

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Empowered by God to resist

Experiencing God as known in Jesus gives people courage and power to help change the world. It leads them to promote justice and peace. It motivates them to resist the violence, environmental harm, and selfish use of military and economic power that fill today's world. That's the encouraging message I heard from Christian authors Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Joan Chittister at an exciting recent three-day presentation titled "Mysticism, Empowerment, and Resistance."



Not a marshmallow experience

Some Christians see mysticism as unreal, impractical, and possibly pagan, but Chittister reminded us that it is far from the marginal, marshmallow, meaningless experience those Christians assume it to be. It is a dynamic, purposeful enlightenment that was vital to the life of Jesus and many other Bible figures, and it has been vital to strong Christians from Jesus's day to ours.



Borg told how William James described mysticism in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Mysticism, said James, includes a sense of union or connection with the sacred—with "what is," with "reality," with what many people call "God." It also includes a sense of illumination—of seeing God, the world, one's life, and the lives of others differently as a result of the experience.

Eyes open or closed

Mysticism may not involve what we think of as ecstatic experience, but it can. It is an experience of the sacred that for some people goes beyond ordinary consciousness. It can include seeing one's surroundings with open eyes but seeing everything looking different, glowing with a light that represents the radiant presence of God.

Churches: spiritual hot tubs . . .

Too often, Joan Chittister finds, we want the church to be merely a warm, soothing spiritual hot tub, but the church's purpose isn't spiritual escapism. Instead, it is promoting the empowerment and resistance that come from authentic experiences of God. That must include addressing political issues.



To follow Jesus, we must get more involved in such issues, not less as some church members prefer. In our churches we need to be having political conversations. John Dominic Crossan assures us that our distinction between what is political and what is religious would have been meaningless to the Jews, pagans, and Christians of the first century. Much of what we see as Christian religious language was the political language of public discourse in Jesus's world.

. . . or incubators of political change?



Besides having political conversations in the church, Borg, Crossan, and Chittister assure us that we also need to be having worship that motivates and empowers us to resist whatever opposes God's peace and justice.

Marcus Borg believes, as I also do, that the purpose of worship is to open us to the reality of God. True worship, Borg observes, is intrinsically subversive, because it declares loyalty only to God. Real worship is also liberating. Our culture intensifies fears, but real worship gives us confidence and frees us from inhibitions that keep us from following Jesus.

Leave or stay, but not quietly

Joan Chittister points out that we may have to leave the church if leaving becomes necessary to save our souls. She warns us, however, not to leave quietly if we leave, or to stay quietly if we stay. By speaking, we perform a needed ministry of irritation, Chittister finds, like the sand that irritates the oyster but causes a pearl to form.



Throughout history, ordinary people who have simply seen the truth and said it have been God's instruments for changing the world. More of us need to do that now.

For other people, the non-ordinary state is an eyes-closed experience that includes visions of God, Jesus, saints, or other spiritual realities. These visions, which often come during internal silent prayer, bring a sense of connection, a sense of the self opening to “what is.”



The sense of union or connection that mystical experiences bring is likely to include a softening or even a disappearance of the usual boundaries one sees between oneself and the world. The experience can't be described adequately in words, and it is transient. It is also passive. We can't make it happen; we can only receive it. And it is a way of knowing, not just feeling. It brings a sense of knowing how things are—of directly knowing a greater reality rather than merely getting information about it.

Music, the most frequent trigger

Although we can't make such experiences happen, some settings seem more likely than others to trigger them. A survey done by priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley, Marcus Borg pointed out, found that what people mentioned most often as the trigger of mystical experience was music. Next most frequent was prayer, and third was nature.



This says something important about the music we include in our worship services. It's not just incidental. Shallow or irritating music, or music whose words misrepresent God's character, can keep some participants from experiencing God during worship. If so, don't we need to avoid using such music?

Fruits matter

It's important to recognize that not all mystical experience is of God. When we have such experiences or hear about them, to evaluate them we need to ask whether they promote the kind of love, justice, and peace that we see Jesus putting into action in the gospels.

Beware of false prophets ... You will know them by their fruits.
—Matthew 7:15-16

Having applied this test, however, non-mystics need to trust the religious experience of others rather than limiting God to what they've seen personally. We know from others' experiences, Marcus Borg reminded attendees at the event I attended, that the

Jesus said to [Thomas], “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”
—John 20:29

sacred is a reality that can be experienced now, that the idea of God is not just hypothetical, and that the sacred is experienced in ways that change people.

New freedom and power

To a great extent, experiencing the sacred frees us from concern for our own security and from what other people will think if we act in unconventional ways. Another way in which it changes us is that it gives us the determination and the power necessary to work for what we see God caring most about.

The only proper use of power, Joan Chittister finds, is for empowering others. She reminds us that in biblical accounts God consistently gives power in order for it to be given away. And God-given power is given for building people up, not for keeping them down.



