

THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY BY MARCUS J BORG: A FIRST RESPONSE

By Jonathan Hogarth

For those who come by this essay incidentally may I say that it is written in response to kind relatives sending me a copy of the above book. It touches on elements that provoked me to respond, which I take it is one of Borg's intentions as he writes controversially about what he terms an 'emerging paradigm' of modern Christianity.

Initially it needs to be made clear that Borg seems to be responding to a very conservative brand of North American Christianity, namely fundamentalist evangelicalism. However his conclusions have far wider implications for the church as a whole.

BORG'S BASIC PREMISES; THE THREE "R"'S

Marcus Borg seems to have three basic premises that underline most of what he says.

Rationality: "Rational" for Borg means adhering to modern norms of rationality. So he imagines a modern western rational human as that for which his idea of a Christian life must be acceptable. As we shall see in further detail this leads to such doctrinal directions as the Bible as having only human authority. Also Borg sees Christ being almost solely human rather than the God and man of the scriptures, which in turn leads to a substantial reducing of his identity and his work as redeemer, an almost total politicising of Christ's death on the cross, and rejection of the substance of the notion of salvation being on any sense other worldly. In addition Borg rejects the idea of paradox existing in Christian belief. So for example in the doctrines of revelation, faith, grace, election, spiritual rebirth, and many others the doctrines are massaged to be acceptable to the rational person he has envisaged. This is typically liberal in method (though Borg dislikes the word) whereby an entity or concept is imposed from outside the tradition and the data made to conform to it or be done away with.

Relevance: Related closely to Borg's notion of the modern rational person is his desire that everything embraced in Christian tradition be relevant. So, for example, as with liberal scholars who preceded him, the supernatural is the first casualty. So supernatural events such as miracles are treated as historical, metaphorical and/or sacramental elements of the tradition which as a whole is a metaphor of a life lived for God. Here I point out that none of these three crucial words used to describe this tradition are used in their normal way. In fact he seems to use these words as adjectives that all give him room to move. He perceives that these words are non-literal descriptions of doctrines and practices in the church which give him room to breathe. The question is whether what he is breathing is the Spirit of Christ or his modern rationalism. At

best they are infused with meaning he perceives as acceptable to his modern rational person. I will return to specific examples in their context below.

Relational: Marcus Borg puts a great emphasis on the Christian life being a relationship with God. For him we are all in a relationship with God from birth. Living in the Christian tradition enriches that already existing relationship with God. We humans, he says, do all have a sense of living “East of Eden” and of wanting to come back but that is just a psychological pathway in life that we all take as we mature. Like the Bible itself, like Jesus, the tradition is a metaphor of what living for God looks like. It is one among many equally valid metaphors Borg draws from other religions.

In addition to the above overview it may help at the outset to outline further the object of Borg’s criticism, namely what he terms “The Early Paradigm” of Christianity. This contrasts with what he terms “The Emerging Paradigm” which is an overview of Christianity that he hopes to facilitate through his work. The latter cannot be described in advance. Its foundations emerge as Borg’s treatment of central doctrines emerges. However we can summarise his concerns about the early paradigm of Christian interpretation, the more traditional one.

Marcus Borg’s interest in the modern rational person and what such a person can accept without compromising intellectual credibility has not only led to him jettisoning much that has been traditionally believed. It has also influenced his notion of the shape of the faith in the minds of those to whom he attributes belief in the early paradigm.

Borg’s recurring description of the chief characteristic of holders to the early paradigm is that for them their belief/faith is in literal facts rather than in a relationship with God. So for him the “internal logic” of this type of faith is that it has to believe certain facts about Jesus in order to be saved. “Believing” he says is the central requirement for such Christians. Borg believes this is a modern development, and emphasis. Strangely he also believes such an emphasis somehow compromises the notion that faith is a relationship with God. However as I understand it, for orthodox Christians, having faith has always been a relationship given by God’s grace and founded on an understanding of literal/factual truths that come primarily from Scripture.

Whilst Borg is right that conservative ideas such as the idea that the Bible is inerrant, or its authority infallible are only a couple of hundred years old, it is problematic to say that the literal/factual interpretation of the Bible is as modern. Our church fathers in the first four or five centuries spent enormous care opposing heresies with careful exegesis of the Bible and corresponding articulation of doctrines enshrined in our creeds and faith documents. Whilst there are elements of these we do not all agree with, hence we have denominational differences, yet it can hardly be argued that they were not based on a literal/factual understanding of the Bible. These fathers of the church preserved such central doctrines as the human and divine natures of

Christ, the resurrection of the body, the divine authority of scripture and many others. These primarily emerged from believing and interpreting the facts in the Bible.

