

Portraits of Jesus

By **Marcus J. Borg**

The title of this lecture is “Portraits of Jesus.” It’s clear, if you look at the sequence of talks, that my task is also to cover the public life of Jesus. Dom Crossan talked about the birth narratives earlier and will talk about the death and Easter narratives in the last lecture. I get to do the in-between. Of course the in-between is enormous. It’s all the public activity of Jesus as an adult. It’s the whole question of what his message and his mission were about.

I will begin by talking about two widespread portraits of Jesus, the first one popular and the second one scholarly. Second, I will describe six contemporary scholarly portraits of Jesus, all done by North American scholars in the past decade. And third and finally, I will talk briefly about where I think we are in the discipline, elements about which there is some consensus and elements about which there continue to be division and uncertainty.

I begin by describing two widespread images or portraits of Jesus. One is popular, the one that has dominated the Christian imagination throughout most of the Christian centuries. The second is scholarly, namely the one that has dominated much of this century’s scholarship until recently.

By the popular image of Jesus, I mean simply the most widespread image. Its answers to the three central questions about Jesus, his identity, his mission and his message, are clear and direct. Who was he according to this popular image? He was the divinely begotten Son of God. His mission or his purpose? His intention was to die for the sins of the world. His message was about many things but primarily about himself—about who he was, what his purpose was and the importance of believing in him.

This is the image of Jesus that I grew up with within the church, and this is how most people who have heard anything at all about Jesus, whether they are Christian or non-Christian, think of him. It is the most widespread image of Jesus around, whether people believe it to be true or not. This image, of course, is crystallized in what may be the best known verse in the whole of the New Testament, *John 3:16*. It’s the verse that

is held up behind the goal posts during field goal attempts at NFL football games. Many of you know it by heart: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” There you have the popular image, Jesus as the Son of God given for the sake of the world. Believe in him and you may have everlasting life. To crystallize this popular image of Jesus down to two words, this is essentially an image of Jesus as the “divine savior.”

Very importantly, this image of Jesus is not seen by mainstream scholars as a historical image. This is not what Jesus was like as a figure of history. To explain that a bit further, I want to say something about where this popular image of Jesus comes from. It comes from a surface reading of the Gospels, reading them as if they were straightforward historical documents. In particular, the popular image is largely the product of reading all the Gospels through the lens of John’s Gospel and of later Christian tradition, including the creeds.

Through this lens, Jesus is seen as one who proclaimed himself with the most exalted titles known in his day. In John’s Gospel, for example, are all of the great “I am” statements: “I am the light of the world” (*John 8:12, 9:5, 12:46*), “I am the bread of life” (*John 6:35, 48–51, 58*), “I am the resurrection and the life” (*John 11:25*), “I am the way, the truth and the life” (*John 14:6*) and so forth. He is “the word made flesh” (*John 1:14*) according to John. If you add to that the Christian creeds, he becomes a divine figure.

One of the most certain results of the quest for the historical Jesus is that John is not historical. Jesus never talked like this. By the way, this was one of the first things I learned in my very first seminary course almost 30 years ago. It seemed important but also vaguely scandalous and something I shouldn’t tell my mother. And I don’t think I ever did!

An important qualification—to say that John is not historical does not mean that John is simply wrong or worthless. Rather, when we understand John’s Gospel for what it is, it is very powerful. But as an accurate historical account, it is deeply misleading. Let me explain that a bit further with a distinction between two phrases I think are very helpful, the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus.

By the first of those phrases, the pre-Easter Jesus, I mean, of course, the historical Jesus, Jesus as a figure of history before his death, Jesus as a flesh-and-blood Galilean

Jew who was probably about five feet tall. (We don't actually know how tall he was, but that was the average height of males at that time in that culture.) That's the pre-Easter Jesus.

By the phrase post-Easter Jesus, which may be less familiar, I mean the Jesus of Christian tradition and experience. That is, after his death, the followers of Jesus, both in the first century and, I would say, to this day, continue to experience him as a living spiritual reality with qualities traditionally ascribed to God. That's the post-Easter Jesus. The post-Easter Jesus is Jesus as the living, risen Christ of Christian experience and tradition.

