

A Hermeneutic of Discontinuity

The Problem of Continuity



There is a crisis of identity in the mainline churches today that has focused primarily on issues of sexuality, but more fundamental theological issues are at stake. Unfortunately, what is really a theological crisis often has been interpreted in non-theological language, in terms of the political rhetoric of the “culture wars,” of a “Fundamentalist” takeover of the church, in terms of the value of embracing pluralism or diversity in the church. In attempting to address a theological crisis with non-theological categories, these interpretations are fundamentally inadequate.¹

That the primary categories of interpretation have been non-theological does not mean that there has been no theological interpretation whatsoever. In what follows, I will suggest that theological interpretation of the current theological crisis has focused on the problem of interpretation itself, or, rather, the contemporary implications of how we interpret the Scriptures and Christian tradition and apply that interpretation to our lives, what is sometimes called the problem of “hermeneutics.”² There are a number of related hermeneutical issues that are crucial to the discussion.

First, there is a basic question of continuity or discontinuity; specifically, is there a continuity or discontinuity between the canon of Scripture (as well as the subsequent tradition of the early church), and the contemporary church? Assuming there must be some continuity if we are going to call ourselves Christians at all, where does that continuity lie?

A second and obviously related issue has to do with the question of unity and diversity, both within the canon, and in later church tradition – “obviously related,” because, if Scripture and church tradition have no intrinsic unity, the content of Christian faith has no genuine identity, and it is meaningless to speak of continuity at all. Or, if there is continuity, that continuity could at most be with a limited selection of what we find in Scripture and church tradition, or else, a continuity of discontinuity itself. And there have been those who have advocated the latter. Some would insist that since the history of the tradition is itself a history of irresolvable disagreement and conflict, there is no reason to expect agreement today. The church, it is claimed, has always been a collection of disparate communities, each with its own agenda, and each in mutual disagreement with other claimants to Christian identity.

A third question has to do with the relation between meaning and texts, and is related to questions of epistemology that have arisen since Descartes and Kant, but have become pressing because of the rise of post-modernity. Given the central role that the canonical biblical text has played for Christian self-understanding, is meaning something that is derived from the text, or, rather, is meaning something that is imposed on the text? If the former, given the vast diversity of readings throughout history, how do we know which reading is the correct one? If the latter, how do we decide between the various communities that attempt to impose their meanings on the text? Or should we even try, in which case meaning becomes

a political struggle between opposing interpretive claimants rather than a hermeneutical exercise? Of course, the very expression "canonical biblical text" itself assumes enough of a unity between various biblical "texts," written by numerous individuals over a period of hundreds of years, that it is meaningful to refer to this collection as a single "canon" or "Bible." But that is also in contention.

Fourth, where is the location of any hoped for continuity? Is it found in the canonical text itself, in something behind or beyond the text to which the text refers (redemptive history, ontology, religious experience?), in the consciousness of the individual(s) interpreting or appropriating the text, or in a community that understands itself to be the proper interpreter of the text, which hands the text on to subsequent generations?

Fifth, what is the concrete subject matter of continuity, of unity of meaning, that provides the ground of continuity between the biblical canon, earlier Christian tradition, and the contemporary Christian community? That is, what is historic Christianity all about, and how does the contemporary church appropriate that?

The above are largely general hermeneutical questions. They point to key issues in the current crisis, but they are the kinds of interpretive questions that would be relevant to any community that saw itself as in some sense in continuity with a previous tradition that was text-oriented, for example, a group of Platonists who were trying to assess to what extent they were in continuity with Plato's own writings, or American Supreme Court justices trying to assess whether a given law was constitutional, that is, in accord with the Constitution of the United States, or even a group of musicians who were trying to assess whether their playing of Mozart was an accurate enough account of his music to be considered "playing Mozart." However, in a hermeneutical crisis involving Christian faith, there are, in addition, distinctively

theological questions involved in the interpretation and appropriation of Scripture.

One of the characteristic features of Christian faith is the notion of revelation. Historically, Christians have believed that God has spoken and acted in specific ways, and that the Bible is not simply a collection of human speculations or helpful reflections, but is an account of God's words and deeds. For example, in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments are claimed to be the direct word of God given to Moses and the Hebrew people at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:1-21). In the New Testament, the epistle to the Hebrews states that, where God formerly spoke through prophets, he has now spoken through his Son Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-2) . So, first, given the centrality of revelation for Christian faith, what is the content or subject matter of revelation?

Second, given that Scripture has been understood to be in some sense a record of or witness to divine revelation, is God in himself who he is in his revelation? That is, is the text itself in some kind of continuity with the nature of God, and of God's intentions? Can we trust the word of Scripture to be or to provide a faithful witness to the word of God? At the same time, can we trust God to have given us a word that can reliably be found in or witnessed to by Scripture? Is God's character stable enough that the word given in revelation can be trusted to be a stable word? Could God change his mind? Could God lie?

If the question of the subject matter of revelation and the question of whether God is in himself who he is in his revelation are the first two properly theological questions that need to be addressed, questions of continuity necessarily concern the subject matter of revelation. Questions of continuity and discontinuity regularly concern the following:

Continuity between the Old and New Testaments

The academic tendency to speak of “Hebrew Scriptures” and “Christian Scriptures” rather than “Old” and “New Testament” itself reflects an assumption that continuity here is a problem. The problem is not new. Historically, the division between Judaism and Christianity points to a disagreement between two different communities about whether or not the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth were the culmination and fulfillment of previous biblical revelation or not. According to Christians, Jesus is the messianic descendant of King David, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, the one who has inaugurated the Kingdom of God; he is the incarnate Son of God who died for the sins of humanity, who rose from the dead, and will return again to judge and save the world, and the Bible, accordingly, consists of an Old Testament and a New Testament. According to Jews, Jesus is not any of these things, and the Jewish Bible is not the Old Testament, but the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the second century, the heretical movements of Gnosticism and Marcionism posited discontinuity between Old and New Testaments in a different way, rejecting not the New Testament, but the Old, denying that the God of Israel was the Creator of the world or the Father of Jesus. For Irenaeus, the primary apologist against Gnosticism, the question of continuity between the Old and New Testament was the crucial hermeneutical question. The God of the Old Testament was also the Father of Jesus, and the Creator who had redeemed sinful humanity through the saving work of Jesus.³

Although a second century heresy, variations on Marcionism reappear periodically. Some versions of Lutheran law-gospel hermeneutics have reduced the Old Testament to the level of a “law” that only condemns, and has been superseded by the New Testament “gospel.” Liberal Protestantism has regularly shown Marcionite tendencies; in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the “father” of Liberal Protestant theology, placed the religion of the Old Testament on the same level as

other non-Christian religions. The German historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack called for the dismissal of the Old Testament from the canon. In the mid-twentieth century, the anti-semitism of the German Christians of the Nazi Third Reich, such as those of New Testament scholar Emanuel Hirsch, expressed itself in fierce attacks on the Old Testament. After World War II, Rudolf Bultmann, perhaps the most prominent New Testament scholar of the time, denied that the Old Testament could be revelation for Christians.⁴ In the last decades of the twentieth century, feminist theologians regularly repudiated the God of the Old Testament as an oppressive patriarchal male deity.⁵

Almost as problematic has been the tendency of Christians not to reject the Old Testament in a Marcionist manner, but to downplay its significance by muting its distinctive voice. This has been done in numerous ways. In the patristic and Medieval church, allegorical or figurative interpretations sometimes eclipsed the literal meaning of the text as fanciful readings were imposed on the text in order to give it a New Testament meaning.⁶

A similar tendency to read the Old Testament through New Testament eyes has characterized much "orthodox" Protestant dogmatic theology which, by collating of proof-texts and an extensive system of typology "artificially screwed up" the language of the Old Testament "to the pitch of the New in order that both Testaments may be on the same spiritual plain."⁷ Accompanying this tendency to read the Old Testament through New Testament eyes was a tendency among dogmatic theologians to ignore much of the Old Testament, as the logical outline of systematic theology tended to be one of creation/fall/redemption, moving directly from the creation and fall narratives of Genesis to the incarnation and atoning work of Jesus Christ, quickly passing over God's covenant with Israel. Loss of the Old Testament in dogmatic theology has

often been paralleled by a discomfort about preaching from the Old Testament in the pulpit, with pastors (both “conservative” and “liberal”) either ignoring the Old Testament or appealing to it primarily for moralistic examples.

