

## MARCUS BORG'S NO-EASTER JESUS

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

A review of his MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME, HarperSF/94

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Instead of the "Jesus of history" (fact) / "Christ of faith" (fiction) distinction he learned in seminary (UTS, NY), this author speaks of the "Pre-Easter Jesus" / "Post-Easter Jesus." What he means, however, in plain & honest terms, is the Pre-Death Jesus & the Post-Death Jesus, since for him there is no Easter Jesus: the person Jesus of Nazareth died & remains dead.

"Many deceivers have gone out into the world" (2Jn.7 NRSV), & M.B. is, sadly, one of them--a highly successful, influential, one of them (e.g., the main speaker at the '96 UCC Mass. annual conference). "Misleader" is a good translation of the Gk. wd. here. This Thinksheet, in laying out the deception, does not accuse the author of intending to deceive. In telling the tale of his long struggle to remain a Jesus man personally as well as professionally, in detail he reveals how he managed to arrive at his present position. The means were not always honest, the end is deceitful; but he would admit neither.

Why my concern if his intentions are good? People are more apt to be "mislead" by a well- than by an ill-intentioned persuader. But why my attack? To speak what one believes true is not enough: one must clarify what that belief is, & defend it, by opposing its deniers. Truth languishes in our mainline churches because of their "being nice" subculture, which taboos the second obligation of truth-rhetoric & condemns anyone who seeks to fulfil this negative obligation, especially when the deniers are named.

1 One thing good about Marxism is that it encourages the "critical consciousness" of asking how a specimen eats. Religion experts eat off of religion dollars or government dollars. A quarter c. ago, many "death of God" experts left off the former for the latter, moving from religion institutions (churches-synagogues, church colleges, seminaries) to state institutions (state colleges/universities) or secular private institutions (foundations, etc.). Sociology of knowledge asks us to interpret specimens (people) in context. A "religious studies" teacher in a secular/state school probably shares that world's mentality, the naturalistic Enlightenment paradigm, as does Borg, who eats off our tax dollars.

For as long as government schools have had "religious studies" departments, I've known the denizens, becoming acquainted with them in countless national & area meetings of the learned societies--e.g., American Academy of Religion, Society of Biblical Literature--in which they mingle with us who eat off religion. Nice people, but committed to personal scholarship rather than to public piety (i.e., leadership in religion institutions). Those whose working context is the academy with its pretense of objectivity in truth-search (the Enlightenment illusion) see themselves as accountable to their guild-peers & responsible for living in, & furthering the interests of, **the academic mind**. Occasionally they essay to bless nonacademics with the "assured results" of their scholarship--an instance of which is the disastrous "Jesus Seminar," in which Borg was a sometime participant.

The church is acting irresponsibly when it uses religion dollars to hire these academics to lecture to the church, unless equal time is given for critical response from scholars who eat off of church dollars, i.e., church-responsible leaders. I have personal knowledge, furthermore, of damage done in some churches who've used, in Christian education, writings of those academics. To be specific: How sad some churches use Borg's book here reviewed instead of church-responsible Jesus books such as those by N.T.Wright & Luke Timothy Johnson.

2 Borg's book appeals partly because it's **confessional**-autobiographical, detailing his oh-so-common "journey" from orthodox Christianity to agnosticism (in college, under the influence of a young PhD out of the U. of Chicago Divinity School [8]) & then, in seminary, to atheism (13), the philosophy that held him through his PhD (on Jesus! 13: "I studied those parts of the tradition [of Jesus] that made sense apart from the idea of God"). Did you get that? Later, he came to see God as central for Jesus; but his PhD dissertation had bagel-shape: Jesus without God! Jesus in the naturalistic-atheistic straightjacket of unenlightened Enlightenment modernity! A beautiful-ugly instance of Cadbury's THE PERIL OF MODERNIZING JESUS.

Train up a scholar in the way he shouldn't go, & when he is old, he will not depart from it (unless, of course, he gets converted, which hasn't happened to Borg).