John's Gospel is basically about the post-Easter Jesus. Why does the author of John say that Jesus is the light of the world? Because the community out of which John's Gospel comes and for which John's Gospel was written had experienced the risen, living Christ as the light that brought them out of darkness.

Similarly, why, if Jesus never said "I am the bread of life," does John's Gospel have him talk that way? Again, because the community out of which that Gospel comes had experienced the living spiritual Christ as the spiritual food that fed them on their journey to that day.

So John's Gospel is basically about the post-Easter Jesus. The popular image of Jesus is generated by reading the Gospels through the lens of the post-Easter Jesus.

This popular image is not an accurate image of the pre-Easter Jesus. To summarize and put it bluntly in three quick statements as I'm going to may seem almost brutal. In all likelihood, the pre-Easter Jesus did not think of himself as the Messiah or in any of the exalted terms in which he is spoken of. Second, we can say with almost complete certainty that he did not see his own mission or purpose as dying for the sins of the world. Third and finally, again with almost complete certainty, we can say that his message was not about himself or the importance of believing in him.

If that isn't what he was like, then what was he like? I turn now to another widespread image of Jesus, this one from scholarly circles. This was the dominant scholarly image of Jesus in 20th-century scholarship until recently. Made famous by Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of this century, it's a portrait of Jesus as an eschatological prophet or an eschatological figure.

The key to this portrait of Jesus is the definition of the technical term eschatology. The word eschatology means “last things,” or “having to do with last things.” The word *eschaton* means the final event or the end times. Within a Jewish framework, eschatology refers to the coming of the messianic age, the end-time events brought about by a dramatic act of God typically involving such features as the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment and the dawn of the everlasting kingdom. It is concerned with the end of the world but not the end of the physical earth or the universe, the space-time world. In Jewish eschatologies, the space-time earth, or the space-time universe, frequently survives in a renewed kind of way. Nevertheless, the change is so dramatic that one may, at least metaphorically, speak of eschatology as being concerned with the end of the world.

Understanding Jesus as an eschatological prophet means understanding that the conviction that the end-times were at hand was central to him. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “The kingdom of God is at hand” (*Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17*). He was referring to the imminent *eschaton*, the imminent arrival of the end-times. When he spoke of the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven—I am referring to how this was seen at the beginning of this century—he was referring to the coming of a supernatural figure who would rule over the everlasting kingdom, either someone other than himself or himself in a transformed state (*Mark 13:26; Matthew 24:30*).

For this image of Jesus, the conviction that the end was at hand was not peripheral. Rather, it was at the center of Jesus’ understanding, message and mission. Indeed, it is where his message of repentance got its urgency. Time is short, so repent.

This view, foreign as it is to many people, in fact dominated the mainstream of Jesus scholarship in both Germany and North America through the middle third of this century. There was a virtual scholarly consensus that Jesus was an eschatological figure in the sense that I have just described. This is what I have called elsewhere the eschatological consensus. That consensus, very importantly, has now collapsed. There are still scholars who affirm it, but as a consensus, it’s gone. I won’t go through the reasons why, even though it’s one of the most exciting developments of the last 15 years or so. Rather, I’ll simply quote Professor James Robinson of the Claremont School of Theology, one of the senior New Testament scholars in North America. In a talk given in Vienna a couple of years ago, Robinson spoke of the collapse of the

eschatological consensus as “the fading of apocalyptic, and a paradigm shift and Copernican revolution in the discipline. The eschatological image of Jesus is an old model which is frayed and blemished with broken parts, a procrustean bed in which the discipline squirms.”⁽¹⁾ The collapse of the eschatological consensus is one of the central characteristics of the renaissance of historical Jesus scholarship. It’s one of the central reasons that the question of what Jesus was like as a figure of history has arisen anew.

This leads me to the second main section of this talk, the six portraits of Jesus in contemporary North American biblical scholarship.