At the opposite extreme from the approach of Protestant orthodoxy was the historicism of the “history of religions” approach, which, by focusing on historical reconstruction of numerous sources behind the texts, as well as the distinct voices of those texts, tended to lose, not only any unity to the Old Testament, and coherence between the Old Testament and the New, but also, any sense of divine revelation.⁸ Accompanying this “historical emphasis” has often been a “developmental” understanding of the relation between Old and New Testaments, in which the Old Testament, having done its work, now could be laid aside as representing a “primitive” understanding of religion that could be surpassed.⁹ In contrast to tendencies either to view the Old Testament as in discontinuity with the New Testament, or to dismiss its relevance in other ways is the affirmation of numerous biblical theologians who assert that the question of the continuity between the Old and New Testament is the crucial question for a hermeneutics of biblical theology.¹⁰

Continuity between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of faith”

The problem of continuity between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of faith” concerns the relationship between the Jesus of Nazareth who actually lived in first century Palestine, and Jesus as he is portrayed in the gospels of the New Testament, and is believed in by the church. For most of church history, it was assumed that the gospels could be trusted to provide an accurate portrayal of the Jesus who actually lived, and that any apparent differences between them could be resolved through harmonization. With the advent of the Enlightenment, with its deist notion of divinity, and a

corresponding rejection of miracles, along with the advent of modern historical method, and the application of historical criticism to the New Testament, it was realized that it was both possible and necessary to distinguish between the Jesus who actually lived, and the Jesus about whom we know through the gospels.

In principle, this is a legitimate distinction insofar as any historical account is an imaginative reconstruction of its author, involving memory, selection of some significant events rather than others, and authorial interpretation of the meaning of events. However, the earliest practitioners of the "Quest for the Historical Jesus" were primarily skeptics who argued for discontinuity between the Jesus who really lived and the gospel portrayals of him. H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768) was the initiator of the "First Quest for the Historical Jesus." Reimarus argued that Jesus was a failed revolutionary whose followers invented a view of Jesus after his death that they knew to be false.¹¹ G. E. Lessing (1729-1781), Reimarus' posthumous publisher, is known for "Lessing's ditch," the postulate that "the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason." Applied to the miraculous stories of the gospels (such as Jesus' resurrection), Lessing pointed out that reports of miracles are not themselves miracles, and need to be tested against contemporary experience. Since there is no contemporary experience of miracles, any claim that miracles happened in the past must be less certain historically than that contemporary experience.¹²

Numerous "lives of Jesus" appeared in the nineteenth century, the most significant of which was David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-1836). Rejecting both the rationalism of the Enlightenment as well as the supernaturalism of the orthodox, Strauss introduced the category of "myth" to account for the miraculous elements in the gospel.¹³ Perhaps the last

significant liberal "Life of Jesus" was that of Adolf von Harnack. In his book, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900),¹⁴ Harnack dismissed the miraculous accounts of the gospels as examples of the credulity of the first century, acknowledging that "miracles, it is true, do not happen," but that the "question of miracles is of relative indifference in comparison with everything else which is to be found in the Gospels." What is that "everything else" that mattered for Harnack? It was Jesus' proclamation of the "Fatherhood of God" and the "infinite value of the human soul." According to Harnack, "the Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not the Son."¹⁵ The Roman Catholic Modernist George Tyrrell, famously wrote: "The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well."¹⁶

The original Quest was not confined to Protestant figures alone. In *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1902), Alfred Loisy, the "founder of Catholic Modernism," took John Henry Newman's theory of doctrinal development to what he considered its logical conclusion.¹⁷ Loisy argued that the divergences between the synoptic gospels, as well as their differences with the gospel of John, means that they cannot be taken as "literal history." The gospels present an idealized picture of Jesus, transformed in their writer's imaginations by the resurrection. Loisy portrays Jesus as an eschatological preacher of the Kingdom of God. Although Jesus did understand himself to be the Son of God, he understood this in the Jewish sense as being equivalent to "the Messiah." Loisy's famous saying summarized the theme of the book: "Jesus came preaching the kingdom, but what arrived was the church."¹⁸

Three books marked the end of the First Quest for the historical Jesus, Wilhelm Wrede's *The Messianic Secret*

(1901),¹⁹ Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906)²⁰ and Martin Kahler's *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (1896).²¹ Wrede emphasized two points that have become mainstays of subsequent New Testament scholarship. First, even Mark's gospel, which is recognized as the earliest, has a thoroughly dogmatic character; Jesus is a supernatural figure with a divine mission. Accordingly, his motives cannot be understood using immanent historical categories. Second, the resurrection appearances produced a radical change in his disciples' relation to him. The gospels are written from the perspective of the resurrection. Wrede concluded from this that Mark does not present actual history, but is rather a dogmatic document. For example, Wrede suggests that the reason that Mark consistently presents the disciples as not understanding Jesus' messianic mission is that Mark is trying to explain why the disciples did not recognize Jesus' identity until after the resurrection. In reality, Wrede claimed, Jesus never claimed to be the messiah, and the early church projected its later beliefs about his identity back into the gospel narratives. Because of this dogmatic perspective that pervades the gospels, the historian can only approach them with skepticism.

Schweitzer wrote a lengthy survey of the major writers of the First Quest, and concluded that they had failed insofar as they had domesticated Jesus by trying to make him intelligible to modern people. To the contrary, Schweitzer concluded that the one thing that we can know with certainty about Jesus was that he was an "apocalyptic." (Schweitzer used the word "eschatology.") Jesus expected the world to end in his lifetime. Unfortunately, Jesus was mistaken, and he was crucified, disappointed that God had not acted as he had hoped. The entire history of Christianity can be explained as the continuing effort of the church to make sense of the "non-occurrence of the Parousia."²²

Finally, in *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ*, Martin Kahler distinguished between the Jesus who could be recovered using the tools of historical critical method, and the Jesus in whom the church places its faith. Kahler argued that the Jesus of the historians of the First Quest was nothing more than a hypothetical construction of the scholars. To the contrary, the only Jesus that the gospel texts know about is the dogmatic "Christ of faith," the crucified and risen Jesus to whom the gospels bear witness and the church has always believed. "The risen Lord is not the historical Jesus *behind* the gospels, but the Christ of the apostolic preaching, of the *whole* New Testament." The Jesus of the New Testament is thus incompatible with the Jesus pursued by the historical scholars, and the pursuit of the "historical Jesus" using the tools of the First Quest is a dead end. For example, the principle of analogy (which attempts to understand Jesus by comparing him with what we know about other people) "contradict[s] the whole tenor of the Gospel portrayals of Jesus," insofar as they portray him as one without sin. The faith of the disciples is that Jesus Christ is Lord, the conqueror of sin, guilt, and death. Thus, "[t]he distinction between Jesus Christ and ourselves is not one of degree but of kind." The gospels confront us with an "Either/Or" challenge. On the one hand, if, as those who pursue a hypothetical "historical Jesus" assume, Jesus was merely a "religious genius" surpassing the rest of humanity only in degree, then the New Testament confession is an obscuring of the facts, and the gospels' entire portrayal must be viewed with suspicion. Conversely, if Jesus is the sinless crucified risen Lord worshiped by the church, then the "question is whether the historian will humble himself before the unique sinless Person – the only proper attitude in the presence of the norm of all morality."²³ The choice is as stark as that.

Wrede, Schweitzer, and Kahler effectively ended the First Quest. It seemed that historical critics had three choices. They could agree with Wrede that the dogmatic perspective that

pervaded the gospels was an imposition by the early church that so radically distorted the true character of Jesus' life and mission that the critic was left with complete skepticism about the actual historical events. Or historians could agree with Schweitzer that we could know something about Jesus – that he was a failed apocalyptic fanatic – but this turned Jesus into a character who was completely foreign to the modern mind.²⁴ Or believers could do as did Kahler, rejecting the fundamental attempt of the critics to create a hypothetical Jesus of their own historical imaginations that differed from the Jesus of the gospels as a misguided attempt to reconstruct Jesus as a reflection of their own self-image, recognizing instead that the only Jesus of which the New Testament speaks is the sinless, crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ who is believed in and worshiped by the church. It is this Jesus who was the “historic” Jesus, that is, not only the Jesus whose “historic” influence created the church and in whom the church places its trust, but also the Jesus who really lived in first century Palestine, but who is inaccessible to the methodology of the historical critics because his sinlessness and his identity as Lord make him without analogy to other human beings.

