why bother with either Jesus or Buddha? why bother with religion?")

Another angle of vision on Borg's religion: it's biographical-historicistic. Nowhere here does he identify himself as a Christian; he's (to coin a word) a Jesus-ian, focusing his religion on a biography, a life-story which he reconstructs with thorough-going (& competent) historical-science research. Not so the focus of Christianity, which "is much more what God does than what man [even the man Jesus] does." (The full Cadbury quote, 183: "Religion for Jesus is much more what God does than what man does.") Christianity (again, the NT & the ecumenical creeds) says that what God did with/in/through/as Jesus was, on the Cross, to open salvation's door of grace to sinners: "Though we once knew Christ from a human point of view [i.e., "the historical Jesus"], we know him no longer in that way....in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself....So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2.Cor.5.16-21 NRSV). In rejecting this whole atonement conceptuality, which has always been at the heart of Christian missions, Borg commits the genetic fallacy: he proposes to get behind Christianity & develop his own religion off his reconstructed "historical Jesus." Again, I can't complain if that's his thing. My complaint is against the deceit in continuing to present himself as an assumed Christian, whereas he's pushing an "alternative" (a favorite word of his) to Christianity. Since Christianity has largely died out in the liberal churches, their constituencies find Borg a darling who ratifies their agenda with a "new vision" version of the dominical (Jesus) sanction. The politics is clear: Those of us who criticize the agenda find ourselves up against this "Jesus." We are frozen out by fictional reconstruction, cheap grace, & false righteousness.

7 Borg's use of some traditional Christian **language** is controled by his unnuanced statements about "the projection of divine qualities back onto Jesus" (7, e.g.). Always projection (a human activity), never revelation (a divine deed). Never any suggestion that such mental-literary processes, whatever one thinks they were, were by divine illumination-guidance. In the light of his "projection" doctrine, an atheist could speak, as Borg does, of "the risen Christ" (6-7). Under the stimulus of Jesus, Borg says, the early Christians experienced "the realm of Spirit" (44: "One enters the realm of Spirit and experiences God."). Borg does not affirm Jesus Resurrectus ("this same Jesus" [Ac.1.11]), whom the earliest Christians believed they were experiencing & would eschatologically experience (same v.: "will come again"). (Therefore my #2786, "Marcus Borg's No-Easter Jesus.")

8 Borg's subtitle--"Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship"--makes clear that this pop-reworking of his PhD dissertation has a practical ("discipleship" to his construct of Jesus), not just a theoretical (the Spirit/culture dialectic) purpose. No problem with "culture," but he uses "**Spirit**" in an idiosyncratic manner, e.g. this (15): "Jesus had an intensely vivid relationship to the world of Spirit, to that 'other reality' sometimes spoken of as the sacred, or the holy, or the other world, or simply as God." This holophrastic use frees his rhetoric to soar expansively without any specific ontological commitment other than the this/other-world distinction. At death, Jesus merges into this numinous blob which magnetically draws to itself a score of familiar religious words, including "God." Semantically it's a virtually impregnable position: his defenders can say, quoting him, "But Borg *does* believe in...."

9 In his defense, Borg can point to the fact that "spirit/Spirit" has wide meanings in the Bible, which is the literature of his specialty; & also, of course, in the specialty called "history of religions," in which his author-teacher is a specialist. But Christianity uses "Spirit" in a narrow sense Borg little mentions & less honors, viz. the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. Here, & at many other points, Borg's **biblicism** reminds me of Protestant fundamentalism: what's postbiblical is out of bounds, or at least largely out of sight.

Let's look at said "author-teacher" of Borg, viz. Houston Smith, whom I know well. Borg's book is what I'd expect Houston to write if he were in Bible instead of in the world's religions (again, his cover-comment on the book: "The book about Jesus I have been waiting for"). On the "Charlie Rose" PBS/TV interview show a few days ago, when Rose asked Smith "Have you changed your opinion of the religion into which you were born [viz., Christianity, "Methodism"]?," Houston replied (typically) "No religion has all the truth. But a swami told me that I'd've done just as well if I'd dug one well 60' deep instead of ten wells 6' deep." He then went on to say that experiencing the Spirit in any religion will lead you to become more (you guessed it!) "compassionate."

Borg on Smith, 35: "I find Smith's phrase 'primordial tradition,' as well as his exposition of the notion, to be especially illuminating and helpful." Borg (36) quotes Smith (FORGOTTEN TRUTH, 21): The "higher levels (of the primordial tradition) are not literally elsewhere; they are removed only in the sense of being inaccessible to ordinary consciousness." And again, Borg uses Smith (op.cit., 97-117) as authority for the belief, which I hold to be true, that the flatlanders (who deny the existence of nonmaterial reality) are losing: "Within the theoretical sciences, the modern [materialist] worldview in its popular form has been abandoned" (Borg, 34). I applaud Borg for maintaining this theme, the recovery of "the second world" (same p.), throughout this book. (There now! And you thought I couldn't say anything good about him!)