Six Portraits Of Jesus

Portrait Type	Author
Restoration Eschatology Prophet	Sanders
Hellenistic-type Cynic Sage	Mack
Egalitarian Wisdom Prophet	Schüssler Fiorenza
Social Prophet	Horsley
Spirit Person	Borg
Jewish Cynic Peasant	Crossan

I begin first with the work of E. P. Sanders. Sanders’ work represents the most direct continuation of the eschatological consensus in North American scholarship. The book in which he works this out, *Jesus and Judaism*,⁽²⁾ published in 1985, has been highly acclaimed. The *New York Times* book reviewer at the time of publication said it was likely to be the most important book of the decade in the discipline. At the end of the decade, it won the prestigious and financially very rewarding Grawemeyer Award as the best book of the decade in religious studies.

In that book Sanders develops a picture of Jesus as a prophet and agent of Jewish restoration eschatology. The key to understanding that somewhat technical-sounding mouthful is in the last two words, restoration eschatology. Restoration eschatology is an understanding of the end-times that emphasizes the restoration of Israel in fulfillment of

God's promises. This, Sanders argues, was a central theme of Judaism in the post-Exilic period, which began with the return of the exiles from Babylonia in 539/8 B.C.E.

Restoration eschatology refers to the coming of the messianic age (although it wouldn't necessarily involve an individual known as the Messiah), a time of deliverance.

Specifically, it would include four elements. It would involve the ingathering of the 12 tribes of Israel. It would be centered in Jerusalem; Mount Zion would be the center of the messianic age. Third, it often involved a new or renewed Temple. And fourth, it would involve a new social order. All of this was to be established by God through direct divine intervention. Restoration eschatology meant the end of the present age and the dawn of the new age.

According to Sanders, this is what Jesus expected, and he expected it soon. The proper framework for interpreting the traditions about Jesus, Sanders argues, is the interpretative framework of restoration eschatology.

It's important to note how concrete, literal in a sense, Sanders' account of Jesus' expectation is. For example, Jesus believed that there really would be a new or renewed Temple in Jerusalem. This is not a metaphor. Moreover, Jesus' action of overturning tables in the Temple symbolized, Sanders argues, the coming destruction of the Temple and its replacement by a new or renewed Temple. Moreover, Jesus believed that he and the Twelve would rule over the restored Israel from the new Temple in Jerusalem, all within the framework of the space-time world. And finally, Jesus may even have thought of himself as the king or soon-to-be king of the coming kingdom.

Sanders works all of this out in great detail. Thus, for Sanders, Jesus was both a prophet and an agent of restoration eschatology. He spoke about it, and he worked to bring it about. The continuity with Schweitzer's understanding of Jesus is striking. Indeed, Sanders' is the only one of the six portraits that I'll be talking about that continues the eschatological consensus.

The second portrait comes from Burton Mack of Claremont Graduate School, and it's a picture of Jesus as a Hellenistic-type cynic sage. It's developed in Mack's two books, *A Myth of Innocence*⁽³⁾ and *The Lost Gospel*.⁽⁴⁾ Burton Mack does not really regard himself as a Jesus scholar but more of a gospel scholar, Markan scholar and "Q"

scholar. Mack is also the North American scholar most associated with the cynic image of Jesus. So whether he likes to regard himself as a Jesus scholar or not, he's in the group. In his 1988 book, what he calls a softly focused characterization of Jesus emerges.

Before I describe what the phrase "Hellenistic-type cynic sage" means, I want to speak briefly about how Mack arrives at this image of Jesus. His first claim is that the earliest layer of the Jesus tradition, which would be the earliest layer of the Q document that Steve Patterson spoke about, is a wisdom text that portrays Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and contains short sayings and a few parables. Everything else in the Gospels, Mack argues, is later. Everything eschatological or apocalyptic is later; conflict material is later and so forth. So the earliest layer is a wisdom layer.

The second major ingredient grounding Mack's portrait is a picture of a deeply Hellenized Galilee, where the process of becoming more and more cosmopolitan had gone very far indeed. Mack is even skeptical that there were synagogues in Galilee. He thinks there were cynic sages present in Galilee. Thus an image of Jesus as a cynic sage would be at home in the Galilean environment.

What portrait of Jesus emerges from this? A portrait of a Hellenistic-style cynic sage. The phrase suggests, first of all, an itinerant teacher, without a home, on the road, one who has deliberately abandoned the world by becoming homeless. As such, Jesus taught a kind of wisdom that mocked or subverted conventional beliefs. Jesus was a scoffer, a gadfly, a debunker who could playfully or sarcastically or with considerable charm ridicule the conventions and preoccupations that animated and imprisoned most people. He was like a Jewish Socrates, if you will, but a Socrates who has become homeless.