In light of this radical choice, biblical scholars after the First Quest broke into two distinct camps, those who advocated a “hermeneutic of discontinuity,” and those who advocated a “hermeneutic of continuity.” Discontinuity can be seen in Rudolf Bultmann, who turned Kahler's distinction on its head, concluding (as did Wrede) that we can know nothing for certain about the “historical Jesus,” meaning not the Jesus of the historical critic's construction, but the Jesus who actually lived.²⁵ Also agreeing with Schweitzer, however, Bultmann concluded that we can know that Jesus was an eschatological prophet who proclaimed the end of the world, whose hope was not fulfilled, since the world still continues.²⁶ Jesus' eschatological proclamation is “mythology,” as are such

notions as a "Father in heaven," a Son of God who becomes incarnate and dies for the sins of the world on the cross, and a final judgment. Modern human beings can no longer believe in "three-decker universes" (with heaven over our heads and earth beneath our feet), biblical eschatology or miraculous interventions of God. Bultmann's attitude is illustrated in his famous quote: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."²⁷

Rather than simply abandoning Christian faith in light of the above, Bultmann advocated the following: (1) Jesus Christ is not the subject matter of Christian faith, but merely its presupposition. (2) The actual subject matter of the New Testament is not Jesus, but the faith of the early church.²⁸ (3) The mythological language of the New Testament can be salvaged by "demythologization," by re-interpreting it "existentially," that is, by unwrapping a "deeper meaning." For example, the "deeper meaning" of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom is "to be open to God's future which is really imminent for each one of us." Statements about acts of God as cosmic events are illegitimate; as are statements that he offered his Son as a sacrifice. Rather, that God has created the world means that "I understand myself to be a creature which owes its existence to God." That the Bible is the word of God means that I can read the Bible as a "word which is addressed to me."²⁹

It is not clear why Bultmann believed that the person of Jesus is necessary for such self-understanding. Bultmann translated Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom into an "existential call for decision," and spoke of Christ as "the eschatological event." This has something to do with the preaching of the church – "It is the eschatological once-for-all because the word becomes event here and now in the living voice of the

preaching.” – and something to do with justification by faith; demythologization is “the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought.”³⁰ That is, Christian faith cannot depend on historical events (such as the incarnation, the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus or a future eschatology) nor on attempts by biblical scholars to confirm such historical events by the tools of historical criticism.

In the mid-twentieth century, some of Bultmann’s disciples became concerned that Bultmann’s approach was docetic insofar as it reduced the connection between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith to the mere fact (*dass*) that Jesus had existed. In an attempt to overcome this “docetic” gap, Ernst Kasemann, Ernst Fuchs, Gunther Bornkamm,³¹ and other disciples of Bultmann began a “New Quest” for the historical Jesus. However, given their assumptions about how the documents of the New Testament were primarily expressions of faith in the resurrection rather than historical witnesses, it was extremely difficult to distinguish between those parts of the gospels that provided accurate historical information, and those that were instead projections of post-resurrection faith back into the life of Jesus. It was presumed, for example, that Jesus did not perform miracles or claim any Messianic titles.

The primary critical tool adopted by the “New Questers” was the “criterion of dissimilarity”: only those incidents and sayings in the gospels that had no parallels to either Judaism or the New Testament church could be presumed to be authentic deeds and sayings of Jesus, because only these could not be accounted for either as carry-overs from Judaism or as projections of New Testament faith back into the life of Jesus. Based on this criterion, the New Questers were able to find some distinctives in the gospels that they believed had to be genuine deeds and sayings of Jesus, for example, that Jesus claimed a unique authority for himself, that Jesus ate

with sinners.

While the criterion of dissimilarity may be helpful in distinguishing deeds and words of Jesus that were uniquely his, it is problematic as an exclusive methodological tool. Does it really make sense to assume that we can account for the life of Jesus by detaching him from his Jewish environment or that the faith of the New Testament writers that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God who died and rose again had *no* connection whatsoever to the Jesus who really lived? Any "historical Jesus" recovered by this tool would necessarily be eccentric, having nothing in common with either first the century Judaism in which Jesus lived nor with the New Testament church of his followers. However, the real irony of the New Quest is that a basic contradiction lies at its heart. In order to overcome a *disconnection* between the Jesus who actually lived and the Christ of faith of the New Testament church, the advocates of the New Quest adapted as a method to identify that which was authentically historical a tool that presumed *discontinuity* between both Jesus and his Jewish environment, and between Jesus and the New Testament church.

What became known as the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus began in the early 1980's, and, as with the prior Quests has had its advocates of the hermeneutics of discontinuity. The Jesus Seminar, which began meeting in 1985, was famous (or infamous?) for its tactic of casting votes for the authenticity of Jesus' sayings using beads of various colors: red meant Jesus certainly said it, pink meant he probably said something like it, gray meant he probably did not say it, and black meant it unlikely he said anything like it. Notoriously the Seminar concluded that only 18% of the sayings ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were likely to have been uttered by Jesus rather than being creations of the early church.³² Again, because the methodology presumed that dogmatic material was an imposition of the faith of the early church and did not go back to Jesus, a judgment of discontinuity was inevitable.

While the Third Quest had much in common with the previous quests, for example, in its use of tools such as dissimilarity as a criterion of authenticity, it is also distinct from the previous two quests in the following ways:

(1) Abandonment of eschatology. The Third Quest tended to reject Schweitzer's image of an eschatological Jesus, insisting rather that the notion of a future kingdom of God was a notion of both John the Baptist and the early church, but not Jesus.

(2) Abandonment of Mark. Where the earlier Quests had relied heavily on Mark's gospel as the earliest, the Third Quest tended rather to distrust Mark and the Synoptic material dependent on him, and turn instead to a reconstructed "Q" gospel, the material common to Matthew and Luke and not in Mark. Since this material consisted largely of sayings, the Jesus who resulted was often portrayed as a kind of sage or "talking head."

(3) Reliance on non-biblical material. In addition to the "Q" material, Third Questers also turned to the non-canonical "Gospel of Thomas" (a gnostic gospel of the late second century) as well as sociological re-constructions of the non-Jewish hellenistic world to cast light on the historical Jesus. If the first two tendencies tended to distance Jesus from the New Testament and the early church, this third (combined with the criterion of dissimilarity) distanced him that much further from Judaism.

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, both members of the Jesus Seminar, are two of the more well known advocates of a hermeneutic of discontinuity. Crossan views Jesus as an illiterate Cynic Jewish peasant whose radical egalitarianism was shown in his table fellowship. Crossan compares working through the gospel texts to arrive at the "historical Jesus" to an archaeological dig or the restoration of a master painting in which numerous layers are removed to recover an

original that has been overlaid with the traditions and interpretations of the early church. However, there is a circularity based on already foregone conclusions in Crossan's method that distinguishes between the genuinely historical and later church interpretation. For example, although Jesus speaks of the Son of man using both present and future language in the gospels, Crossan eliminates all future references as unhistorical because he knows that the historical Jesus did not hold a futurist eschatology. How does he know this? Because all authentic sayings of Jesus interpret the kingdom of God as a present reality. But what about those sayings that refer to a future coming of the Son of man? They are not authentic.³³

Crossan's methodology eliminates huge swaths of gospel material. We know that miracles do not happen because "what God does now is what God always did."³⁴ Stories of Jesus' healings and exorcisms are thus about healing on the "social level," inviting the outcast back into the community, not physical healings. The nature miracles of the gospel are dismissed as "authority parables": "They are not about Jesus' power over nature, but about the disciples' authority in the Church."³⁵ Similarly, Crossan does not accept as historical any appearances of the risen Jesus to his disciples because these are primarily about political authority: The resurrection stories "tell us who is in charge, now that Jesus is no longer personally present."³⁶ Such hierarchical authority is incompatible with Jesus' original egalitarianism. Crossan eliminates large numbers of events as "not historical": the virginal conception and infancy narratives (miracles don't happen); Jesus' twelve disciples (inconsistent with Jesus' egalitarianism); Jesus' synagogue reading of Isaiah in Luke 4 (Jesus was illiterate); any indications of a futurist eschatology; all nature miracles; Jesus' healings as actual physical healings; the last supper; Peter's denial of Jesus; Jesus' burial (no one knows what happened to Jesus' body); the

empty tomb (there was no tomb); the resurrection appearances – all are rejected. Basically, anything in the gospels that does not portray Jesus as an egalitarian cynic Jewish peasant is dismissed as unhistorical. And how do we know these stories are unhistorical? Because we know that Jesus was an egalitarian cynic Jewish peasant!