It should also be said the so called "literal-factual" belief of many millions over the years has not been in contrast to a belief in a relational understanding of their faith, as Borg claims, but in fact has caused it. For many the belief in facts, often heard in preaching has led to a genuine spiritual relationship with God in Christ based on forgiveness and actually experienced new life.

PRINCIPAL TOPICS ADDRESSED BY BORG:

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

Borg questions whether the authority of the Bible is in any sense divine. For him it is a human response to God. He describes as an historical element of the life lived for God coming from the Judeo-Christian heritage. What he means by this is not historical in the normal sense of a record of events and words that occurred or were interpreted at a specific time, but historical in the sense that they are part of the history of the development of the Christian faith as we know it. This may seem a small difference but not when you consider how lightly Borg sits to the question of whether the events actually happened or not. This is not to say that I believe every event recorded actually happened as the fundamentalists Borg often seems to be addressing often seem to. But it questions the habitual usage of the word historical in Borg's discussion. For him it sometimes means dated and often means out of date!

Borg similarly uses the word metaphorical for how he feels the Bible functions in the life of the church. He says this means "more not less", but his use of metaphor actually reduces its meaning because as I will show, his metaphor has lost its primary reference, a crucial element of the use of religious metaphor. Of course this is just what Borg wants because he needs room to breathe the air of his rationalistic attempt to soften the divine authority of the Bible and he thinks the word metaphor to describe its function gives him that room.

In some instances stories and events in the Bible are to be interpreted metaphorically. For instance the sense of the books of Job and Jonah is not greatly affected by whether the events portrayed actually happened. Further if the metaphorical or symbolic elements of these books is overlooked a lot is lost in translation so to speak. They are at least metaphorical descriptions of real human experience. But the same cannot be said of the Bible as a whole nor of its overall function or authority. Sometimes the metaphorical interpretation provides an added layer of meaning. So for example Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 are summary verses of Jesus' ministry. In between them are 10 words and 10 deeds/miracles of Jesus. Metaphorically this adds meaning to Matthew's interpretation of Jesus as the new Moses. Or take an example Borg actually uses to try and show that metaphor gives more meaning than what he terms the literal-factual

approach. He parodies the literal approach to the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine at the marriage at Cana of Galilee (John 2). He says it leads to seeing Jesus as a wonder worker with the power of God and as “evidence” (his emphasis) that Jesus was who he says he was. He contrasts this with his metaphorical interpretation that leads to seeing here “the mystical marriage of heaven and earth, of God as lover and us as the beloved of God. “The story of Jesus is about this” says Borg.

This is a good example of how Borg reduces the meaning of the passage and indeed the event recorded by trying to resort solely to the use of metaphor as his interpretative tool. The story of the wedding does indeed have metaphorical elements but neither the event behind the story nor the description of it in John are remotely satisfied by a solely metaphorical interpretation. It is recorded as “the first of Jesus’ miraculous signs by which he manifested his glory” (John 2:11) . For Borg the miracles of Jesus are the community’s interpretation of the oral tradition around Jesus. So they are only metaphors. So Borg misses the crucial point in John’s gospel that this is the first literal manifestation of Jesus’ glory, a major theme in John’s gospel, albeit enhanced by the metaphorical creation by the writer John, of Jesus doing the perfect number of seven “signs”. Importantly this series of miraculous signs also leads inexorably to the conclusive and final manifestation of his glory, namely, his being literally lifted up on the cross. Yes there is a lot of metaphorical theological work here. But reduce it to just the metaphor and it becomes inspiring literature. Not enough to change lives the way the story of the cross has. In fact this is the direction Borg wants to take us. He doesn’t see the death of Jesus as meaning much more than having been a political inevitability given the way Jesus behaved! I shall return to this below.

Borg misses the fact that biblical metaphors take their meaning from their prime referents which occur in their narrative context. Because for him the Bible doesn’t contain any divine authority he needs to relativise its authority to conform to his modern rational framework in which it has but human authority. So we see his use of words such as metaphorical, historical and sacramental all to some degree overlapping in Borg to express a less than divine meaning. What he misses is that narrative is a more fundamental biblical genre than metaphor and that the referents of metaphor are contained in the biblical narratives. So for example the references to spiritual renewal as a new exodus in the prophets are often metaphorical but take their power from the narrative of the original exodus. As a further example if you were trying to tell someone what you know of Jonathan Hogarth you would not get far using only metaphors. You could say his thoughts are often a dogs breakfast, or his golf driving is a game of chance. You could use them to enlarge on some of his characteristics but not to describe him. For this you need a narrative. So it is with God. No metaphor is adequately descriptive of God without a narrative out of which the actual content of its referents emerges. Lots of flowery religious poetry has been written . Take for example George Harrison’s well known song My Sweet Lord. Lovely words but it is not

about worship of the Christian God but Krishna! No religious metaphor makes adequate sense or call on us outside its narrative context.