Mack's image of Jesus is really the polar opposite of Ed Sanders' image of Jesus. For Sanders, Jesus is deeply eschatological and deeply Jewish. For Burton Mack, Jesus is not eschatological and not very Jewish. Mack agrees he's Jewish by birth. But the adult Jesus is not concerned with Jewish institutions and not concerned with the future of the Jewish people. He is a highly individualistic Hellenistic-style cynic sage.

The third portrait comes from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the most influential feminist New Testament scholar in North America. In her 1983 book, *In Memory of Her*,⁽⁵⁾ she

brings a feminist perspective to her reading of texts. As a feminist scholar, she is especially sensitive to the two related but not identical phenomena I talked about earlier, namely androcentrism and patriarchy. From her reading of the texts with these sensitivities, a picture of Jesus as an egalitarian, anti-patriarchal wisdom prophet emerges. To begin with the last phrase first, in common with many contemporary scholars, she sees Jesus as a wisdom figure, that is, a teacher who used characteristic wisdom forms of speech, such as parables and aphorisms.

In addition, and this is what makes her portrait distinctive, she points out that the gospels sometimes portray Jesus as speaking on behalf of wisdom or as a child of wisdom. In *Luke 11:49*, for example, the Jesus of Luke says, “Therefore the wisdom of God said. ... ” Then Jesus speaks, and, for our purposes, what he says isn’t as important as the fact that he is represented as speaking on behalf of the wisdom of God.

Wisdom in Jewish wisdom literature is often personified as a woman. The Greek word for wisdom, which is also a woman’s name in English and therefore works nicely, is *sophia*, so that scholars often speak of wisdom in Jewish wisdom literature personified as Sophia. In that same literature, wisdom is often spoken of as the functional equivalent of God. Wisdom is spoken of as having been present with God at creation. Wisdom, or Sophia, is spoken of as the agent of creation, as present in the world, and has many divine attributes. Thus, in Jewish wisdom literature, wisdom, or Sophia, sometimes functions as a female image of God. Even in the biblical tradition we find elements of Jewish wisdom literature.

When Jesus refers to himself as the spokesperson of wisdom, he speaks of himself as the spokesperson of Sophia, or maybe even the child of Sophia. Sophia is the name of Israel’s god personified in female form. This is what Schüssler Fiorenza means when she says that Jesus was a wisdom prophet. He was a prophet of divine Sophia.

The other phrase in that shorthand telegram message characterizing Schüssler Fiorenza’s portrait of Jesus is egalitarian and anti-patriarchal. As a prophet of Sophia, Jesus rejected the purity and patriarchy system of his day and carried out his mission to the marginalized members of society in the name of an alternative vision of human community. That vision, Schüssler Fiorenza says, was embodied in the egalitarian praxis of the kingdom of God, which she understands as a discipleship of equals. Jesus’ egalitarian praxis subverted the major divisions of his social world, divisions

between pure and impure, healthy and maimed, male and female. Thus there is a very strong sociopolitical dimension to Schüssler Fiorenza's understanding of Jesus.

The fourth portrait is by Richard Horsley, one of the most prolific North American New Testament scholars in recent years. He is the author of *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*,⁽⁶⁾ *The Liberation of Christmas*,⁽⁷⁾ *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*⁽⁸⁾ and *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*.⁽⁹⁾ In *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, Horsley develops a picture of Jesus as an Elijah-style social prophet and community organizer. The framework for this portrait is the centrality that Horsley gives to the study of peasant societies in his analysis of the Jesus traditions and to the conflict between urban ruling elites and rural peasants.

Within this framework, Jesus emerges first as an Elijah-type social prophet. The reference, of course, is to the prophet Elijah, a ninth-century B.C.E. figure of ancient Israel who protested against the ruling elites of his day and fomented a social revolution. As a social prophet in the tradition of Elijah, Jesus was passionate about the injustices of the peasant agrarian society of his time. He challenged and indicted the ruling elites and their retainers.