Rather than distinguishing between the “Jesus of History” and the “Christ of faith,” Marcus Borg prefers to distinguish between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. The difference here is not the difference between the Jesus who lived in the first century and was crucified under Pontius Pilate and the Jesus who has now risen from the dead, but “Jesus as a figure of history before his death,” and the “Jesus of Christian tradition and experience.”³⁷ Borg does not clarify whether by the “pre-Easter Jesus” he means the Jesus who actually lived or the Jesus who can be recovered using the tools of the historian, nor whether the post-Easter Jesus is the Jesus who actually rose from the dead or rather the Jesus believed in by Christians, and who might well be just as much a product of Christian projection as the first might be the product of the projection of liberal Protestant biblical scholars. What is clear is that Borg focuses on the discontinuity between the the Jesus who really lived and the historical events and persons that lie at the origins of the movements that became Christianity and its consequent developed traditional forms. Borg writes: “[A]s an image of the historical Jesus—of what Jesus was like as a figure of history before his death—the popular image is not accurate.” What Borg refers to as the “popular image” is really the constitutive understanding of the mission of Christ found in the scriptures and creeds – that Jesus is, in Borg’s words, “a divine or semidivine figure” sent by God to die on the cross for the sins of the world and to open the way to eternal life. Borg characterizes this “popular image” as “seriously misleading.”³⁸ What Borg offers instead is a “pre-Easter Jesus”

who shares many of the same characteristics as Crossan's. Like Crossan's, Borg's Jesus launched a social program. Jesus offered an "alternative social vision"; he formed a community of compassion and inclusiveness in contrast to the "purity codes" of Pharisaic Judaism, and his table fellowship challenged the purity system. Borg's Jesus is, like Crossan's, "non-eschatological" and "non-messianic."³⁹ In a reversal of C.S. Lewis's classic "Lord, Liar, or Lunatic" trilemma,⁴⁰ Borg has "misgivings" about whether Jesus believed that he was the messiah or that his death would have salvific significance: "[I]f you think you're the light of the world, you're not. That is, perceiving one-self in such grand terms is a fairly good indicator that you're off base. . . . [I]f you think you are the messiah, you're not."⁴¹ Borg is emphatic that Jesus did not understand his death as redemptive: "[W]e do not think Jesus saw his purpose as dying for the sins of the world."⁴² Borg does seem willing to go beyond Crossan by speaking of Jesus as a "spirit person," a person like many religious leaders in various religions for whom the divine or sacred is an "experiential" reality.⁴³ Borg is also willing to speak of Jesus as a "sage," a teacher of wisdom.

Borg speaks of the "post-Easter Jesus" as, in some sense, a continuing reality of Christian experience. Whether this means that Jesus actually survived death is not clear. What all of this does not mean is that Borg understands Jesus to have been the Son of God incarnate, to have died for the sins of the world, or to have risen bodily from the dead. Borg is willing to recite the words of the Nicene Creed, but understands the language as "culturally relative [Hellenistic] terms": "To see Jesus as 'the Wisdom of God' and 'Son of God' and 'messiah' means to take very seriously what we see in him as a disclosure of God."⁴⁴ Indeed, the advantage of such an approach is that it frees us from exclusivist claims about Christian finality: "[R]ather than being the exclusive revelation of

God, [Jesus] is one of many mediators of the sacred.”⁴⁵

Continuity between the First-century and Second-century Church

The question of continuity between the first and second century church is crucial for contemporary understandings of the nature of Christian faith because it was in the second century that the church identified itself as “catholic” in consequence of the crisis of identity occasioned by gnosticism. If gnostics rejected continuity between the Old Testament God and the God of Jesus, they also understood their own identity differently from those Christians who identified themselves as “catholic.” They had their own gospels, their own understandings of who Jesus was, their own understandings of salvation, and they claimed that they were the true successors of Jesus in contrast to catholic Christians.

While gnosticism historically was understood as a major deviation from Christian faith, in recent decades the claim has been made that the catholic “orthodoxy” of the second century was simply one of many groups that claimed to be Christian in the second century and that the gnostic claim was just as legitimate. In her influential book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels acknowledges correctly that those modern Christians who regard the New Testament as authoritative, who endorse the creeds, and who celebrate the sacraments, represent the triumph of the catholic orthodoxy of the second-century church over the alternative interpretations of Christianity represented by gnosticism.⁴⁶ At the same time, the central theme of her book is that if the gnostic writings had been allowed the same authority as the canonical texts, Christianity would look very different. (One can hardly disagree.) That the canonical texts survived and the gnostic writings did not (except insofar as they have been rediscovered in archaeological sites like Nag Hammadi) reflects that it is the winners who write history. Pagels suggests that the second-century Catholic church embraced the

doctrines that stand at the heart of the Rule of Faith—divine omnipotence and monotheism, creation, atonement, resurrection, again, the central themes of what we have called constitutive Christianity—because they established a “framework for clerical authority”; the belief in “one Creator God” confirmed the authority of “one bishop” as “monarch” of the church.⁴⁷

The scholarly precedents for Pagel’s views can be found in Adolf von Harnack’s interpretation of Church history as a triumph of the “Hellenization” of dogma, brought about by the corruption of early Christian thought by the importation of classic Greek metaphysics⁴⁸; in Walter Bauer’s thesis that “orthodoxy” was only one of many early movements within Christianity, and that in many geographical locations in the first few centuries, so-called “heresies” actually preceded and were more wide-spread than orthodoxy⁴⁹; and in Wilhelm Bossuet’s thesis that a major shift took place in the early history of pre-biblical Christianity when Gentile Christians began to worship Jesus as a divine Hellenistic Lord (*kurios*) rather than as the exalted Son of Man of Jewish Christianity.⁵⁰ On a popular level, Dan Brown embraces this view and runs with it in his novel the *Da Vinci Code*, claiming erroneously that the Nag Hammadi scrolls (gnostic gospels) are the “earliest Christian records” and that it was the emperor Constantine who created the biblical canon and first declared that Jesus was Son of God at Nicea in 325 AD.⁵¹

Continuity of Textual Meaning

If questions of historical continuity raise issues about continuity between the biblical text and the historical realities to which it refers as well as questions of continuity between Israel, Jesus, and the subsequent church, there are also questions of literary continuity, of continuity of meaning. In a post-modern setting, it has been inevitable that questions have been raised about whether the Bible has a

meaning or at least a meaning that can be appropriated by contemporary readers. Two of the more significant challenges to biblical meaning have been projectionism and the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

Projectionism

The nineteenth century atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach argued in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) that the idea of God is nothing more than the projection of human values to infinity.⁵² If the Bible states that humanity was created in the image of God, Feuerbach’s thesis was that the reverse is the case. When people think they are worshiping God, they are actually worshiping only an image of themselves imagined to exist without imperfections.

Although Feurbach’s thesis was intended as a criticism of Christianity, there have been in recent decades liberal Protestant theologians who have endorsed a similar theory of anthropological projection, but have understood this to be something positive.

The feminist theologian Sallie McFague has been one of the most influential advocates of projectionism. McFague has argued that all religious language is fundamentally metaphorical, projections of human experience to talk about the relation between the divine and the world: “[T]heology . . . is principally an elaboration of a few basic metaphors and models in an attempt to express the claim of Christianity in a powerful, comprehensive, and contemporary way. . . . the elaboration of key metaphors and models.”⁵³

People who live in different cultures and periods have used different metaphors to indicate their own understanding of this relation between the divine and the human, and these metaphors are appropriate to those cultures and periods. So the primary metaphors of the Bible were illuminative of the experiences that people had at that time. However, metaphors

from one time cannot simply be reappropriated in another time without change because their experiences are not necessarily our experiences. To be faithful to the Bible does not mean repeating outdated metaphors but engaging in the same process of interpreting contemporary experience in terms of metaphors that are relevant to our own time. Just as the people who write the Bible used metaphors that spoke to their own needs, so we are free to project metaphors that speak to ours.⁵⁴

There is, then, a priority of the present in McFague's theology. She writes: "[F]or theology to do less than fit our present understanding – for it to accept basic assumptions about reality from a very different time – seems blatantly wrongheaded."⁵⁵ And McFague finds that many of the metaphors used in Scripture are inappropriate for our time. The dominant metaphors of the tradition – both in Scripture and tradition – do not speak to current human experience or needs because they are rooted in images that are hierarchical, patriarchal, and dualist, and are thus oppressive and idolatrous. Current experience needs metaphors that are inclusive, nonhierarchical, ecological. McFague suggests then the abandonment of such biblical metaphors of God as king, father, and transcendent creator: "[T]he basic metaphors and models have remained relatively constant: they are triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal. . . [T]here is no way to do theology for our time with outmoded or oppressive metaphors and models."⁵⁶ McFague suggests that metaphors of Mother, Lover, and Friend, and the earth as God's body are particularly appropriate for our time because they are nonhierarchical, inclusive, and holistic.

The use of such metaphors should not suggest that we actually know anything about the God of whom we use the metaphors. The claims made by metaphorical theology are "small." Such metaphors are neither true nor false. They do not speak of God in God's own nature, but of our attempt to express our own

experience of God. Theology is “mainly fiction,” but some metaphors are better than others because of their pragmatic value in a given era.⁵⁷ In a passage reminiscent of Feuerbach, McFague states:

[S]ince no metaphor or model refers properly or directly to God, many are necessary. All are inappropriate, partial, and inadequate . . . [M]odels of God are not definitions of God, but likely accounts of experiences of relating to God with the help of relationships we know and understand. . . Predicates such as omniscience, infinity, omnipotence, and omnipresence do not properly apply to God, either, for the meaning of all such language – knowledge, finitude, power, presence – applies properly only to our existence, not God’s. All that such predicates represent is an attempt to make human qualities limitless.

