

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

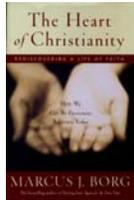
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Surviving through thick and thin

“The Christian life,” says Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSan-Francisco, 2003), is about the Spirit of God opening our hearts in thin places.”



This metaphor, based on Paul’s speech quoted in Acts, came to Borg from Celtic Christianity, which began flourishing in Ireland and parts of Scotland,

Wales, and northern England in the fifth century. In this form of Christianity, God was seen as a nonmaterial layer of reality all around us—an encompassing Spirit in which everything exists.

The God who made the world and everything in it ... is not far from each one of us. For in [God] we live and move and have our being ...
—Acts 17:24-28

The veil lifts at thin places

A thin place is a place where the nonmaterial layer intersects with the visible world of ordinary experience. It’s a place where the boundary between the two layers becomes soft, porous, and permeable, where the sacred becomes apparent. “Thin places,” Borg explains, “are places where the veil momentarily lifts and we behold God . . .”

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you ...
—Job 42:5

What about the thick places?

The main purpose of every traditional Christian practice, says Borg, is to become a thin place—a place where our hearts are opened. In Borg’s view this is one of the main purposes of worship. I share that view, but for me it raises a crucial question. How shall we respond to worship practices that for us are thick places—places that hide God and lead us to keep our hearts closed?

A bridge between two ways of seeing



Writing about the earlier way of seeing Christianity and the emerging way, whose differences deeply divide Christians, Marcus Borg suggests a way to bridge the divide. It’s the “born again” image.

Borg finds that for several reasons mainline Christians have generally left “born again” language to more conservative Christians. One reason is that conservative Christians often define being born again quite narrowly, to mean accepting a particular set of beliefs. Also, these Christians sometimes try to test whether others have the right beliefs, by asking what Borg calls a salvation-formula question—“Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior?”



Many mainline Christians also avoid “born again” language because they have known people whose claims of having been born again have had very unattractive results. The new birth they say they’ve experienced has led to “a rigid kind of righteousness, judgmentalism, and sharp boundaries between an in-group and an out-group,” Borg observes.

The central New Testament metaphor

Borg reminds us that “rightly understood, being born again ... is at the very center of the New Testament and the Christian life.” It means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way and new identity—a way of being and an identity centered in the sacred, in Spirit, in Christ, in God.” In the New Testament, Borg emphasizes, dying and rising are repeatedly “a metaphor for personal transformation, for the psychological-spiritual process at the center of the Christian life.”



A universal way

This death and rebirth process, Borg sees, “is ‘the way’ spoken of by all the major religions of the world. ... Rather than being the unique revelation of a way known only to [Jesus], his life and death are the incarnation of a universal way known in all of the enduring religions.” Couldn’t this bridge between religions bridge the gap between Christians too?

Thin places can be anywhere

◆ Thin places can be geographical locations. Some have become destinations for religious pilgrimages because for many people they are thin places. However, thin places don't have to be explicitly religious places. Nature, especially in wilderness areas, is a thin place for many people.



◆ The arts—music, dance, the visual arts, and poetry and other literature—are thin places for many. Observing or creating works of art can let the boundary between the self and the nonmaterial world disappear momentarily, revealing the sacred.

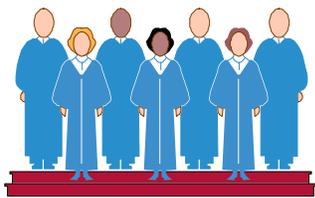
◆ Even times of serious illness, grief, and other kinds of suffering can become thin places, because they break our hearts open.

◆ People can be thin places for each other.



◆ Certain individual practices often are thin places. These include reading, retreats, pilgrimages, fasting, silent prayer, and journaling and other writing. “Their purpose,” Borg tells us, “is to bring intention and attention together for the opening of the heart.”

◆ Many parts of worship services can serve the important purpose of being thin places, although we don't always experience them as such. Borg believes that in worship the main role of music, especially, is to provide a thin place. In his view, hymns do this for many, and they do it best when they combine words that move us and music that we can sing easily. Sermons, the sacraments, prayers, scripture readings when done well, and other parts of the worship liturgy can also become thin places for worship participants.



One person's thin is another's thick

What are your thin places? Mine most often come during reading, journaling and other writing, participating in great choral works, hearing other great music, and conversing with certain people with whom I have especially great rapport. I know that

for many other Christians, however, these are thick places rather than thin ones. And many places that other Christians find thin, I find thick. Why?

Differences in our personalities, experiences, interests, and skills probably cause some of the differences in what we find thin and thick. However, for me and I suspect for other Christians too, the difference often comes instead from what Marcus Borg describes as the differences between two ways of understanding what being Christian means and what the Christian life is about.

Two ways of seeing Christianity



In *The Heart of Christianity* as in his previous books, Borg describes what he calls an earlier way and an emerging way. He finds that both ways are present in the churches of North America today, deeply dividing Christians. Beneath these two ways' differences concerning sexuality, the role of women, Christian exclusivism, and other specific issues, he explains, lies the basic difference—views about the Bible and its authority.