As a community organizer, Jesus sought to reorganize village society into relatively autonomous self-sufficient communities of solidarity. This is the context in which Horsley puts some of the most familiar sayings of Jesus, sayings about lending without question, about giving without worrying about return, sayings about the mutual forgiveness of debts—all of which refer to the reorganization of village life. Horsley points out, as many other scholars have, that the original wording of the Lord's Prayer is "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We've always taken that as a metaphor for trespasses, but Horsley says, in the context of a peasant society, it was probably meant literally—don't hold your indebted neighbor responsible for his debt. That's what the forgiveness of debts means.

Importantly for Horsley, Jesus sought to bring about a social revolution but not a political revolution. The distinction is significant; social revolution starts at the bottom and moves up, and political revolution starts at the top and moves down. A political revolution is intended to change the governing class. Jesus, Horsley argues, was concerned about inaugurating a social revolution; he was not seeking to seize "top down" control of power.

Fifth, I turn to a quick sketch of my own understanding of Jesus. It is found in my *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*,⁽¹⁰⁾ *Jesus, A New Vision*,⁽¹¹⁾ *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*⁽¹²⁾ and *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*.⁽¹³⁾ Like other scholars, I have written hundreds of pages about this, so it's hard to fit into two and one-half minutes here, but I will try. The best way to crystallize my understanding of Jesus is to see it as a sketch that has four major strokes, each stroke corresponding to a type of religious personality known cross-culturally as well as within the Jewish tradition.

The first stroke is the most important one and the one that, perhaps, most distinguishes my understanding of Jesus. That first stroke is understanding Jesus as a "spirit person." Spirit person is a newly coined technical phrase for a type of religious personality that has been known for a long time.

Spirit persons have two primary defining qualities. They have vivid and frequent experiences of another level or layer of reality, which I refer to as the realm of spirit or the realm of God. They have frequent mystical experiences, if you will, although the word mystical is so misunderstood today that I'm not sure how useful it is. Second, by virtue of these experiences, a spirit person becomes a mediator or a funnel or a conduit for the power of the spirit to flow into this world. Characteristically spirit people are healers, although the power of the spirit flows into this world in other ways as well.

It seems obvious to me that, if we think there really are people like this (and anthropological studies as well as historical studies of Israel are filled with them), then Jesus, whatever else needs to be said about him, was one of them. To use only slightly different language, he was one of those who knew God, not just somebody who believed strongly in God, but someone who knew God in his own experience. The phrase "knowing God" is in fact a phrase from the Hebrew Bible that refers to a number of people in the Jewish tradition who knew God in this way (*Jeremiah 31:34; Hosea 4:1, 5:4, 6:6, 13:4*).

The second, third and fourth strokes of my portrait I'll do more quickly because they pick up on themes in other people's work as well. My second stroke is that Jesus was a subversive sage. He was a teacher of wisdom, a particular kind of wisdom that was both subversive and alternative. He subverted conventional wisdom and dominant consciousness and invited his hearers to live by an alternative wisdom.

Third, he was a social prophet, a radical critic of the purity system and, more broadly, of the domination system. I argue that he opposed the politics of purity with what I call a politics of compassion.

And fourth and finally, I see him as a movement founder whose purpose was the transformation of Judaism. That is, he did not intend to establish a new religion but rather to renew or transform his own tradition. The movement that came into existence around him was an inclusive movement that embodied the alternative social vision in his teaching as a wisdom teacher and his message as a social prophet.

The sixth and final contemporary portrait I will describe is the Jesus who emerges in the work of John Dominic Crossan. By the way, I have not told him what I am going to say, so he has neither affected nor censored it. I can only hope it is reasonably accurate.

Dom has been well known in the discipline for about 20 years; much of his early work is on wisdom forms in the teaching of Jesus, namely parables and aphorisms. His 1991 book *The Historical Jesus*⁽¹⁴⁾ is a comprehensive treatment of the historical Jesus, and I think it could be the most significant Jesus book since Albert Schweitzer's at the beginning of this century. In the first 18 months after publication, it sold over 50,000 copies, which is remarkable in the scholarly world, especially for a fairly hefty book of about 500 pages. By the way, Dom has a popular version of his book coming out. He calls it his baby Jesus book although the official title is *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.⁽¹⁵⁾ I've seen it in typescript, and it is also very good.

