

DAYS  
OF AWE  
AND  
WONDER

**Also by Marcus J. Borg**

*Convictions*

*Evolution of the Word*

*The First Christmas*

*The First Paul*

*The God We Never Knew*

*The Heart of Christianity*

*Jesus*

*Jesus: A New Vision*

*The Last Week*

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*The Meaning of Jesus*

*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

*Putting Away Childish Things*

*Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*

*Speaking Christian*

DAYS  
OF AWE  
AND  
WONDER  
MARCUS  
BORG

How to Be a Christian  
in the Twenty-First Century



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*In love for Marcus and dedicated  
to the unending conversation*

*In gratitude for  
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## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Marianne Borg</i>	ix
1. Listening to the Spirit	i
2. Faith: A Journey of Trust	17
3. My Conversion to Mysticism	27
4. Jesus, Our Model for Being Spirit-Filled	45
5. Reclaiming Mysticism	65
6. Awe, Wonder, and Jesus	89
7. Is Jesus God?	111
8. Taking Jesus Seriously: Mystic, Wisdom Teacher, Social Prophet	121
9. Stand with Jesus	131
10. Renewing Our Image of Jesus	139
11. Healing Our Image of God	149
12. Living God's Passion	161
13. Facing Today's Challenges: An Interview	177
14. The Heart and Soul of Christianity	191
15. Encountering the Wisdom of Other Faiths	203
16. Listening for the Voice of God	227
<i>Afterword by Barbara Brown Taylor</i>	237
<i>Notes</i>	247
<i>Scripture Index</i>	267





## Foreword

by Marianne Borg

**F**or as long as there have been Christians, there has been considerable debate about what it means to be a Christian. From the authority of the Bible and the believability of its stories, to the meaning of Jesus, to what difference Christianity really makes, essential Christian ideas have evolved and been interpreted in various ways.

Yet the twenty-first century has seen even more dramatic change for Christianity. Old assumptions about and images of God no longer hold. Christianity is no longer considered essential for “salvation.” It no longer provides an unambiguous moral compass. And the United States, “a Christian country,” is now the most religiously diverse country in the world. As W. B. Yeats wrote in “Second Coming,” we are in a post-Christian era; and what “rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.”

## FOREWORD

So just how important is Christianity to the twenty-first century? What does it mean to follow Jesus across terrain that is both trampled and uncharted? Does being Christian really matter anymore?

I suggest the angst among many Christians and the increasing number of “nones” on the religious affiliation line is good news. And it couldn’t come at a more opportune time.

As poet Yehuda Amichai writes:

*From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the spring.  
The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard,  
but doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plow.*

Our doubts and loves are shaking our foundations, readying the ground for new life. Christianity is being born again.

Marcus Borg’s journey reveals the fruit and labor of doubts and loves. In this collection of thoughts and ideas taken from a diversity of sources, from his dissertation written at age twenty-seven to his final book written at age seventy, you will find a companion for your doubts

## FOREWORD

and loves. And you may just discover what it means to be a Christian in the twenty-first century.

A quick word about Marcus. Marcus was asked to preach on a Sunday morning as part of a lecture weekend. A children's sermon preceding Marcus's featured two darling dog puppets. To introduce Marcus to their young audience, one puppet exclaimed how excited he was to hear him speak. The other dog puppet paused and then shyly asked, "Who is Marcus Borg?"

Some of you know of Marcus Borg. Others of you are like the pup. Who is Marcus Borg? He is arguably one of the clearest, most accessible, insightful Jesus scholars and voices for Christianity in this century. He addressed many of our current questions and helped us fall in love with Christianity again, as if for the first time.

This volume is an opportunity to meet Marcus. For some, it will be a chance to read Marcus again as if for the first time, and for others it will truly be for the first time.

I want to identify a few themes that await you in this book. "The purpose of a book," suggests Thomas Merton, "is to teach you how to think and not to do your thinking for you. . . . As soon as any thought stimulates your mind or your heart, you can put the book down, because your meditation has begun." And, may I add, then pick this book up again. May it stimulate your mind and your heart.

First, there is a "more." Given all of life's ambiguities and the reality of impermanence and suffering, our existence is remarkable, wondrous. It evokes awe and amazement. We

## FOREWORD

need to pay attention. Really pay attention. Lest we become blind to the awe and wonder that fills our days.

Second, Jesus is significant. Then and now. Because he is one of us. He is the embodiment of human possibility. He shows us our capacity for “knowing God,” our capacity for courage, loving-kindness, and doing justice. This is hopeful.

Third, context matters. The first-century world was fraught with economic injustices, oppressive social and political structures, and claims of monopoly on God. Jesus was deeply affected and concerned about the sufferings and inequities of his day. So much so that he dedicated his entire life to the welfare of others. Jesus was equally concerned that we come to realize the nature of and the Reality that is God. In us. For us. Beyond us. Our lives depend upon it. How are we to respond to the complexities of the context of our lives? What is real? How, then, shall we live?