Almost all we read in the Bible makes sense because of the primary narratives of the Pentateuch and the gospels. And the work of the Holy Spirit was hardly mentioned in the gospels because it required a narrative of his work to make sense of it, a narrative provided in the Acts of the Apostles. Metaphors of Christian truth require such narratives and if they are loosed from them then their interpretation is just an open slather. Borg's understanding of metaphor quite simply cannot do the job he requires of it. For that he needs narrative, but he rejects this because his received narratives tie him to an interpretation he wants to sit loose to.

GOD:

Borg claims that supernatural theism and panentheism (the notion of God being in everything) have been held side by side in the world's great religions for centuries. Leave aside the observation that Buddhists don't worship God as a sole existing entity, and Hindus have a plethora of deities, it is hard to see what meaning such a statement has for them. In addition Muslims have a deistic view of God whereby he is "out there", distant and remote but running the world according to his will.

Orthodox Christianity has for many centuries held a tension between God's transcendence and his immanence, that is, between his out-there-ness and his presence. Transcendence does not mean out there in the sense of far away as Borg seems to indicate. It is more that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Most importantly he is One, a unity. But he is also immanent. This does not mean panentheistic, in everything, as Borg explains it. Panentheism in that sense leads to a syncretism of, or plethora of gods in a pantheon. This is the world of the Hindu and of the animist who has been parodied as worshipping a god under every rock and tree. It cannot do as a description of God, over and against, or as an alternative to supernatural theism which Borg holds is the erroneous dominant view of Western Christianity. It is his belief that since the Enlightenment scientific knowledge has distanced God from us. This won't do because God's transcendence and immanence, paradoxical as this may be, must be held in tension together to do justice to the orthodox belief. To put this another way God's immanent gracious presence takes its meaning from his transcendence. Picture Jesus, the baby, in a world sustained by the Creator God. Or envision Jesus metaphorically described as sitting at the right hand of the Father whilst present in and to us in the person of the Holy Spirit. Orthodox Christians believe the truth behind both these descriptions to be true. God is both Father and Son and Spirit at the same time in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, a paradox unable to be fully explained but experienced as true. God does not have to be rationalised as panentheistic, in everything, to be relevant and close to us. He is immanently involved with us through his Spirit

who applies to us the benefits of the finished work of Jesus. This is an experienced truth that agrees with what Jesus promised. Jesus comes to us in the power of the Spirit with the authority of Almighty God.

JESUS:

Borg begins his treatment of the person of Jesus by stating that the traditional view of him is out of date. So the image of him that emphasises his identity as Son of God, Light of the World, Bread of Life, promised Messiah, who rose from the dead and who will return, and which sees his death as having saving significance in the sense that he died for our sins “doesn’t work” for millions of people. It leads to a view of Christianity that is exclusive, the only true religion, and for Borg this is unpersuasive and even a barrier to many people’

Notice that Borg’s reason for moving from the above descriptions of Jesus which are part of the earlier paradigm is that it is unpersuasive to many millions’. Once again we see one of his foundational values to the fore. His modern rational person needs a faith that is rational to him or her.

Like many modern scholars Borg also makes a lot of the distinction between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus. The pre-Easter Jesus, the one who lived and died, for Borg did not have attached to him the Christological titles that are the product of later post-Easter communities’ confessions of faith. These are the product of post-Easter Christian experience and tradition, not the language of Jesus and literal/factual. For Borg these titles and the language of the supernatural events attaching to the gospel records of Jesus’ life are metaphorical. He believes that if taken literally or factually such language if attached to the pre-Easter Jesus makes him not a real person, not “a credible human being”. The pre-Easter Jesus was for Borg a Jewish mystic, healer, wisdom teacher, social prophet and movement initiator. As such he is lost for Borg as he “becomes a divine figure of the past.” As such his humanity is lost for the sake of the traditional emphasis on his divinity. In fact Borg thinks if we don’t separate the pre-Easter Jesus from the post-Easter then we lose both in the past as we await his second coming.