3 Borg wants to hold onto Jesus, & his project is to affirm him as much as can be *within the limits of* modernist-naturalistic-"scientific" **antisupernaturalism**, an Enlightenment theory now (thank God!) dissolving in the acids of "the new science" (on which see, e.g., Patrick Glynn's "Beyond the Death of God: The atheistic assumptions of modern society are being challenged by the new science--which is making many scientists distinctly uneasy," 28ff, NATIONAL REVIEW 6May96). Borg seems not uneasy, but quite comfortable, with the old science, to which he made his peace by surrendering "miracle," including the supernatural resurrection of Jesus. I studied under the formative "naturalistic theists," who were determined to preserve God within their antisupernaturalism. "Process theology" is another name for this failed view, now abandoned by many of its first generation of converts, e.g. fellow-student Huston Smith, who's now back into supernaturalism. Borg is pushing something passé, but the unlearned think he's preaching something new & fresh.

"Supernaturalism"? It's the belief that the reach of reason is limited--that there are reaches of reality unavailable, *ever*, to our powers to concatenate (to make sense by adding one thing to another). The premise of science is that there's continuity between the human mind & "the world" (a fact illumined by the biblical-theological doctrine of creation, a doctrine uniquely able to bring modern science to birth): the premise of **scientism** (as in Darwin, Marx, Freud) is that reason & reality are coeval & coterminous: when it comes to anything "beyond[supra-] nature," there's no there there (as Gertrude Stein said about a little town she'd visited). The rule of reason makes the rules, which all--including gods/goddesses/angels/demons--must abide by. The fact is that reality is monistic ("ontological continuity," metaphysicians say), though poets & saints may experience aspects of it as dualistic fiction ("epistemological discontinuity"--e.g., the Creator as both beyond & within creation)....Sorry about that if this seems far from Borg: it isn't. For him, "the Jesus of history" is fact, "the Christ of faith" is fiction created by the early Church. In seminary he was taught, & came to believe, that the gospels' Story "was not historically true" (9), "the divine savior who knew himself to be the Son of God and who offered up his life for the sins of the world....Jesus would not have known any of those things about himself" (10). "The Christ of faith" is "what Jesus became in the faith of the early communities in the decades after his [sic!] death" (NB: not "resurrection," or even "death and resurrection"). What critical scholarship reveals is "a sharp discontinuity" between (historical) fact & (theological) fiction. Dead men tell no tales, as the old saw goes; & Jesus said nothing after they killed him.

What's so sad about this old defunct modernism is its (1) survival & (2) presentation today as not old but new. By 60 years ago, I'd heard it all over & over again. Walking down a corridor of Garrett Seminary 54 years ago, I overheard through an open classroom door a lecturer pushing D.F. Strauss' Jesus of history / Christ of faith distinction;\* I peeked in, & it was Edgar Sheffield Brightman, one of the second generation of Boston personalists. No wonder the liberal Protestant preachers of the 1920s & '30s, including mine, had left off preaching religion &, as Kirkegaard a century earlier had predicted they would, gone to teaching ethics, as Borg does....\*In his LIFE OF JESUS, more than a century earlier!

4 Borg's simple-minded **reductionism**, in the course of his intellectual formation toward & in his PhD, was to peel away from Jesus everything religious, leaving only a preacher of compassion, a feminine virtue, for which he was not executed: he was executed for preaching a masculine message, viz. judgment. When some years after his PhD the philosophy of gender feminism arose out of the politics of civil feminism, Borg's compassionism fitted hand-in-glove with it. He's not socio-historically sophisticated enough to recognize what Peter Berger has often remarked (most recently in June-July/96 FIRST THINGS, 8), viz. the moral horrors compassion-commitment produces in history because of "original sin."