Fourth, there is “a way” of life that is sustainable. In brief, it is the way of compassion. Compassion is at the heart of all the great religious traditions. Each tradition is like a prism or a lens that gives us a distinctive perspective. We see only in part. Together we can find the way. The lens of Christianity, clarified and refracted in the work of these pages, is a way of seeing that commands compassion, love of this wondrous life and all humanity, of all things seen and unseen, and the unceasing work for peace and justice. Jesus has been described as the face of God turned toward us. We see not only God in his life and even death;

## FOREWORD

we see ourselves. We are given disclosures of “the way.” A lot to ponder.

Every age should think of itself as the “axial age,” the pivotal time. Ours is no exception. We have unprecedented realms of knowledge and information at our disposal, medical advances, scientific discoveries, including the ubiquitous neutrino, the superhero of the subatomic particle world that prefers matter over antimatter. This is hopeful. Ours is a time of awe and wonder of a magnitude not known before.

A cautionary note: we also have an unprecedented capacity for self-destruction, not only of humanity, but also of the planet. The stakes have never been higher. What we do now matters.

And here I return to Christianity. Why be a Christian in the twenty-first century? Because it gives us a vision. And a hope. And a way. The language of the New Testament talks about the “kingdom of God.” Which is here, now. Which is what this world would be like if God was king and Caesar was not. The vision of Christianity for a just, sane, nonviolent world is not utopian. It is within our capacity. And such capacity requires that we take up the crucible of transformation. Transformation, individually and collectively, is the key ingredient for liberation. Without our participation in transformation and embodying lives of compassion, the kingdom of God will not come. It is up to us, and we are not alone.

This volume will explore these themes and others. May the discoveries here give us hope, like flowers in the spring

## FOREWORD

that emerge from a season that looks to some like death. Marcus Borg's doubts and loves plowed ground. His life and work led him to rediscover the heart of Christianity. For himself, and for us. With new eyes and, yes, a new heart, being Christian in the twenty-first century can make the world a better place.

As a benediction, I close with this passage from the Jewish Sabbath Prayer Book:

Days pass, and the years vanish, and we walk  
sightless among miracles. Fill our eyes with  
seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there  
be moments when your Presence, like lightning,  
illuminates the darkness in which we walk. Help  
us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns,  
unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will  
reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder,  
“How filled with awe is this place . . .”

Marianne Borg  
The Transfiguration  
The Last Sunday in  
Epiphany, 2017

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DAYS *OF* AWE  
AND WONDER





## Chapter 1

# Listening to the Spirit

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG TEACHER in my mid-twenties, an older colleague delighted in characterizing modern theology as “flat-tire” theology: “All of the *pneuma* has gone out of it.” The irony of his comment depended on the double meaning of *pneuma*, a Greek word meaning both “air” and “spirit.” I understood his point, but I wasn’t sure I agreed with it. For me, modern theology was a joy: insightful, challenging, liberating.

Though I still see modern theology as a treasure of great value for both church and culture, I also see that my colleague’s statement was (and is) largely correct, not only

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about theology in general, but also about biblical scholarship and historical Jesus studies in particular.<sup>2</sup> Within scholarly circles, Jesus's relationship to the world of Spirit is seldom taken seriously.<sup>3</sup> Attention is directed to what he *said*, and sometimes even to what he *did*, but seldom is attention paid to what he *was*.

What Jesus was, historically speaking, was a Spirit-filled person in the charismatic stream of Judaism. This is the key to understanding what he was like as a historical figure. In an important sense, all that he was, taught, and did flowed out of his own intimate experience of the "world of Spirit."

### The "World of Spirit"

The notion of a "world of Spirit" is a vague and difficult notion in the contemporary world. By it I mean another dimension or layer or level of reality in addition to the visible world of our ordinary experience. This notion of "another world," understood as *actual* even though nonmaterial, is quite alien to the modern way of thinking. The modern worldview, or "picture of reality," sees reality as having essentially one dimension, the visible and material realm.<sup>4</sup> Deeply ingrained in all of us who have grown up in modern Western culture, this worldview makes us skeptical about another reality. For most contemporary people, believing in another reality requires "faith," understood as affirming that which on other grounds is doubtful.<sup>5</sup> The

## Listening to the Spirit

“world of Spirit” is not part of our taken-for-granted understanding of reality, not part of our worldview.

But the notion of another reality, a world of Spirit, was the common property of virtually every culture before ours, constituting what has been called the “primordial tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Appearing in a multiplicity of cultural forms, indeed in virtually as many forms as there are cultures, it was almost a “cultural universal,” the “human unanimity” prior to the modern period. Essential to it are two claims.

First, in addition to the visible material world disclosed to us by ordinary sense perception (and modern science), there is another level of reality, a second world of nonmaterial reality, charged with energy and power. This basic division of reality into two levels can be spoken of in many ways—as the sacred and the profane, the holy (or “numinous”) and the mundane, God and “this world,” and so forth.<sup>7</sup> What is most important is the notion of another level or levels of reality rather than any particular set of terms. Moreover, the “other world”—the world of Spirit—is seen as “more” real than “this world.” Indeed, the “other reality” is the source or ground of “this world.”

Second, and very important, the “other world” is not simply an article of belief, but an element of experience. That is, the notion of another reality does not have its origin in prescientific speculation about the origin of things, primal anxiety about death, or the need for protection, but is grounded in the religious experience of humankind.<sup>8</sup> It is not merely believed in, but *known*.

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