What Borg is saying is that Jesus is a living figure of the present in the experience of Christians and in the developing tradition of their faith. That language of faith is primarily metaphorical, historical in the sense of a product of those times (late first century), and sacramental, a bearer of the sacred for those communities. This leads to him being able to justify a substantial relativising of the language of the New Testament about Jesus, and especially about his redemptive work, as we shall see below. In other words for our time, especially since the development of historical scholarship, we are in just another era of interpretation in the development of Christology, another period of experience and tradition in which the old views of Jesus which include a so-

called emphasis on his divinity just are not intellectually acceptable any more. They were a product of the then communities' confessions of faith, rather than being Jesus' own view of himself, according to Borg. This is strange logic. What if they were descriptions and titles of Jesus packed with theological meaning, with which he was totally familiar. In fact there is little doubt this is so. Jesus had far greater understanding of the Old Testament than Borg gives him credit for and most of the Christological titles and Messianic descriptions of him and his work come from the language of the Old Testament. Further Jesus grew in his understanding of his calling from these scriptures. They were profoundly authoritative for him. To suggest that if Jesus knew these things about himself renders him less than truly human, does not make sense. The Christian faith holds he was divine, that he progressively grew in the knowledge of his divinity and of its full implications as Messiah. But he was totally human, filled with the life of God. Yes this is paradoxical but not intellectually inconceivable.

Borg's view that "for our time" historical scholarship is particularly relevant seems to mean that because Borg understands the post-Easter Jesus as the Jesus of Christian experience and tradition it is a developing picture of Jesus. So the New Testament represents several phases of that development as far as its view of Jesus is concerned, and more, these phases are not normative nor authoritative for later generations. This opens the way for him to make a case for the relevance of his emerging paradigm which in his preface he refers to as "progressive Christianity" a title which by implication is pejorative of the traditional or early paradigm.

I believe one of the reasons Borg can make such a clear distinction between the pre- and post-Easter Jesus, and so clearly associate divinity Christology with the communities that began to emphasise this later in the first century, is because he has a very understated view of the work of the Holy Spirit.

At one stage he says that when we do not make the distinction between the two Jesuses of modern scholarship, "we not only lose the former; we also in a sense lose the latter. Jesus becomes a divine figure of the past. For 35 years more or less he was here. But after Easter, he ascended into heaven. He will come again someday, but in the meantime he is not here. And thus we lose the living Jesus as a figure of the present who is still here, still an experiential reality today."

This passage underlines how little Borg considers the place of the Holy Spirit in the Christian heritage. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus, IS the reality that links the so-called pre-Easter Jesus with the so-called post-Easter Jesus. If you examine closely the lives of Peter, James and John, for example, in the gospels, in their writings, and especially in the Acts of the Apostles, let alone in the handed down traditions of their later lives, there is an enormous consistent change in all of them. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. These New Testament records were

contemporaneous with the period Borg maintains the development of the post-Easter view of Jesus took place with its no longer required emphasis on Jesus' divinity. Paul's transformation was the work of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus. The Acts is Luke's testimony to the activity of the Holy Spirit, often equated there with Jesus' presence, in the life of the early church. Did Peter and Paul do miracles by that Spirit's power? What possible metaphor could you apply to take away the literal; factual record of Peter raising a cripple or of the miracles of healing Paul did in Jesus' name? This is the living Jesus revealing that He is alive in the church.

Borg ignores the work of the Holy Spirit in this context. He calls Jesus a figure of the present who is one with God and therefore Lord. But this is never explained. What does a figure of the present mean? For Borg it does not mean the Holy Spirit's presence, who is Jesus alive. For him it means a figure that is a symbol, a metaphor of, a life full of God.

THE DEATH OF CHRIST:

Borg maintains that the interpretation of Jesus' as being "for our sins" is post-Easter. It is, he believes, "post-Easter and thus retrospective." This is an odd position to hold. Firstly it dismisses the theme of the suffering servant of God, which climaxes in Isaiah 53, wherein a substitutionary sufferer for our sins is envisioned. This points beyond the sacrificial system of the Old Testament with its repeated sacrifices of animals. It is Messianic. The narratives of the Old Testament make it plain that redemptive sacrifice is needed to expiate sin and its effects. It is these narratives that give meaning to the central sacrifices such as the Passover and covenant rituals. Paul takes over such images and descriptions and sees Christ as THE sacrifice for us (Ephesians 5:2, Romans 3:25). Even the ancient story of Job, a man as seemingly close to sinless as humans can get, posits faith in a redeemer coming. So Borg is not just dismissing the redemptive role of Jesus' death as a post-Easter retrospective, secondary and unauthoritative interpretation. He also thereby ignores the long established narratives into which the record of Jesus' death is seen as fulfilment.

It is hard to see how Borg can disregard the centrality of the notion of the redeeming death of Christ. That was established very soon after Jesus' death. In Paul's writings it is very hard to see how this emphasis could be an element in the confession of the post-Easter community rather than a result of Paul's experience of Christ interpreted by his profound understanding of the Old Testament. Paul's theology was his own, not the Christian communities' confession. It is highly likely that Paul was able to articulate the theology of the death of Christ so powerfully because he had a number of years away from the early churches and thus had time to reflect.