■ An earlier way

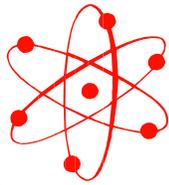
The earlier vision of Christianity sees the Bible as the unique revelation of God and emphasizes the literal meaning of its contents. This vision also sees miraculous happenings as central to the truth of Christianity. From the viewpoint of the emerging way, this interpretation makes no sense and is anti-intellectual and rigidly but selectively moralistic.

This earlier vision sees the Christian life as centered in believing now for the sake of salvation later. It sees belief in God, the Bible, and Jesus as the way to heaven, and sees Christianity as the only true religion. For Christians with this viewpoint, faith as belief is central, as is the afterlife, and the Christian life is about requirements and the rewards and punishments that come from meeting those requirements or failing to meet them.

In Borg's view this vision of Christianity is essentially a modern product and, ironically, given its adherents' claims to the contrary, an innovative one. It isn't Christian tradition but only a particular and relatively recent way of seeing Christian tradition.



■ An emerging way



In contrast, Borg observes, the emerging way of understanding Christianity takes seriously both the Christian tradition and who we have become as a result of our encounter with science, historical scholarship, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity. It includes awareness of how Christianity has contributed to racism, sexism, nationalism, exclusivism, and other harmful ideologies that actually contradict what Jesus modeled and taught.

This emerging way sees the Bible as the historical product of two ancient communities, ancient Israel and the early Christian movement. It sees much of the Bible's content as metaphorical, and as important especially for what the Bible's stories mean for us. This way also sees the Bible as sacramental, as a means of grace that can mediate the sacred to us and serve as a vessel for the Holy Spirit.



To Christians who hold to the earlier way, however, the emerging way looks like a reduction of Christianity that questions the authority of the Bible, the divinity and uniqueness of Jesus, and the wonderworking power of God.

God works through both ways

Borg acknowledges that the earlier way has nourished the lives of millions of Christians for centuries and that the Holy Spirit has worked through it in the past and continues to work, providing comfort for many people and producing many lives of love and compassion. He emphasizes the fact that both ways affirm the reality of God, the centrality of the Bible and Jesus, the importance of rela-



tionship with God as known in Jesus, and the need for transformation of ourselves and our world. Borg sees, however, that for many people in our time the earlier way is not compelling or convincing. It not only doesn't work for these people. It actually gets in the way.



Thick places in worship

Although Borg, like me and many other Christians today, found as an adult that the earlier way, which he had learned in childhood, was no longer persuasive, he finds that many hymns, creeds, prayers, and other parts of worship services that reflect the earlier way still nourish him. In his view, saying the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and other statements that we "know by heart" shouldn't be an intellectual exercise in which we think about the words' meaning. Borg says he no longer focuses on thinking hard about the words. Instead, what he calls "the drone of the words" and the sound of the community saying them together make them thin for him even though they reflect an understanding of Christianity that he no can longer accept.



That's where I part company with Borg. Because most worship services that I attend reflect the earlier way that is unconvincing to me and is heavy with sexist and 17th century language, most worship services I attend conceal God's presence from me more than revealing it. They're mostly thick places.

I'm afraid they're thick for many other people, too. They're thick for some churchgoers who keep saying the words of familiar creeds and prayers but see many of them contradicting what we know about

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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 voluntarily 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 believe our churches need to address.

the world. Maybe even more important, seeing churchgoers apparently taking at face value outdated, offensive, and apparently meaningless statements undoubtedly contributes to making some people avoid churches.



More thin places in our worship?

I keep attending worship services despite their features I find thick. I've mostly resigned myself to finding my needed thin places elsewhere. However, I'm concerned about the people who instead avoid the church because they don't find thin places in it. To reach the many people for whom the emerging way

of understanding Christianity is the only one that makes sense, couldn't we acknowledge openly that many statements in our creeds, prayers, and hymns are metaphorical rather than literal? Couldn't we stop using outdated and sexist words in our worship? Or will we keep on keeping emerging-way people away, for fear of losing some earlier-way members by making such changes?

"If we took seriously that a major purpose of worship is to become a thin place," Marcus Borg reminds us, "it would affect how we conduct our worship services."

Barbara



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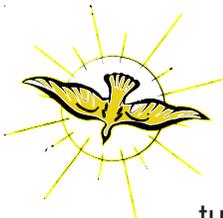
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Being born again (and again and again)—the heart of the Christian life

"To be born again," writes Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity*, "involves dying to the false self, to that identity, to that way of being, and to be born again into an identity centered in the Spirit, in Christ, in God."



Whether this new birth happens suddenly or gradually, observes Borg, it is the work of the Spirit. We can't make it happen, but like a midwife we can help the new self to be born and we can nourish the new life. In Borg's view, spirituality is that midwifery. It combines awareness, intention, and practice.

"The Christian life," says Borg, "is not very much about believing a set of beliefs, but about a deepening relationship with the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Paying attention to this relationship transforms us. This is what our lives are to be about ... " Dying and rising is a transformation that begins a process of continuing transformation.