With these two books, Dom has established himself as the premier Jesus scholar in North America, and I trust that might be worth a free dinner tonight. His book is as important for its method as for its results. His method has two major components. First, he develops a quantifiable way of assessing what is earliest in the Jesus tradition by using an archaeological model. He layers the tradition into four strata, from earliest to latest. Then he counts up the number of attestations of particular sayings or complexes in each layer.

The second element in his methodology is an interdisciplinary approach for interpreting these traditions. This is one of the most striking features of his book. Indeed, his book is the finest and fullest fruition to date of the interdisciplinary

character of the renaissance in historical Jesus scholarship. Studies in cultural and social anthropology, medical anthropology, the sociology of colonial protest movements, the dynamics and structure of pre-industrial peasant societies, honor-shame societies, patron-client societies and so forth, run throughout his pages. The book is a gold mine of information and insights and an important resource book.

The portrait of Jesus that emerges is that Jesus was a Jewish cynic peasant with an alternative social vision. The emphasis upon peasant is important in terms of understanding the message and activity of Jesus. His message could not be too “heady”; it had to have something to do with the body. To use a phrase from Dom’s baby Jesus book, to take seriously the peasant audience of Jesus means that the message of Jesus could not be “too preachy, teachy or speechy.”

In the phrase Jewish cynic, both the adjective and the noun are important. To begin with the noun, Dom suggests that Jesus was both like and unlike Hellenistic cynic teachers. How were they alike? Both taught and enacted ways of shattering convention. Both embodied practice, not just theory, a different way of living, not just a different way of thinking. How were they different? The Hellenistic cynic teachers were urban; they addressed the marketplace, and their teaching was individualistic. Jesus, on the other hand, was rural; he addressed peasants, and there was a much more communitarian dimension to his message.

That last point leads to the alternative social vision of Jesus embodied in his two most characteristic activities, magic and meals. Crossan refers provocatively to Jesus as a magician, which he says he means in a neutral and nonpejorative sense. A magician is somebody else’s healer, someone who heals outside of established religious authority. To do so, of course, subverts religious institutions, just as social banditry subverts political institutions. Unauthorized healing, Crossan suggests, is like religious banditry, outside of the authority structure.

The second most characteristic activity is eating. Crossan refers to the open-table practice of Jesus as open “commensality.” Open commensality embodied an alternative social vision. Eating together without regard for social boundaries subverted the deepest social boundaries—between honor and shame, patron and client, female and male, slave and free, rich and poor. Together, magic and meal embodied religious

and economic egalitarianism that negated the religious and political hierarchies of the day.

I conclude with some observations about where the discipline is and where we're likely to go. I have four brief comments. First, the eschatological debate is not over. I think a change has occurred, and the balance has tipped in favor of a noneschatological reading of the Jesus tradition. But I think the debate will continue.

Second, the greatest consensus among contemporary New Testament scholars is about Jesus as a wisdom teacher, a consensus that has emerged in the last 20 years. The most characteristic forms of Jesus' speech as a wisdom teacher are parables (basically short stories) and aphorisms (short sayings), both of which crystallize insight. Aphorisms are great one-liners. I think it's fascinating that one of the most certain things we can know about Jesus is that he was a storyteller and a speaker of great one-liners.

Third, there is an emerging tendency within the discipline to see Jesus as political, at least in the broad sense of the word, as concerned with the shape of society. Four of the six portraits I sketched see Jesus in this way. The claim is not that he was exclusively political but that he was political and something else. This is a new concept in the discipline. Most scholars in this century have denied that Jesus was political. If Jesus expected the end of everything, why would he be concerned about the social order? Jesus has most often been understood in highly individualistic terms.

Fourth and finally, a comment about Jesus as a spirit person. Most portraits of Jesus do not address this issue. However, in quite different ways, Dom and I, I think, both make this issue central. In one of his articles, Dom refers to Jesus as presumably having had mystical experiences and that Jesus' understanding of the immediacy of God comes from his mystical experiences.⁽¹⁶⁾ If you combine mystical experience and magic, mystic and healer, you have what I mean by spirit person. Whether this will become a central category, I have no idea. But it seems to me an illuminating category.