In his book "Paul: An Outline of His Theology" by Herman Ridderbos he writes about the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ about which he says:

“Materially it is found so frequently that one must consider it as pertaining to the central content of the Pauline kerygma.”

It is therefore no small matter for Borg to dismiss the “for our sins” interpretation of Jesus’ death. It ignores the link of Paul’s theology to Jesus. This seems to be credible for Borg because he does not think sin is very important in the modern scheme of things. The self-centredness we all experience is a part of being human. For him there is nothing of the affront to God that sin is nor of the separation from God that it causes, nor of the need for it to be expiated in order for us to grow in a relationship with God. For Borg it is a small element in the human predicament. But for Jesus it was central. The synoptic gospels all record Jesus starting his preaching with the word “repent”. In the Acts Peter and Paul both encourage listeners to repent in their initial response to preaching about Jesus. This cannot be post-Easter retrospection. How could a post-Easter community equate healing a cripple with forgiving sin if there was not a precedent in Jesus’ life (Mark 2:9). It just would not be conceived of.

I believe the relativising of the importance of the traditional view of sin for Borg is possible because he allows other aspects of the human problem of living “East of Eden” with a longing to return, to be as important to him as the problem of our sin. So whereas in the Bible THE problem we have is our sin, for Borg this is not so, hence the significance of Jesus death is not primarily to help us overcome it. We need to link this to Borg’s emphasis that we are already in a relationship with God, so we do not need the death of Christ to overcome sin; this despite Jesus own view and that of the Bible as a whole that we are NOT all naturally in such a relationship with God that is so close that we would call it personal. This comes when Jesus deals with our sin personally through faith in him. This is conversion and the experience of being born again.

I think Borg emphasises two aspects too much in his understanding of this experience. He does acknowledge that conversions take place suddenly but in general he overemphasises that being born again is a process of life rather than something that God does in us when we respond wholeheartedly to the gospel message in repentance. In addition to this he overstates the nature of spiritual renewal as a part of the process of human maturing. Both these emphases fit his humanising of the faith and his general belittling of the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. When Jesus said to Simon Peter “a person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean” (John 13:10), he was not primarily commenting on first century bathing habits whereby before someone left home for dinner they would bath then at the door of the host’s house wash their feet again. He was making a spiritual allusion by metaphor. This is clear from the immediate context in which he goes on to say “And you are clean, though not every one of you” intimating Judas. John immediately clarifies this with the words “For he knew who was going to betray him.” My point here is that spiritually few would doubt Jesus is referring to the born again experience of spiritual renewal, using a metaphor made plain because its

primary referent is clear in the narratives of the gospels.. For Jesus repentance was primarily a once off wholehearted response to Him though of course once having so bathed in God's Spirit we will need to regularly 'wash' our feet.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

This leads us to the ethical section of Borg's work. This he delineates in four sections.

- Born Again : A New Heart
- The Kingdom of God: The Heart of Justice
- Thin Places: Opening the Heart
- Sin and Salvation: Transforming the Heart

Born Again: A New Heart:

Borg acknowledges the centrality of the metaphor 'born again' in the New Testament. However his principal interest in it is stated as the possibility of it being a bridge between conservative/fundamentalist Christianity and what he terms "mainline Christianity." Apart from the obvious criticism that what he has previously termed "the emerging paradigm" is by no means "mainline", there is the observation that he removes the biblical phrase "born again" from the sense that its narrative context in the New Testament gives it, transforming it into a much wider metaphor that has universal religious meaning. After explaining the meaning of the "born again" phrase in the gospel of John especially on the lips of Jesus in John 3:16, he links it to the dying and rising language in the other synoptic gospels and the writings of Paul. He then concludes that "the way" that Jesus incarnates' in John and the rest of the New Testament is the "path of death and resurrection."

However this conclusion is oddly interpreted when he goes on to say that this path has "nothing to do with believing doctrines about Jesus" but "it is the way....incarnate in Jesus." He further adds that this "is the way spoken of by all the major religions" and that "life and death are the incarnation of a universal way known in all the enduring religions."

