

The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar has attracted attention for its Scholar's Version of the New Testament, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*.¹ In it red ink is used for sayings of Jesus accepted as authentic by most of the Seminar's members: "That's Jesus!" Pink ink designates a phrase that "sure sounds like him"; grey means, "Well maybe"; and black, "There's been some mistake!" The results will startle many Catholics: ". . . only 20 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels will be printed in red or pink," and black ink engulfs "essentially all of John's gospel." In his *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*² Marcus J. Borg describes the functioning of the Seminar and its implications for Christianity. Despite some unavoidable repetitiveness—the book is a collect of articles—and some ugly writing, Borg's points are clearly, even entertainingly made. His book is an easy entry into what's happening in New Testament scholarship.

A fundamental principle of Borg's scholarly method is a high esteem for the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. He accepts as a working principle its rejection of the "primordial tradition," the widespread belief that there is a "world of Spirit" which is more real than the physical world we see and experience. As a "committed Christian," he of course allows for extraordinary figures who are paradigms of those religious experiences that have established the primordial tradition, Jesus being one among many. Borg worries, however, that an allegiance to "the truth of a particular religious system" is often "at the expense of other traditions." The effect is to remove attention from the spiritual plane, about which we can know nothing with certainty, so as to fix our attention on contemporary society. The "renaissance" in the study of the historical Jesus, for example, is made possible not by a theological or philosophical breakthrough, but by the use of archaeology, sociology, psychology, and comparative religions, in short by focusing on qualities that Jesus shared with Jews of his time and with other people who have functioned as bridges between the two levels of reality. Borg presents the current state of things well as he sketches his picture of Jesus and reports the results of the studies of his academic colleagues.

Borg claims that there is one aspect of the Enlightenment that has borne remarkable fruit over the last quarter century: the quest for the historical Jesus. Various representations of this historical Jesus—or, as Borg would have it, of the "pre-Easter Jesus—had been advanced until early in the twentieth century scholars gave the project up as impossible. The conviction that we could know nothing about the man Jesus formed the basis of theological reflection, especially that of Rudolf Bultmann in his adaptation of Christianity to existentialism. Then, in the 1950s the quest was renewed. The real Jesus, it turned out, was a wrong-headed prophet of the imminent end of time, who expected God dramatically, overtly, and quickly to intervene in history. Hans Küng, for one, used this theory as the basis of the section of Jesus in *On Being Christian*.³ Küng

¹ *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Word of Jesus*, Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, et al., edd. (San Francisco, 1993). The fifth one is the Gospel of Thomas, which the Seminar regards as equally valid a source for the historical Jesus as Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Philadelphia, 1994).

³ Hans Küng, *On Being Christian*, Edward Quinn, trans. (New York, 1984).

will have to change his tune; scholars now have a new vision of the pre-Easter Jesus, formed as the social sciences and archaeology are brought to bear on the issue. Jesus is now presented as having been “a teacher of subversive wisdom.” Surprisingly, or perhaps not surprisingly, scholars tell us that the Jesus of history challenged patriarchy, hierarchy, and intolerance and favoured feminism, egalitarianism, and pluralism. He was, it seems particularly irked by the social and religious hierarchy engendered among the Jews in the “purity society” of the first century. The implication is that anyone who wants to be a true follower of Jesus must be willing to challenge the conventionalities of our day. It is fortunate for the harmonious working of the Seminar that none of its members regard feminism, egalitarianism, and pluralism as contemporary conventionalities to be attacked by a radical social critic who, like Jesus, is close to the common people and opposed to the posturings of the intelligentsia.

The result of the work of the Seminar is that there is little or nothing left of the Jesus Christians have worshipped in the past. Commenting on an authoritative summary of our belief—the Nicene Creed—Borg writes:

Historical scholarship about the pre-Easter Jesus affirms essentially none of this. We are quite certain that Jesus did not think of himself as divine or as “Son of God” in any unique sense, if at all. . . . Moreover, most Jesus scholars do not think Jesus was born of a virgin, or that he ascended into heaven in a visible way, or that there will be a literal second coming. Indeed, perhaps the only line from the Creed that would be seen as historical is the reference to his death.

Similarly, we are informed that “[Jesus] certainly did not intend to establish ‘Christianity’ or ‘the church’ in the sense of a new religion.” After the resurrection, however, he “was increasingly seen as having all the qualities of God.” This was the work of the early Christian community as they explored the meaning of the religious experiences that had been mediated to them through the figure of Jesus. For Borg, their experience was valid *as experience*, but its written record in the New Testament does us a disservice by obscuring the historical Jesus. The Gospel of John, as we have seen, is almost entirely black (i.e., historically false) and Matthew is not much better, for he “often domesticates the message of Jesus by subverting his subversive teaching. And when the subversive is subverted, we are back to the conventional.” Borg then raises a crucial question:

What happens to the claims of Christian theology, doctrine, dogma, and morals when the Bible is treated not as a divine product whose truth is guaranteed by its divine origin but as a human product, produced by two ancient cultures, namely, ancient Israel and the early Christian movement?

The answer is Jesus as described by the Seminar, a construct that reduces Christianity and implicitly religion itself to an uplifting emotion with no objective content.

Borg’s acceptance of traditional Christianity is highly qualified. Indeed, he admits to knowing little about it, given the difficulty of keeping abreast of current developments in his own academic discipline. There is simply no time for reading widely in literature or theology. This narrow academic focus may account for Borg’s bypassing the contradiction involved in his acceptance of both traditional Christianity as a religious

phenomenon and the definitive importance of the Seminar's version of the pre-Easter Jesus. Borg cannot believe "that the vast majority of Christians throughout the centuries have not had authentic faith." But the gradual replacement of this older version of Christianity by the current scholarly consensus must mean one of two things: that the current version is true (or at least closer to the truth), in which case those Christians of the past could not have had an "authentic faith"; or that neither version of Christianity is valid, so that religion is reduced to sentiment, the exalted feeling that some people find in music or sports. One must wonder about the nature of a "world of Spirit" that would impinge upon human consciousness in order to deceive it. And one may further wonder how Borg can defend the validity of a religious experience that, on the one hand, arises out of those very sections of Scripture that the Seminar would discard and, on the other, rejects the Seminar's interpretation of biblical texts that Christians who are not members of the Seminar consider to be of crucial importance.