Chittister observes that in both the church and the world, however, we often see harmful uses of power. Exploitative “power over” is often used to prevent others from acting in their own best interest. In the church, Chittister notices, this kind of power often claims to aim at creating unity when it is actually stifling thinking that is badly needed. We too often achieve a false unity in the church by staying silent.

In the church as elsewhere, we also frequently see competitive power, which is power used against others instead of for their benefit. Manipulative power is another kind of power often used to control others. Its use is sometimes secret and often insidious, observes Chittister. As an example she mentions tokenism—taking in a few members of an outcast group in order to avoid having to take in the rest of the group. We've often done this in the



The event I describe here was in Austin, Texas, sponsored jointly by several mainline Austin churches and seminaries and largely financed by the D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation. (See www.faithandreason.org if you want more information about this foundation.)

church as well as in society as a whole, with women and members of nonwhite racial groups. Have our church systems done it with the laity, too, by putting a few in visible leadership roles but not letting the rest be heard?

A story of resistance to empires



Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan both emphasize the need for Christians to resist systems in which a tiny elite dominates the world by using its wealth and power to keep the rest of the population from having enough of the world's resources. Borg and Crossan stress the similarities between the empires that in this way dominated the ancient world we read about in the Bible, and the U.S. today, with its military and economic power making it the domination system of today's world.

We've watered down the Christian story to make it mainly about sins (especially sexual behaviors, which get little attention in the Bible) and going to heaven when we die. But those subjects have low priority in the Bible. It speaks mainly about God's passion for justice and peace, about experiences of the sacred, and about having the courage and power that come through such experiences, to resist domination systems that promote injustice and violence.

Political and economic statements

Empowered by their mystical experiences, the classical Old Testament prophets stood against the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires and for God's peace and justice, especially economic justice. Similarly, empowered by his mystical experiences Jesus stood against the Roman Empire and stood for the kingdom of God. That name,



Borg points out, is a political metaphor describing a reign that was totally unlike the Roman Empire.

Leaders claiming to represent God

An important way in which ancient empires maintained power was by using names like "son of God" for their top leaders. This is apparent in the Old Testament as well as in historical accounts of kings and other secular leaders of ancient times, and it was common in the Roman Empire of Jesus's time.

Like many other Bible scholars, Borg and Crossan observe that many terms used in scripture to refer to Jesus didn't originally have the meanings Christians tend to give them today. In the Roman Empire, terms like "son of God," "savior of the world," and "redeemer" were commonly used to describe emperors. These words appeared widely on Roman coins and public buildings. They were declarations of loyalty to the emperor and the empire.



In applying them to Jesus, his followers thus were denying allegiance to the Roman Empire and declaring allegiance instead to the kingdom Jesus represented, a kingdom based on love, justice, and peace rather than the violence and oppression on which the Roman Empire was based.

In saying "Jesus is Lord," the early Christians were denying the common Roman loyalty oath, "Caesar is Lord." They were making a political statement verging on treason. Rather than calling Jesus divine, they were saying how utterly different the kingdom of God was from the kingdom of Rome, and saying where their loyalty lay. Borg suggests that a comparable statement for U.S. Christians today might be "Jesus is our commander-in-chief."



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Standing where Jesus stood

Many Christians today speak of the need to accept Jesus as Lord and savior, when they merely mean expressing belief in certain doctrinal statements about Jesus. Really accepting Jesus as Lord means something very different. It means agreeing to promote the peace and justice that Jesus advocated, that throughout the Bible are shown as God's passionate desire for the world.

In particular, that means rejecting war and other violence. It means caring for the earth. It also means promoting more equitable distribution of the re-



sources people need for life. Much of the justice Jesus and the Old Testament prophets spoke about was economic. Borg finds that two of the three earliest versions of what we call the Lord's Prayer say "debts" and "debtors," referring to material goods. And its reference to the kingdom of God coming on earth is clearly about the here and now, not an afterlife.

Following Jesus requires standing against what he stood against and for what he stood for. Our religious experiences can empower us to do that—to be passionate about the justice and peace God is passionate about, and to resist whatever powers oppose that justice and peace.

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Reeducation about the big subjects

Marcus Borg believes that our churches need to provide a lot of adult reeducation about the big subjects—God, Jesus, the Christian life, and our own tradition. That includes making members aware that according to the Bible God cares especially about the parts of life that we call political and prefer to avoid in church.



Borg feels this kind of reeducation and political conversation is best accomplished not through sermons but in small adult groups. He suggests two methods to use in these groups.

✓ Start with a relatively safe political-journey exercise. First, ask "What is your earliest memory associated with politics? Was politics talked about in your childhood home? If so, how? Did you know what your parents' political beliefs were?" Invite each person in the circle to answer. Then ask, "Is there a political conversion story in your life—a story of sharp change in your political position, or merely a deepening? Or have you been on automatic pilot politically throughout your life?"

✓ Have a Bible study of the book of Amos, which portrays God's indictment of the wealthy and the powerful for exploiting the underclass. Have at least six sessions: one for introducing the book, four for covering its content, and one for discussing its possible meaning for today.