Two things stand out here. First, there is Borg's parody of so called conservative Christians. In my experience these are not people who are essentially Christian because they believe doctrines about Jesus. They do so but this is not what characterises them as Christian. In fact they have come to know Jesus through conversion which happened by God's grace when they heard about Jesus, repented, and gave their lives to Jesus. This happens when one takes Jesus at his word and trusts him. The incredible transformation that one sees in the early Christians and indeed which one continues to see in many Bible believing people's lives today are not the exception to the rule but the rule. These changes were given them by God, in Jesus and by the power of His Spirit. There is no other adequate explanation given the spiritual nature if such changes. These transformations

certainly were not and could not be brought about by understanding Jesus as “the way of dying and rising as in every enduring religion” as Borg would have us believe. This is a prime example of how Borg so widens the scope of his use of metaphor as an interpretative tool that he not only removes it from its biblical context, but feels free to fill it with content foreign thereto. This is a repetitive aspect of his work in this book. In fact his use of metaphor, sacrament, and even the word “historical” are all often used to relativise the received tradition and mould it to be able to hold the inventive reinterpretations he so seeks to become normative for his “emerging paradigm”.

How can Borg unite Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians in a “way” that is universal? The universality of Jesus “way” of dying and rising is not universal because it is supposed to be seen in every major religion, but because every human needs Jesus, and only Jesus, to touch them spiritually (bringing new birth) and to daily enable them by His Spirit to live a new life for him. The logic of Borg’s universalism is ultimately that there is no bedrock truth in religion except this vague metaphor of the way that he finds in all of them.. However in fact there is nothing in any other religion than Christianity that even approaches the truth that God mercifully gave His Son to die to expiate human sin, and that through that Son’s risen life and Spirit empowers believers to live for Him.

Borg adds that “when the Christian path is seen as utterly unique, it is suspect...But when Jesus is seen as the incarnation of a path that is universally spoken of elsewhere, the path we see in Him has great credibility.” This illustrates how hard it is for Borg to accept the traditional doctrine of the uniqueness of Jesus and the paradox of His human/divine nature which is the fundamental basis upon which He is able to die redemptively. It is incredible to me that a scholar of Borg’s ability could come to such an unfounded and contradictory conclusion. Of course a further contradiction with the evidence is that none of the religions he unites in his metaphor accept his thinking. Most of their adherents would find it utterly offensive.

Finally Borg wants us to think of being born again as an intentional process “one of an ongoing deepening relationship with God” in whom , he quotes from Paul in the Acts, “we live and move and have our being.” In fact this is taking Paul out of context. Paul in using that phrase was quoting a pagan poet of his time in order to communicate with his hearers. But Borg is using it to advance his notion that God is panentheistic (in everything) as his basis for holding that we are all from birth in a relationship with God. So he believes that paying attention to this already existing relationship transforms us. He believes there is evidence of this in mainline churches, and that this is evidence of his “emerging paradigm” taking root. This is pure fantasy. In most mainline churches there is a crisis of attendance whereas there is a worldwide growth in churches that preach the gospel especially in North America.

The Kingdom of God: The heart of justice

His chapter contains a helpful explanation of God's passion for justice, an aspect of Christianity often neglected or undervalued. Particularly has this been so in conservative circles and in the "earlier paradigm" that Borg is keen to point out "no longer works" for many Christians. So conservatives can learn a lot from this chapter.

The chapter looks at the nature of the Kingdom of God, especially its political aspect. Within this framework he explains aspects of the lordship of Christ, early perceptions of empire as in the Rome of New Testament times, and the political meaning of the cross and more particularly the death of Jesus. Borg's conclusion is that:

"the cross is both personal and political. It embodies the path of personal transformation, of being born again by dying and rising with Christ; and it indicts the domination systems of the world. Good Friday and Easter have a political meaning, even as they are both more than political."

Borg rightly encourages growth in "consciousness raising" which he sees as the process to being better informed about the political relevance of God's passion for justice and of Christianity as a reflection of this. For Borg this process addresses unjust social systems and how they affect people's lives. So, for example he mentions racism, sexism, and economic systems or structures that oppress or discriminate. These are examples of Borg's earlier encouragement to exercise intentionality in our Christian lives i.e. aspects often overlooked that require specific focus and energy if anything is to change.

The above discussion leads logically to Borg's chapter on Christian practice (though in the book he intersperses these two with chapters on "Thin Places: opening the heart" and "Sin and Salvation: the transformation of the heart" to which I shall briefly return below.)

The Heart of the Matter: practice

By practice Borg explains that he means practices "the means by which we live the Christian life." So he lists the things many Christians would take as fairly typical of those committed Christians engage in. However he lists some reasons why this often does not occur as it should. First he criticises Protestantism for paying little attention to "traditional Christian practices" because at the Reformation there arose a contrast between faith and works. Whilst that is somewhat true it has to be put in context to be properly understood. The pillars of the Reformation such as Martin Luther and from my Anglican perspective in England such as Ridley, Latimer and Cranmer were at pains to reject the Roman Catholic church's loss of the primacy of grace and faith for salvation. So whilst it may appear that "works" of various kinds may have lost their place for an emphasis on "faith", this was certainly required at that time in history. It may be acknowledged that an oft held criticism of evangelicals is that they emphasise "faith" over "works." But that is by no means an admission that for them Borg's "practices" are soft-pedalled. The enormous success of evangelising the world was

largely accomplished by evangelical churches sending and supporting their missionaries. No, it is just that in discussions of the way people are “born again” they are not going to sacrifice the hard earned gains of the Reformation.