10 I'm tempted (but am resisting) to write a whole Thinksheet on Borg's **compassionism**, a beguiling doctrine of high currency & energy in current liberal religion. He's erected it into a universal & controlling principle, as before him Bultmann did *die Entscheidung*, the decisional ("existential") element in the Jesus of the Gospels. Rightly, Borg says (37) that Bultmann's parallel project of "demythologizing" involves not only a deliteralizing of the three-story universe, but also a collapse of the world of Spirit itself." What is to prevent, I ask, Borg's compassion-project from collapsing into ethicism, as Judaism in 1875 collapsed (for some New York City Jews) into Ethical Culture? "Compassion" is the common term in Spirit-compassion & Jesus-compassion & disciples-compassion: why is not all this simplifiable into a mystical religion of Compassion, with the "characters" (Spirit, Jesus, disciples) functioning as in the virtue-name-bearing "characters" in medieval morality plays, Jn. Bunyan, & Wm. Law? Intellectually, Borg has been delivered from the skepticism of his college days & (of which also he speaks in MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME) the atheism of his seminary days. I don't sense that it goes deeper than that, but I hope and pray it does. I cannot doubt his resolve to make Jesus usable, "relevant" (14), to which end he sees his book as a recovery effort (17): "Though this is primarily a historical study, it is done with the recognition that the figure of Jesus has been significant to generations of Christians, and with the conviction that he is of continuing and indeed crucial importance to the life of both church and culture. With this conviction in mind, this book seeks to recover the vision of Jesus [subjective genitive, i.e. the vision Jesus had], a vision which can provide us with an alternative vision of life." (He means "alternative" not just to the visions of the world's cultures but also, unfortunately, to the church's canonical-ecumenical vision of him as the Redeemer Lord: he wants us to be disciples of a Jesus whom we Christians, with the possible exception of the first generation [if his "recovery" of that Jesus is accurate], have never known--instead of being Christians, but of course he has a "new vision" of what it means to be a Christian.)

In a dozen places, Borg expresses his compassionism doctrine. Here's one (129): "The image of reality generated by Jesus' charismatic experience created a new ethos for the life of the people of God, a central paradigm or ethic in accord with which they were to live.... Jesus expressed this ethos as an *imitatio dei*, or 'imi-

tation of God.' But the content of Jesus' *imitatio dei* differed: whereas first-century Judaism spoke primarily of the holiness of God, Jesus spoke primarily of the compassion of God." Of the historic trefoil image of Jesus as Prophet-Priest-King, Borg will have nothing to do with "Priest," the social functionary of the Holy, though (oddly) Borg holds that Jesus' generative spiritual experience was of the Holy, which he calls "Spirit": Borg overplays the holiness/compassion split, as he does the difference between Jesus' message before & after the Resurrection (200; Jesus stopped talking after they killed him, so Gospel reports of his speaking "truths about himself" are not what he said but what the church said about him). For Christian faith, there can be no more basic question addressed to the Gospels & the whole of early Christian literature than this: *Did Jesus stop talking after they killed him?* From all that I've seen-heard-read (including his personal letter to me), I judge that Borg's answer is "Yes." Does not that answer put him outside the Christian religion even if he claims to remain in?

I'll boldface Borg's compassion words on just one page, 199: "Jesus points us to...an alternative culture which seeks to make the world more **compassionate**...there is a dimension of reality beyond the visible world of our ordinary experience, a dimension charged with power, whose ultimate quality is **compassion**." He bends his considerable learning to serve that "dimension" (a.k.a. "Spirit," "God," et al). The power of his message is that he's symphonically pushing a simple melody, a single virtue, a motif elaborated by extensive expositions/endnotes antiphons. If I did not know Borg's field, I'd be taken in by his cleverness. He himself is taken in by it, with a little help from his Jesus Seminar compeers/friends (20).

Contrast, now, what we know of early Christian preaching (e.g., sermons in Ac.) with this about "the Jesus movement" (139): "the *imitatio dei* as **compassion** [my boldface] transcended the cultural distinction between Jew and Roman, righteous and outcast, men and women, rich and poor." That's early Christian preaching/living as severely modernized as Borg modernizes Jesus, & to the same purport. He speaks rightly of early Christianity's social transcendence, but he skips over the set of theological-christological ideas founding & empowering the transcendence. He says (2) "the three...questions about the historical Jesus" are his identity ("who was he?"), his message, & his mission--but immediately sets aside (3) "his divine identity" as the mere "popular [though NT & ecumenical!] image"! He makes the same Jesus-of-history/Christ-of-faith leap in a sentence which could be, but in Borg text cannot be, read as orthodox (13): "Christianity does not consist primarily of having correct beliefs about the historical Jesus, but consists of having a relationship with the living Christ." If you inquire of Borg as to the identity continuity of God the Son, the historical Jesus, & "the living Christ," you will get from him a response not from out of biblical-canonical-classical Christian thought but from his own peculiar Spirit/culture paradigm with "alternative" consciousness/community. But not to give up hope for him: In the Preface he says his belief vis-a-vis Christianity's "central claims" is "still embryonic but growing." That confessional note warms me up enough to say that apart from his idiosyncratic use of the Christian language (esp. his holophrastic use of "Spirit") & his dogmatic compassionism, his book shows him to be a careful, responsible, fair-minded biblical scholar. (Holophrastic: His Subject Index has "Spirit," but you'll not find "Father" or "God" or "King" or "Lord" or "Judge/judgment" [though some of these are in his text, as my comprehensive index shows; e.g., "king" 4x, though never capitalized; "Lord" capitalized once].)

11 I take heart from Borg's calling Jaroslav Pelikan's JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES (Yale/95; H&R/87 paperback) "a masterful survey of Jesus' role in culture" (17). A native Lutheran like Borg, he's never fallen into scholarly faddishness, as Borg has. From that folly he was protected from having to work his way back to his Christian roots, as Borg seems now to be doing: Pelikan never abandoned those roots, as Borg did. Borg's distortions & omissions derive, as I see it, from (1) his "nature mysticism" (rather than Christian repentance-faith) base of religious experiencing of "Spirit" & (2) his life-work situation as (apparently) never anything other than teacher in secular schools, where the atmosphere pressures "religious studies" teachers to find circumlocutions for "God" & never to refer to God pronominally (though the Goddess may be referred to as "she"). Borg usually submits to the former taboo, & (apparently) always to the latter.