Metaphorical language about God is “principally adverbial.” It has “to do with how we relate to God rather than defining the nature of God”⁵⁸

McFague is clear that metaphorical theology is projectionist and pragmatic, and does not actually tell us anything positive about God’s own nature: “I do not know whether God (the inner being of God) can be described by the models of mother, lover, and friend.” Such models “*project a possibility*: [McFague’s emphasis] that God’s love can be seen through the screen of these human loves.” Such models are “illuminating, fruitful.” McFague admits:

This is largely a functional, pragmatic view of truth . . . but I do not see any way out of it; I do not know what God is, but I find some models better than other for constructing an image of God commensurate with my trust in a God as on the side of life. . . . We really do not know: the hints and clues we have of the way things are . . . are too fragile, too little . . . for much more than a hypothesis, a guess, a

*projection of a possibility that, although it can be comprehensive and illuminating, may not be true. We can believe it is, and act as if it were . . .*⁵⁹

In the end, McFague is not even willing to say that God is good: "Since we do not know *what* God's being is, we have no corollary for asserting 'goodness' to God. . . . 'Goodness' can *only* be a metaphor when asserted of God . . . that is, we use the associations of human goodness as a grid or screen to say something about God."⁶⁰

What we believe about God, the world, revelation, and religious language will have inevitable implications for what we believe about the person and work of Jesus Christ. McFague consistently draws the implications of a projectionist metaphorical theology for Christology; the person and work of Christ are not in any way constitutive of salvation, but are rather illustrative of a salvation available elsewhere, indeed everywhere. The significance of the story of Jesus lies in its "present relevance," not its past reference. It is "paradigmatic" in that it is "illuminating" of the God-world relationship "for today."⁶¹ Jesus' parables illuminate the destabilizing element of that relationship; his table fellowship with outcasts illuminates inclusiveness; the cross illuminates its nonhierarchical emphasis. At the same time, the story of Jesus is only a resource. Jesus is only one savior, and there are others.⁶²

In contrast to the "illuminative," "paradigmatic" understanding of Jesus of metaphorical theology is the traditional understanding of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus as an atonement for the forgiveness of sins. McFague insists that images of atonement and forgiveness connected with the Jesus story are not useful today. Contemporary people do not need stories of sacrifice or of

dying and rising gods.⁶³ Triumphalist christologies and atonements must be rejected. The traditional understandings of incarnation – the two nature Christology of Jesus as fully God and fully human – and of atonement as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins provide a salvation we do not need, and undermines the salvation we do need.⁶⁴ Jesus does not “do something” for us. Rather, he provides an illustration of something that is always true.⁶⁵ Similarly, the resurrection of Jesus is a “way of speaking,” of saying that the God who was present in Jesus is always present. However, the resurrection is not about something that actually happened in the past. The traditional understanding of resurrection is unacceptable because it is hierarchical and exclusive.⁶⁶

In the traditional Christian account, the biblical story is a story about a God who acts and speaks and who has come among us in the person of Jesus, whose atoning work in his life, death and resurrection creates salvation. In McFague’s retelling, the story is not primarily about God, and certainly not about anything God has done. McFague’s God neither acts nor speaks, and we can know little to nothing about this God. The story is rather about us, and how we relate to a God whom we create through projections of our imagination. We project our own needs onto this God using metaphor, but these projections are “mostly fiction.” Their value is not that they communicate truth, but that they are functional and pragmatic. They serve to promote the ideology of a progressive political agenda of inclusiveness, equality, and care for the environment. It is not that these values are necessarily objectionable, but that, as hermeneutical tools, they do not rise out of or help to understand the biblical text. They are rather imposed upon it; indeed, they correct what are perceived to be its deficiencies. The content of the biblical story is acceptable only to the extent that it is in accord with this external agenda, and no more. Accordingly, for McFague, theology is primarily instrumentalist. It promotes an

agenda alien to the biblical text, and is thus as idolatrous as the metaphors McFague rejects.

A more recent example of a “metaphorical” theology similar to McFague can be found in the work of biblical scholar Marcus Borg (already discussed above). In Borg’s discussion of what he considers to be the “heart of Christianity,” and what it means to “speak Christian,”⁶⁷ he contrasts two approaches to Christianity – what he calls a “literal” approach and his own preferred “metaphorical approach.” What Borg calls the “literal approach” is simply historic Christianity. According to Borg, “literalists” are those who believe that biblical language is to be understood “literally.” “Literalists” believe that the narratives of the Old Testament in which God delivered Israel from Egypt through miraculous acts such as the parting of the Red Sea, and of New Testament assertions such that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he died for our sins, that he rose again, and will return as judge, refer to real events that actually happened, and that Christians are to live in accordance with such beliefs.⁶⁸

Borg contrasts this “literalist” approach to a “metaphorical” approach. What Borg means by “metaphorical” is not entirely clear. He is not as specific as McFague. Borg rightly recognizes that the Bible (like all human language, we might add) sometimes uses metaphors, and that the Bible contains narratives that no one would take as historical accounts. For example, there is the Biblical metaphor of God’s “right hand”; Christians have always recognized that this is a metaphor for God’s power, since God does not have physical hands. That God shelters us under his wings (Psalm 91:4) does not mean that God is a chicken! Borg also points out that Jesus taught in parables, and that the purpose of parabolic language is not to recount historical facts, but to make comparisons or similes.⁶⁹ None of this is controversial, and would be standard material

in any traditional textbook on exegesis or hermeneutics.⁷⁰

Borg makes the further move, however, of suggesting that passages in Scripture that appear on a straightforward reading to be accounts of events that actually took place are not so, but are rather “metaphors.” Their significance is not as accounts of historical events, but as making a point about some other more general truth. So, for example, the Exodus of Israel from Egypt is not about an actual event, but “the human condition as marked by bondage to the lords who rule this world, and about God’s passion that we be liberated from bondage and embark on a journey that leads from Egypt to the promised land.”⁷¹ A metaphorical reading is not concerned with whether the events recorded in the Bible actually took place. It is concerned rather with their “meanings.” Such a reading, Borg writes, “is not bothered by the possibility that the stories’ of Jesus’ birth and resurrection are metaphorical rather than literally factual accounts. It asks, ‘Whether it happened this way or not, what is this story saying? What meanings does it have for us?’”⁷²

The primary criterion by which Borg decides whether an event mentioned in the Bible is historical or metaphorical seems to be whether it is miraculous, or mentions what Borg refers to as an “intervention” of God. As with many authors in our narrative of the “hermeneutics of discontinuity,” Borg is clear that contemporary people cannot believe that miracles happen, so any biblical story that contains such an event must be interpreted as a metaphor. For example, Borg writes that the biblical description of Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead “no longer works for millions of people.” Also, he writes, “there are many parts of the gospels that they can’t take literally. When literalized, the story of Jesus becomes literally incredible.”⁷³ Of course, that millions of contemporary people do take the miraculous events of the gospel “literally” belies Borg’s claim. For

those who believe, the story of Jesus is *literally* credible. That is what the word "belief" means.

The approach here is entirely circular and question begging. Borg nowhere makes an argument that miracles are metaphysically impossible, or that the God who created the world could not become incarnate, or that if Jesus were the Son of God that he could not forgive sins or rise from the dead. Nor does he engage in a careful textual study to show that the biblical texts themselves distinguish between non-miraculous "historical events" and miraculous "metaphorical" events. The distinction between a "literal" and a "metaphorical" reading is assumed in approaching the text and then imposed on it.

Moreover, Borg's is an odd use of the word "metaphor," which normally means "figurative," not miraculous. Presumably, a secular account of undisputed and non-miraculous historical events could use highly metaphorical language, and might have a great deal of contemporary significance or "meaning," for example, a biography of Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. At the same time, an account of an entirely fantastic and fictional event could use non-metaphorical and prosaic language. For example, tall tales about Paul Bunyan often derive their humor from describing highly exaggerated and impossible stories in prosaic language. It is not clear why Borg wants to use the expression "metaphorical" to describe certain events in the Bible except to say that "they did not happen."

Borg uses the expressions "more-than-literal," and "more-than-factual"⁷⁴ here, but what he rather means is "less-than-literal," and "less-than-factual." It is not that Jesus of Nazareth was really the Son of God who really died for our sins and rose from the dead, and that this has present implications that extend beyond the significance of an ordinary mundane historical event that happened in first

century Palestine. It is rather that Jesus really was not the Son of God, really did not die for our sins, and really did not rise bodily from the dead. Therefore, any significance that might be attached to his life and death must be in something other than what the texts actually say. Jesus' significance cannot lie in the intrinsic significance of his person and work – in the end he was no more than an ordinary human being – but in the pragmatic symbolic implications we might draw from his life and death today.