At this point again we have to take issue with Borg. He feels that the Western and Protestant emphasis on faith as “belief” meant there was a loss of emphasis on doing, which he associates with “loving God.” For him “faith is not primarily about belief, but about “loving God.” What he consistently misses here in his overall aim to unite all religious adherents in a universal way, is what Paul called “living by faith” and was at pains to explain that without which you cannot please God. There is no way you can explain what that life is in terms of practice alone. If you want to use “practice” as a sort of metaphor for the total Christian response then you once again cannot remove it from its narrative context according to which we are told by John “these things are written (i.e. the gospel narratives I have just recorded) that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). The very able and practical explanation by Borg of what a Christian life and membership of a church might contain, and of some of the areas that might need more emphasis, which he describes as “about our relationship to both God and our neighbour” will not come about without a good measure of believing faith in the living and sustaining presence of Jesus as its motivation and inspiration.

I now move back to a brief look at one of the previous chapters, namely:

Thin Places: opening the heart

The first six pages of this chapter deal with biblical descriptions of the heart and then emphasize the author’s interpretation of what “a closed heart” is. Characteristics like limited vision, lacking gratitude, forgetting God, lacking compassion, and insensitivity to injustice all typify the closed heart. Borg describes the closed heart as common to all of us because it is a natural effect of our growing self-awareness as we grow up. We become more and more self centred and this translates to closed hearts spiritually. Borg explains the common cry in the Bible for a new or clean heart and rightly says that it is overcome in us by the Spirit of God. However he goes on to claim that the Spirit of God works through “thin places.” His understanding of these loci of the Spirit’s work is OK as far as it goes but it falls very far short of telling us any of the primary places that God’s Spirit inspires us.

First what is a “thin place”? Leaning on a concept from Celtic Christianity Borg explains the idea stems from a particular way of thinking about God, namely God as “the encompassing Spirit in which everything is.” To underline this he claims kinship with the text from the Acts when Paul says “in him we live and move and have our being”. Now these ideas fit with Borg’s position that God is panentheistic (in everything, “not somewhere else”.) So it follows for him that “thin places” are where we, as it were, are able to sense God’s presence. Borg lists some of these as geographical places important for several of the major religions such as Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina and Rome. He

includes mountains, and high places of various religions and tribal Indian traditions. Music, poetry, literature, arts and dance are also listed. Finally his pen picture of thin places includes people, including Jesus, whom he describes as “a remarkable thin place.”

My criticism of this description of places where God’s veil is removed is threefold. First it is based on a view of God that is unchristian. Second, it levels the loci of where God may be found so that any number of “thin places” from a lovely sunset to Jesus are all similarly thought of. Finally it grossly understates Jesus Christ Himself as the prime locus of the Spirit of God and of our inspiration in an ongoing way.

I need not add too much to my criticism of Borg, namely that his view of God is unchristian, or that it levels the significance of the loci of where God may be found. In my earlier section on Borg’s view of God it was explained why God cannot be seen as panentheistic (in everything.) This is not the way to describe the presence of God. God is Holy, and we describe Him as transcendent because he is other than the creation. His spiritual presence is not because he is in everything (and not somewhere else as Borg curiously says) but because when we receive Christ through faith God graciously gives us His Holy Spirit. The presence Borg describes that is felt in sunrises, mountains, and other religious landmarks and places is traditionally called “general revelation”; it gives us an awareness of God through his creation that shows us our need of Him. But this is not the presence of the Spirit. That latter is granted by God’s grace when we submit in faith through repentance and faith. Borg levels all loci of the presence so that he can perpetuate his view of God as panentheistic and link all religions into his universalistic vision of all climbing up the same mountain by different ways.

I conclude these comments by saying my position is not just dry doctrine. It is the actual experience of many Christians I know and who write testimonies of their lives. We do not know God personally through his presence in creation phenomena and other religions. Through those phenomena our awareness of what Paul called “his eternal power and deity” may increase. This has the purpose of clarifying our need of Him, but that need is only met truly personally in a relationship with Jesus which is given by Him. Traditionally this is called “special revelation” which is centred in Jesus Christ, and is differentiated from general revelation.