In his compassionism, Borg is a replay of Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life" (both in odd, oblique relation to Rome's present "ethic of life"). S. ended the "first quest" for the historical Jesus, the quest that tried & (Schweitzer

showed) failed to separate Jesus-"history" from Christ-"myth," facts from theological elaborations. Though Schweitzer rejected the conclusion of Reimarus (d.1768) that the Christian movement was a hoax, he could not believe in Jesus' resurrection & managed to find no theological significance in his death. What could be rationally affirmed, he asserted, was the enduring worth of Jesus' prophetic, world-denying ethics, on the basis of which the great scholar-musician abandoned "the world" & gave the rest of his life to hands-on (medical) compassion in black Africa.

Anything wrong with compassion? "Compassionate intelligence" is "the moral heart of the truly human society" (my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT, 85). But (218f) "exercise continuous critical judgment as to the devotional and ethical content of feelings and behavior claiming the name 'compassion'--because, cut off from worship and integrity, compassion is falsely so called, for it is nothing but sentimentality. God disappears into 'Compassion,' which then is the highest virtue and value, the central and supreme good....without repentance from your unrighteousness and without return to the One who alone is worthy of worship."

5 What was the foil for Borg's compassionism? His published (Mellen Press) PhD dissertation contrasts the good "ethics of compassion" (allegedly Jesus') from the bad "ethics of purity" (the priests'). Like so many academic religionists, he has an **antihieratic** bias, a prejudice against institutional religion (whose leaders eat off the [voluntary] collection plates, whereas he eats off of [government coerced] taxes). In a too-neat distinction, he says the priests focused on religion & Jesus focused on ethics. He utterly repudiates, as "simply incredible" (31), the NT's use of OT priestcraft (the sacrificial system) to illumine Jesus' death as God's atonement for human sin--even though this is, for the NT & canonical-historical Christianity, the central analogy for understanding how & why God was in Christ (on which see the great text, 2Cor.4-5, ending thus [NRSV]: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"). This disdain appeared shockingly in a statement made at the Re-imaging Conference (Nov/94) by Delores Williams, currently a prof. in Borg's seminary: "No man dying on a cross is ever going to do me any good."....Borg 15: Jesus "was an advocate of the politics of compassion in a social world dominated by the politics of purity"--the thesis of his PhD dissertation.

6 As early as 1930 I was warned not to go to college lest I "lose my religion." A few decades later, Borg did, & did, & thinks losing his religion was a Good Idea, which he recommends. He still seems unaware that one may lose one's "precritical naiveté" (6, quoting Paul Ricoeur) without losing one's religion: I did. He then got stuck in the metaphoric "second naiveté" & (as far as one can judge from the book) has not managed to press on to the transmetaphoric third naiveté (in which some metaphors are grasped as no longer heuristic [a reaching out for meaning] but revelational [God's reaching saving truth down-in-through certain metaphors & so privileging them beyond optionality]). I pray for his progress in truth & grace.

7 Since the 1950s, "journeying" has become a tired metaphor for a person's spiritual process through stages of un/faith. Various streams of the human-potential movement & New Age & pop psychotherapy jabbered away about one's "spiritual journey," & Ira Progoff got some of the better-heeled into "journaling" (recalling & recording one's inner life-process). Borg loves the metaphor & uses it especially for (1) the three journeys (Exodus, Return from Exile, & one's personal experience of the sacred), & (2) three ways of looking at Jesus (the fideistic way [as savior], the moralistic way [as teacher], & the empirical way [as fellow-journeyer in "transformation"]-2-3; only the third getting his unreserved approbation).

8 Of the derivative sources of religious knowledge/authority--scripture, tradition, reason, the living church, personal experience--Borg with Schleiermacher (father of religious modernism, d.1834) clearly gives the prize to the last. S.'s "feeling of absolute dependence" becomes Borg's feeling of relationship (17): "the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with **that** to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit...a relationship that involves one in a journey of transformation." He admiringly quotes J.D.Crossan as having answered "Do you believe Jesus is the Son

of God?" with a flow of obscurational metaphor--titles such as here Borg himself uses (including "the risen living Christ," which one must not be misled into believing Borg would affirm separate from the "God...Spirit" flow). The rhetorical ploy here is to escape seeming to underbelieve by a lexical burst giving the impression of overbelief (believing everything, instead of believing nothing or disbelieving something). Borg's devious equivocations betray him as dishonest to language: how could we trust him to be honest to God?