It is not surprising then that Borg finds traditional atonement language to be “very strange”; Borg claims that such language implies a limitation on God's power to forgive; it implies that Jesus' death “had to happen,” and that it was “part of God's plan of salvation.” To the contrary, Borg insists that the original meaning of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sin was simply a way to deny the Jewish temple's claim to have a monopoly on forgiveness. It was not a “literal description of either God's purpose or Jesus' vocation,” but a “metaphorical proclamation of radical grace.”⁷⁵

Consistent with his belief that Jesus was neither the unique Son of God nor were his death and resurrection part of God's plan for salvation, Borg embraces a “pluralist” understanding of world religions. Christians believe that the *pattern* of Jesus' “death and resurrection” is the way, the truth, and the life, but this can be found in other religions as well. Of course, to speak of this pattern of “death and resurrection” is to use the language of a tradition that Borg rejects. After all, Jesus' death had no atoning value, and he did not literally rise from the dead. “Death and resurrection” are metaphors about something that happens to us today, not something that happened to Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago.

The “metaphorical approach” of McFague and Borg is an example of a hermeneutic of discontinuity because it does not actually focus on the metaphors of either Scripture or the Christian

tradition. McFague discounts the dominant metaphors of the Bible because they “do not speak” to contemporary people, especially feminists, and so embraces alternative metaphors such as “mother,” “friend,” and the “earth as God’s body.” Although Borg appeals to the language of metaphor, he is not really interested in how metaphor functions in Scripture, and spends little time discussing it. What he is interested in is an alternative interpretation of those passages in Scripture that refer to miraculous events (such as the incarnation or resurrection of Jesus) that make contemporary people uncomfortable. Borg’s use of the term “metaphor” to speak of these events is parallel to Bultmann’s use of the term “mythology,” as a handy term to describe an “act of God” that modern people cannot believe in. Since modern people know that such things do not happen, or at least find it impossible to believe that they happened, we must find an alternative way to understand them. Jesus was not really the Son of God; nor did he rise bodily from the dead. Nonetheless, the language of “incarnation” and “resurrection” can be meaningful if interpreted as a “metaphor” for something else that actually speaks about us rather than the God of the Bible or the saving person and work of Jesus Christ – our own experience of “resurrection” in the midst of difficulty, our awareness of some kind of comfort or purpose or freedom when we read the stories of Jesus in the Bible.

Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Another way in which the text of Scripture is read in terms of “discontinuity” is the “hermeneutics of suspicion” advocated by the feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others. Schüssler Fiorenza regards the biblical texts as containing material that is inherently androcentric and oppressive to women and other minorities, and so must be read with caution: “[A] feminist critical hermeneutics of suspicion places a warning label on all biblical texts: *Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival. . .*” She writes:

“Without question, the Bible is a male book . . . The first and never-ending task of a hermeneutics of suspicion, therefore, is to elaborate as much as possible the patriarchal, destructive and oppressive elements in the Bible.”⁷⁶ It is not merely that biblical texts have been interpreted in manner hostile to women; they are in themselves “patriarchal texts” and “can serve to legitimate women’s subordinate role and secondary status in patriarchal society and church.”⁷⁷ According to Schüssler Fiorenza, “[N]o biblical patriarchal text that perpetuates violence against women, children, or ‘slaves’ should be accorded the status of divine revelation.”⁷⁸

Because the Bible contains such oppressive texts, it cannot function as an exclusive canon or source of revelation. Rather, it must be considered as one source among others.⁷⁹ The crucial hermeneutical tool for determining the extent to which biblical texts have contemporary value necessarily arises from outside the text, from “within the struggle for liberation of women and all oppressed peoples. . . . The personally and politically reflected experience of oppression and liberation must become the criterion of ‘appropriateness’ for biblical interpretation.”⁸⁰ The Bible is authoritative then just to the extent that it is in agreement with the demands of feminist ideology: “[T]he litmus test for invoking Scripture as the Word of God must be whether or not biblical texts and traditions seek to end relations of domination and exploitation.”⁸¹

As we have already seen, Elaine Pagels and John Dominic Crossan apply a similar “hermeneutic of suspicion” to the question of the relation between the church of the first-century and the second-century church, particularly in reference to the relation between the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the canon of Scripture. Historically, most biblical scholars have believed that the passion narratives contain

some of the earliest materials of the gospel and that the conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead was the fundamental insight that led to the beginning of the Christian movement. In contrast, Pagels and Crossan interpret belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus as a primarily political move. Pagels suggests that the belief in a "literal view of resurrection" is directly related to the question of the authority of the apostles: "[T]he doctrine of bodily resurrection . . . serves an essential *political* function: it legitimates the authority of certain men who claim to exclusive leadership over the churches as the successors of the apostle Peter."⁸² It was those followers of Jesus who claimed to have been witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus who came to exercise leadership in the Christians churches; books ostensibly written by them came to be recognized as canonical scripture (in contrast to gnostic writings, for example). The catholic church of the second century acknowledged the leadership only of those churches that had bishops ordained in "apostolic succession." Pagels notes a similar connection between belief in monotheism in the second century church and political authority: "[W]hen the orthodox [of the second-century Catholic church] insisted upon 'one God,' they simultaneously validated the system of governance in which the church is ruled by 'one bishop.'"⁸³ Pagels concludes that "It is the winners that write history – their way. No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity."⁸⁴ Pagels makes the argument that the gnostic Gospels have a stronger appeal to contemporary people precisely because they challenge such appeals to authority: "An increasing number of people today share their [gnostics] experience. They cannot rest solely on the authority of the Scriptures, the apostles, the church – at least not without inquiring how that authority constituted itself, and what, if anything, gives its legitimacy."⁸⁵

Crossan makes a similar connection. The purpose of the resurrection accounts in Scripture is not to tell us about anything that happened to Jesus after his death: "Stories like that [of Doubting Thomas] tell us absolutely nothing of historical value about the origins of Christian faith." The resurrection accounts "have nothing to do with appearances on Easter Sunday." Rather, their "purpose is to tell us who's in charge, now that Jesus is no longer personally present."⁸⁶ As noted earlier, Crossan believes that the "historical Jesus" was a "radical egalitarian" who recognized no distinctions between leaders and followers. Accordingly, Jesus would have rejected any attempt by his followers to introduce distinctions between apostles (who had seen the risen Jesus) and others (who had not). To believe in a literal resurrection is to betray the cause of Jesus because it gives authority to some (apostles) rather than others.⁸⁷

Continuity in Ontology

Christian theology demands ontology. This is a necessary implication of the basic realization that God must be in himself who he is in his revelation. The God who is known as gracious in the history of Israel, of Jesus, and the church must be gracious in himself if his word of forgiveness and new life in Jesus is a word that can be trusted. Accordingly, historic Christianity is a theology of epistemological and metaphysical realism. God can be known because he has revealed himself in word and deed, and the world in which we live in can be both known and trusted because it has been created by a trustworthy God.

In the first few centuries of the Christian church, a Christian ontology was developed, understood as the necessary implication of the God who had revealed himself in history as witnessed to in Scripture. This ontology was not dependent on, but was occasioned by three historical events: the gnostic crisis of the second century, the Arian and subsequent

christological crises, and the trinitarian doctrine worked out in consequence of these two crisis. Major figures associated with the formulations of traditional Christian ontology in the East include Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and the three Cappadocians: Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea. In the West, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine held a similar significance.

Historic Christian ontology affirmed the following: (1) Covenantal creational monotheism: the Christian God is also the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth *ex nihilo* (from nothing), transcendent to all that he has created, and the Hebrew Scriptures which speak of this Creator God are also Christian Scriptures, the Old Testament; (2) Incarnation: the God who created the world and made a covenant with Israel has redeemed the world by becoming a human being in Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of Old Testament promise. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, he has redeemed sinful human beings and enabled them to share in the divine life; because only God can save, Jesus is not merely a God-filled human being, but God incarnate, God become flesh. He is fully God and fully human, the eternal Son of the God who is eternally his Father. In contrast to creation, the Son is eternally "begotten, not made." (3) If God has revealed himself in the history of Israel as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then God must be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in himself. The economic Trinity (God in the history of salvation) presupposes an immanent Trinity: from eternity, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This ontology is summarized in the words of the Nicene Creed, as well as the formulations of the Council of Chalcedon and the later ecumenical councils.