The above criticism seems to fit with Borg’s treatment of “Thin Places and Christian Worship” which argues that various aspects of worship “can become thin places” if they are “accessible” to the people. So Borg cites music and hymns, of which he says if they are accessible, that is “they combine words that move us and music that can be easily sung” can be a thin place. Then he lists Baptism and the Eucharist which strangely he says we do not always experience as a thin place, and yet they are because “that is their defined function, they are a means of grace.” So it seems

some things are a thin place even if they are not accessible. There is something wrong with the logic here.

Next sermons, the Bible, and liturgical words “can all become thin places”; sermons because “they can open our hearts”, the Bible “if it is read well”, and liturgical words because we know them by heart and not because saying them as “an intellectual exercise in which we think about the meaning of the words”. Borg then struggles to explain how saying such liturgical words as the Lord’s prayer becomes a thin place. For him it is “not about thinking about the meaning of the words”, but “the point is to let the drone of the words that we know by heart become a thin place.” To this Borg compares saying the creed which he says is not about committing one’s intellect to the propositional truth of it, because “it is impossible for a modern thinking person to do so.” He then defines the purpose as not “propositional but sacramental.” This for Borg means we “join in the sound of the community saying these words.” Notice here the use of the word “sacramental” seems to be used to broaden the sense in which the recitation of the creed may be seen to be efficacious. But in fact given it is harnessed to contrast its efficacy with taking the actual words seriously it is a case of less not more rather than the other way round as Borg would have it.

These last example says a lot about how Borg sees God revealing himself in worship. For him it has almost nothing to do with the words we are saying, which as I have often pointed out have a specific narrative context that gives them their meaning. It is more about the feeling we have as we participate. Borg calls this a sacramental function. This illustrates a point about his philosophy I have been at pains to underline. He uses “sacramental” in a way that means function rather than meaning, just as his use of metaphor, removed as it is from its narrative context and meaning, leaves room for his interpretations of religious phenomena, that he hopes will unite all religious people. This completely misses the meaning of the structure of the liturgy, for example, which is to set out the gospel. It works not because elements of it are “accessible” but because it sets out the gospel. Ideally it is a narrative telling of the Christian gospel. Sundays have a theme from the church’s year, the hymns, readings, and sermon enlarge the themes which over a year cover “the whole counsel of God.” This part of the service builds on the heritage of reflection on the Word of God taken from the Jewish tradition of reading the Old Testament and the Psalms. To this is added the New Testament readings and the Lord’s Supper which Christianises the worship. So the whole finds its focus and fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The confession of sin comes early as we approach God or prior to the passing of the peace so that we go reconciled to the Lord’s Table. In both places it has meaning from the narrative (gospel) context of its origins.

The whole is based in the Word of God which through faith in Christ and the power of the Spirit of God nurtures us spiritually. Borg’s divorce of all this from its narrative and propositional context leaves a lot to be desired. Of course we want our worship services to be done well. But we should not think that efficacy is an adequate criterion of validity, and validity is rooted and grounded for

Christians in the meaning of the New Testament, grounded as it is in the Old Testament and fulfilled as it is in Jesus Christ the unique, risen Saviour. Paul writes to the Romans that they should offer their bodies “ as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual (or “reasonable” as per the alternate translation) worship” (NIV Bible). Interestingly the New English Bible gives the alternative reading as “which is the worship you owe as rational beings.” My point is that Borg is moving in quite the wrong direction when he wants to direct us away from using our minds to focus on meanings, and towards warm and fuzzy feelings and practices in our worship. That may unite people in a social hug at the peace, but not in adoration of God for the salvation in Christ that he has availed us with by the presence of His Spirit.

Just over 40 years ago the well known Scotsman and scholar A.M.Hunter wrote a book called “Exploring the New Testament”. Reflecting on the four “sure sayings” that Paul highlights in the letters to Timothy and Titus (the so called Pastoral Epistles) he asks what they add up to. He writes: “The worth of religion for life, the Saviourhood of Christ, the call to Christian fidelity and fortitude, the good news of God’s grace to sinners in Christ and the blessed hope of eternal life. For the earliest Christians these were among the things ‘most surely believed.’ “ He continues:

“We live in an age when....some advanced Christian theologians would like to ‘demythologise the Gospel’ and re-write its central tenets in terms which will be acceptable to sceptical, irreligious, and scientifically minded modern man. For them their doxology would seem to be ‘Glory to man in the depths of his being’; they invite us to see in Jesus ‘the man for others’; and they sum up Christian morals in ‘Love, and what you will do.’ Compare these slogans with the ‘sure words’ of the Pastorals and must we not agree with Karl Barth that this is ‘flat tyre theology.’ “ The Spirit has been taken out of it.

With little change to the fundamental thesis of Borg’s vision A.M.Hunter could well be addressing Borg’s work in his book “The Heart of Christianity.”