I conclude with a brief story that goes back to 1988. I was driving through the rain one October morning about six o'clock to the Portland airport to catch a plane to Atlanta. I was flying to Atlanta for a meeting of the Jesus Seminar, at which we were scheduled to vote upon the Lord's Prayer (which is a bizarre thing to do). As I was driving along

thinking about the 50 other scholars from all over the country who were converging on Atlanta to vote on the Lord's Prayer, I was listening to NPR's "Morning Edition." The second lead story on "Morning Edition" that day was about the results of laboratory tests on the Shroud of Turin, which, of course, is the alleged burial shroud of Jesus.

I thought to myself, isn't it amazing that 2,000 years after the death of this Galilean peasant a bunch of us are flying to Atlanta to vote on whether or not he said the Lord's Prayer, and the second lead story in the news is about the Shroud of Turin. It was the same year the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* had come out in the summer, with considerable furor, and that Jesus had been on the cover of *Time* magazine. I was struck by the fact that Jesus is still in the news.

It is striking that this figure continues to exercise such fascinating power on our intellects and our imaginations. The question will be with us for a long time to come. What was he like? What manner of man was he?

Questions & Answers

Question: How does Walter Wink's portrayal of Jesus as a radical revolutionary using nonviolent methods to oppose the domination system fit in with what you have said here?

Marcus J. Borg: The question is about Walter Wink, another of our colleagues, who portrays Jesus as a social revolutionary strongly opposed to the domination system. I think the chapter in which Wink develops that understanding in the third volume of his trilogy—it's called *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress, 1992)—is probably the finest compact analysis I've ever read of the politics of Jesus.

By the domination system, Wink means a combination of the purity system, the patriarchy system, the peasant society system and a few other things as well. I'm not convinced that Jesus was ideologically committed to nonviolence, although I think he was nonviolent. But I think Wink's basic claim, that Jesus radically opposed the domination system of his day and, by extension, the domination system of any day, is very persuasive.

Q: Dr. Borg, as you were summing up your excellent talk, I couldn't help but think that some of us who have spent a long time in the Far East were reminded of the Buddha.

Do you have any comment?

Borg: The question concerns resemblances between Jesus and the Buddha. I regularly name Jesus and the Buddha as the two major religious figures who most resemble each other. Of course, there are all the differences that two different cultures make, the culture of the South Asian subcontinent and the culture of the Middle East and Judaism in particular. So there are cultural differences between the two of them. I also think Jesus was more sociopolitical than the Buddha. But with regard to enlightenment experience and with regard to Jesus' subversive and alternative wisdom being very much like the Buddha's teaching about the Four Noble Truths, I think there are deep similarities. One way I try to express that is to imagine the Buddha and Jesus meeting sometime. If that were to happen, neither one, I'm convinced, would try to convert the other. They would recognize each other.

Q: I'm wondering, being new to this subject, if these views of Jesus don't reflect more on the 20th century than they do on the first century. I mean, he's sort of a stand-up comedian, a cynic, a sort of new-age mystic. Are we hearing more about the 20th century than the first century ?

Borg: That's a question we historians have to face all the time. One can only try to be self-aware and self-critical as to the possibility of doing that. The other quick comment I would make is that sometimes the experiences of a particular time lead us to see the past more clearly rather than less clearly. In his book *What Is History?* (Random House, 1967), the English historian E. H. Carr draws a comparison between the work of a historian and a person observing a parade, the parade being the moving process of history. Carr says that the historian can never sit in the bleachers and watch the parade because he or she is also part of the historical procession. As the historical procession winds back and forth, the angle of vision on the past is constantly changing. Now we will always see from our own present, but some presents, I am convinced, enable us to see things that other presents don't. By being as self-aware as possible, we can, to some degree, control how much we project our own interests onto the past. I don't have any interest in Jesus being a peasant reformer. I'd rather he was a middle class guy who drove a Mitsubishi. So I appreciate the comment, and we have to be very much aware of it. But I think we do try to be aware of it.

Marcus J. Borg (d. 2015) held the Hundere Chair in Religion and Culture in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University. He was the author of many books, including the bestselling *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (Harper San Francisco, 1994).

[All work >](#)