9 In the above §, did you notice that God was not "he" (or "she") but (as I emphasized by boldfacing) **"that"** (impersonal)? Sanskrit has he, she, "(s)at" (personal [he or she]), that (impersonal); but in Eng., "that" is always impersonal. "That" is improper for the biblical God, who pronominally is always "he"; but it's proper in referring to Borg's experience, into which the deity seems absorbed, as in New Age's "nature mysticism," by which expression he characterizes his religious experience (14): "I realized that *God* does not refer to a supernatural being 'out there'. ...*God* refers to the sacred at the center of existence," though "not to be identified" with creation/creature. 15: "God--the sacred, the holy, the numinous"--is "real." But Borg's nature-mysticism "God" should not be confused with the Bible's repentance-demanding God, before whom we stand guilty of (among other things) failure to praise & thank the Patron-Father above us (Borg gives no evidence of understanding this basic social structure underlying & informing scripture). He preaches cheap grace: Since folks today don't feel guilty, they don't need a savior; but they feel trapped, so need a liberator--& lonely, so need a friend (acceptor, affirmer). No whiff in Borg of the truth that the Good News helps people see that they are bad news, that they are guilty whether or not they've sensed it before hearing the gospel. Instead of entering into the Kingdom of God through the painful gate of repentance, he thinks to climb over the wall to get in free ("a thief and a bandit," Jn.10.1 NRSV). His radical deconstruction/reconstruction of Christianity has produced **a new religion** conformable to (Christopher Lasch) "the culture of narcissism." Jesus is his Barbie doll (note the gender) whom he dresses up to please himself, rejecting his orthodox Christian clothing (117: "Perhaps more than any other part of the developing tradition, 'christological' passages must be systematically suspect" as deriving not from Jesus but from the Christian community).

10 Barbie: Borg is a darling of gender feminists for his crowd-pleasing suppressing of the masculine in deity & elevation of the feminine. (Crowd: The current Friendship Press/UCC catalog has, as authors, 14 women & 2 men). World-wide, dominance (from Lat. *dominus*, lord) is the outstanding feature of male sex-attraction for females (63 NW 3June96). But gender feminists, a minuscule minority of the world's women, hate it, as does Borg, who rejects the Father/Son trinitarian terminology because (109) it's from a "patriarchal and androcentric culture." 63n (on L.6.36): "I have used the gender-inclusive word 'God' instead of 'Father' [though he fails to note that "God" is masc., the fem. being "Goddess"]." He claims to preach **gender complementarity**, but he leans fem. too far & falls over into gender reversal, Jesus as feminine. As this is the book's cleverest, slipperiest performance, let's see how he manages it....

....He reifies (makes-real) Sophia, using dominical (Jesus) authority for it (102, ref. to L.7.33-35): "Jesus speaks of himself as a child of Sophia." Sophia is (same p.) the "personification of God in female form." 107: "For Paul, Jesus is the embodiment of Sophia." 108 (on the Prolog of Jn.): "Jesus is the incarnation of Sophia [here identified with the Logos], Sophia become flesh."

Now get this cutie (109): "For early Christianity [Synoptics, Paul, Jn.], Jesus was the child of Abba [Father], & the child of Sophia--the Son of the Father and the incarnation of Sophia." (That's right: Jesus had three parents, two divine & one human. It's a tough move, but gender egalitarianism must be forced on heaven as well as on earth.) By using extracanonical Jewish materials, Borg manages to confer ontological (reality) status on Hokmah-Sophia-Wisdom (feminine, though in the NT wisdom is masculine, Jesus as "the wisdom of God")...."Sophia" is in the Index, but not the overwhelmingly more common biblical word "Lord."

11 "Resurrection" is an empty term, only once in the Index. 94: "I have no idea if Jesus saw the afterlife as including the survival and awareness of one's personal identity."....Don't be fooled by "Lord" in the book's penultimate ¶.