Creational, incarnational, and trinitarian ontology has stood the test of time, and has been embraced by all historic Christian churches – Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformation – as a faithful understanding of the necessary implications of biblical revelation, until recently. As the modern period has

seen the appearance of a “hermeneutic of discontinuity” in regard to the history of, and the meaning of biblical texts, so there is also a “hermeneutic of discontinuity” in the area of ontology. The same theologians who posit discontinuity in terms of history and meaning also embrace a discontinuity of ontology, rejecting both the epistemological and ontological tenets of historic Christianity.

Epistemology

The theologians of discontinuity tend to be Kantian in their epistemology, rejecting a realist account of knowledge and presuming an epistemological agnosticism, especially in reference to our knowledge of God. If the historic Christian position is that God is in himself who he has revealed himself to be in his revelation, the basic premises of the revisionist epistemology is that knowledge of God is not based on revelation but on projection of human aspirations, is not an accurate knowledge of God’s own nature, but rather a reflection of how we relate to God, and we can know nothing of God’s inner reality. We have already seen an example of this projectionist epistemology in Sallie McFague’s “metaphorical theology.” McFague states: “I see no way that assumptions concerning the inner nature of God are possible.”⁸⁸

Epistemological agnosticism also pervades Marcus Borg’s recent writing. He states that “The reality to which God points is beyond words, beyond all language, beyond all concepts. . . . Once we name it, we are no longer talking about it, for this reality cannot be expressed in words.”⁸⁹ Such epistemological agnosticism could simply be echoing the traditional theistic linguistic approach of *via negativa*. Insofar as linguistic concepts refer primarily to created beings, they do not properly apply to the Creator – they express created limitations rather than divine reality, and so language about God must be either negative, metaphorical, or analogical. Borg may be suggesting something like this when he writes, “[T]he

one, the sacred is ineffable – beyond all language.”⁹⁰ However, Borg elsewhere makes clear that he believes that it is impossible to know anything at all about God *in se*, for example, in his dismissal of a doctrine of an immanent Trinity, or in his complaint that what he calls “supernatural theism” claims to “know too much” about the “mechanism” of the divine- world relation.⁹¹ The predominant flavor of the language that Borg uses about God is anthropocentric, that is, Borg views religious language as entirely relational, of speaking not so much of God as of our relation to God, of how we make sense of our own reality.

What is needed here is a theory of metaphorical and analogical predication, and of the differences between them. Stating that God’s reality is “beyond words” is itself a use of metaphor, and a spatial metaphor at that. Granted that God is “beyond” our concepts, do those concepts refer truthfully? Is Borg embracing a Maimonidean understanding of language, that is, that language about God simply say what “God is not?”⁹² Elsewhere, Borg identifies God with “what is”:

*[The question] is no longer whether there is another being separate from the universe. Rather, the question is about the nature of reality, of “what is,” of “is-ness.” . . . This referent of the word God affirms that reality, “what is,” is ultimately a sacred reality, a “more,” all around us, wondrous and glorious. The word does not point to a being who may or may not exist, but names “what is” as wondrous and sacred, a stupendous and glorious “more.”*⁹³

What does it mean to identify God with “what is”? How would this be distinct from atheism? What does Borg mean by “is-ness”? Is existence a predicate or property? What does Borg mean by “something more,” a quantitative rather than spatial metaphor? Given that we can experience reality as “wondrous,” “stupendous,” “glorious,” why should we use the word “God” to

designate this reality, especially if God is not “a being” which “may or may not exist”? One suspects that philosophical theologians would dismiss Borg’s language here as so much nonsense, but its roots in Kantian epistemological skepticism seem obvious.

>*Immanentism*

Despite epistemological skepticism, writers such as Borg and McFague do not hesitate to affirm that we know something about God, embracing an immanentist ontology of monism or panentheism. As Borg states: “No concept of God, no way of stating the referent of the world – neither supernaturalism than nor panentheism – is adequate. Yet the latter is better.” It is “more expansive and less constricting” – another spatial metaphor.⁹⁴ While God is “more than the world,” God is in some sense ontologically one with creation, and the world and God are mutually necessary. Creation is “in” God, and, while there is no world without God, neither is there a God without the world. McFague acknowledges: “[T]he model is monist and perhaps most precisely designated as panentheistic”⁹⁵

Borg and McFague contrast historic Christian ontology with their own preferred “panentheism.” McFague contrasts this with the understanding of creation in the “Hebraic-Christian tradition,” in which “creation has been imaginatively pictured as an intellectual, aesthetic ‘act’ of God, accomplished through God’s word and wrought by God’s ‘hands’ much as a painting is created by an artist or a form by a sculptor.” McFague dismisses this understanding of creation as “dualistic” and “hierarchical,” and dismissive of physical reality as inferior to spiritual reality. The “Hebraic-Christian” model of creation contrasts with her own model of “God as mother” and the world as “God’s body.”⁹⁶ McFague prefers “immanent models, in contrast to the radically transcendent models for God in the Western tradition.” The problem with the traditional Christian understanding of God is

its transcendence, “a transcendence undergirded by triumphalist, sovereign, patriarchal imagery that contributes to a sense of distance between God and the world.”⁹⁷

Borg designates historic Christian ontology as “supernatural theism.” “Supernatural theism” imagines God to be “a *personlike being*,” “the supreme being,” radically distinguished from the world, a God who is “up in heaven,” “out there,” and “beyond the universe.” Both Borg and McFague agree that such a God can only be present to the world through “intervention,” since the transcendent God is “out there,” and “not here.” They dismiss the miracles of the Bible as examples of “interventionism.” Borg writes, “For supernatural theism in Christian form, these interventions include the spectacular events reported in the Bible, especially those associated with Jesus: his birth, miracles, death, and resurrection.”⁹⁸ To the contrary, the “panentheist” God does not perform miracles because this God does not “intervene.” McFague states: “God does not, as in the royal model, intervene in the natural or historical process in *deus-ex-machina* fashion. . . .”⁹⁹ Borg asks whether it “makes sense” to speak of God as “intervening” to do something like prevent terrorist attacks. Why would God intervene in one instance, but not in another? Accordingly, “panetheism rejects the language of ‘divine intervention.’” Borg claims that “supernatural theism” claims to “know too much” in affirming divine intervention as the “explanatory mechanism for God’s relation to the world.” Panentheism does not claim to know the “mechanism” for the relation between God and the world.¹⁰⁰

This is an interesting contrast with an earlier agnosticism affirmed by Borg. In *Jesus: A New Vision*, Borg claimed that historical judgment was “impossible” about whether or not Jesus performed nature miracles, and that, on “historical grounds,” “we cannot say” whether “something happened to the corpse of Jesus.”¹⁰¹ It seems clear that Borg now does claim to

know. He knows that God does not answer some prayers and not others, that God cannot “intervene” to prevent terrorist attacks, that God does not perform miracles such as the nature miracles of Jesus or raising Jesus from the dead because such miracles presuppose a transcendent “interventionist” view of God, and Borg knows that the panentheist God does not “intervene.”

In contrast to the transcendent relation between God and creation in which God is distinct from a universe that he freely brings into being as a creation other than God, McFague and Borg understand creation entirely in terms of immanence. If the Nicene Creed states that the eternal Son of God is “begotten not made,” McFague uses such language, not of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but of the world itself. In the model of “God as mother,” “the universe is bodied forth from God, it is expressive of God’s very being. It is not something alien to or other from God . . .” God as mother is “parent to all species,” not just to Jesus.¹⁰² God is incarnate, not uniquely in Jesus, but in all of creation: “God becomes incarnated, ‘in the flesh,’ both in the body of the world as a whole and in the bodies and spirits of certain creatures . . .”¹⁰³

While Borg recognizes that the Scriptures speak of God as distinct from the world – as in the language of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father in heaven” – he finds such language unsatisfactory: “God is not a being separate from the universe but a sacred presence all around us.” The notion of “omnipresence” is incompatible with divine transcendence in the traditional sense: “We also heard that God is ‘everywhere’ – that is, omnipresent. How can that be? It is possible only if the word does not refer to ‘a being,’ a ‘superbeing,’ or a ‘personal being’ separate from the universe, but to the reality in whom we and everything exist.”¹⁰⁴

The “monist” God does not freely create the world anymore than

we freely create our bodies. For the advocate of immanentism, if the world does not exist without God, it is also impossible for God to exist without the world. God *needs* the world in order to be. McFague writes, "God will therefore need the world, want the world, not simply as a dependent inferior . . . but as an offspring, beloved, and companion . . . God needs the world."¹⁰⁵ Because the God of monism is so intimately dependent on the world, this God is a physical God: "This shocking idea – that God is physical – is one of the most important implications of the model of creation by God the mother."¹⁰⁶ And, of course, since evil exists in the world, and the world is God's body, God is ultimately responsible for evil: "Evil is not a power over against God; in a sense, it is God's 'responsibility,' part of God's being, if you will. A monist position cannot avoid this."¹⁰⁷

In contrast to religions and philosophical traditions such as Buddhism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and modern absolute Idealism, that think of the divine or the basic principle behind the universe to be fundamentally impersonal, the Christian tradition has always understood God to be personal. Specifically, and rather scandalously, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is that God is three persons, and the Christological and trinitarian controversies were fundamental in the rise of the modern understanding of personhood and of personalism. Is the God of immanentism personal? Marcus Borg is not so sure. Borg acknowledges that, for traditional Christians, God is personal. Biblical language addresses God in prayer. It speaks of God as father, king, shepherd, lover: "God is like a person – a center of consciousness who thinks, knows, wills, feels, acts, loves, cares, and commonly, judges and punishes." Borg states that there is "nothing wrong" with such language, unless it is taken "literally" or "semiliterally."¹⁰⁸ Despite this concession, Borg states: "Like many, I cannot myself think of God as personal in the sense of being a personlike being, even though I am very comfortable

using personal language to refer to God.”¹⁰⁹

Borg asks: “So, is God personal? At the ontological level, I don’t know, even as I am convinced that God is not a personlike being.”¹¹⁰ Borg suggests that God is “transpersonal” or “more than personal, not less than personal.”¹¹¹ God is sometimes “experienced . . . as a *presence*,” and this presence is more like a “you” than an “it,” but the use of personal language should not reduce God to “a supernatural person about whose existence one can argue.”¹¹² What could this possibly mean? Borg does not acknowledge that language of “presence” is as much a metaphor as is language about a God who “intervenes,” or is “out there.” He has merely shifted from metaphors of transcendence to metaphors of immanence. What does Borg mean by saying that God is “more than personal”? Although Borg uses the language of “intentionality,”¹¹³ he appears to deny that God has the central characteristics of personhood that are associated with intentionality. Does Borg’s God know and will? Does God act freely? Could God speak or appear in a manner that could be certainly known, and not simply experienced as a “sense of presence”? Is it appropriate to refer to God with pronouns? Is God a “who” or a “what”? Can we truly address God as “you” rather than addressing God as if God were “you” when in actuality this would be inappropriate since God is not a person? Can God hear our address, and respond to it in any meaningful way? Can God truly address us? If God is personal, the answer to these questions should be “yes,” but Borg consistently rejects such notions as “interventionist.” If the answer to these questions is not “yes,” it would seem nonsensical to suggest that God is not “less than,” but “more than” personal.

Borg does state that “. . . I think *God ‘speaks’ to us*,” but he is clear that this does not mean “oral or aural revelation or divine dictation.” God “speaks” through visions, and through “internal proddings” and “leadings,” through other

people and the reading of Scripture. We sometimes have a sense of "being addressed."¹¹⁴ No orthodox Christian would want to deny the existence of such a sense of a providential awareness of God's guidance, or that the reading of Scripture or meditation or prayer or worship can often produce an almost palpable sense of divine presence. But this is clearly not what is meant in the Bible by language of God's speaking. The Bible uses the imagery of theophany – God's address to Moses in the burning bush, God's giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, the prophetic calls of the Old Testament, the angel Gabriel's appearance to the virgin Mary, the Father's recognition of Jesus as his beloved Son at his baptism, the transfiguration of Jesus with Moses and Elijah, Paul's seeing of a light and being addressed by an auditory voice on the road to Damascus. This is not the language of a "sense of presence," but of revelation.¹¹⁵ Moreover, at the heart of the New Testament message is the claim that God has not merely given us information, but has given us *himself*. In Jesus, God has come among us by speaking through his Son.¹¹⁶

Adoptionism

Given their denial that God is transcendent in the traditional sense, that God acts or speaks in the world except in the sense of a "presence" or a "being addressed," it would make no sense for the advocates of immanence to embrace the New Testament's affirmation of Jesus as the "Word made flesh," (John 1:14) the one who existed "in the form of God," and "became a servant," (Philippians 2:1-11) or Chalcedon's formula that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. Rather, the Christology that is affirmed is adoptionist. Jesus was not "God become human," but a human being who was especially aware of God, more aware than others perhaps, but in no way unique. McFague, whose monist position of creation leads her affirm that God has become incarnate in the world, qualifies her language about Jesus:

One can . . . understand the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth” to mean that “Jesus’ response as beloved to God as lover was so open and thorough that his life and death were revelatory of God’s great love for the world. His illumination of that love . . . is paradigmatic of God the lover but is not unique. . . . Jesus is not ontologically different from other paradigmatic figures . . . He is special to us as our foundational figure.¹¹⁷

Borg uses similar language: “Jesus is, for us as Christians, the decisive revelation of what a life full of God looks like. Radically centered in God and filled with the Spirit, he is the decisive disclosure and epiphany of what can be seen of God embodied in a human life.”¹¹⁸ Notice that Borg’s christology is entirely relational, anthropocentric, and psychological. The emphasis is on what Jesus means for us, and how he affects our understanding. Borg does not address the question: Who is Jesus in himself? Is Jesus God become a human being or a God-filled human being? Are the person and work constitutive of Jesus constitutive of a salvation found nowhere else, or rather illustrative of a salvation found elsewhere and perhaps everywhere? It is rather clear which of these two alternatives Borg would embrace.

Unitarian

Finally, it should be obvious that the ontology of immanentism is unitarian insofar as it is theistic at all. McFague cannot understand the point of trinitarian language in any matter except to provide illustrations of how God in some manner transcends the world (as we transcend our bodies) and of how both creation and Jesus illustrates the principle of immanence (as we are identified with our bodies): “Is there something sacred about three? I do not think so,” she writes.¹¹⁹ Concerning the creed, Borg acknowledges that many contemporary people have difficulty “professing affirmation of a list of statements they think they are supposed to believe to be

literally and absolutely true.”¹²⁰ (One might not be surprised if people interpret a statement that begins “We believe in . . .” to mean that we actually do believe these things.)

Borg claims that the language of the Nicene Creed is “drawn from Greek philosophy” although “some of its language is drawn from the New Testament.” If it were written today, we would not use language of “substance” or “Being” (why not?), and “what matters most about Jesus might have been quite different.”¹²¹ (On what basis would one make such claims? Would not the basic questions be the same: Is Jesus God become human or a human being who was especially open to God? Does Jesus save us because he is God, or does Jesus provide us at most an example by which we save ourselves?) Borg goes on to say that “the notion that the language of the creed is to be understood literally and absolutely is strange when you think about it.” Did Jesus “come down from heaven” or “ascend to heaven”? Where is heaven? Does God have hands so that Jesus “could be seated at the right hand of the Father”? Obviously such language is the language of poetry, and should not be understood “literally.” Borg suggests that “the creed is not a set of absolutely and literally true statements that are to be believed, in the modern sense of the word.” To emphasize this, he suggests that it can be sung rather than said, and that it can be supplemented with other creeds.¹²²

As for the doctrine of the Trinity itself, it suggests that “God is like a committee of three people.” As with McFague, Borg suggests that the point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to emphasize that God is both transcendent and immanent, but, in addition, it is “a tribute to the centrality of Jesus for Christians.” For once, Borg suggests that the word “person” should be understood in its literal Latin sense – as a “mask.” The Latin meaning of *person/prosopon* is that “for Christians the one God is known and speaks in three primary roles or ways: as creator and the God of Israel; in Jesus; and through

the Spirit.” Borg notes that “[s]ome theologians have argued that the Trinity is also about *internal* relations *within* God,” but when theological disputes occur “about what those relationships are like, I wonder whether they are trying to know too much.” If God has internal relations, Borg asks how we could ever know that. “But when we focus on the *external* meaning of the Trinity, its claim is clear. God is one (Christians are monotheists), and God is known to us in three primary ways.”¹²³ Of course, what Borg calls the position of “some theologians” is the faith of historic Christian faith, affirmed by all Christians until recently. The position that the Trinity is simply different modes or “three primary ways” in which God is known is the heresy of “modalism,” condemned from the earliest periods of Church history. Like Borg’s Christology, his Trinitarian theology is entirely anthropocentric. The point of trinitarian language is not about God, but about us. The doctrine of the Trinity does not say anything about God in himself, but about how we relate to or understand God “in three ways.”

Evaluation

It would be a mistake to conclude from the above that the bulk of biblical or theological scholarship in the last two centuries has been a story of hermeneutic discontinuity. To the contrary, in contrast with the above, one can point to myriad biblical scholars and theologians, who, while no less competent in the tools of biblical criticism, historical, systematic, and philosophical theology, have endorsed a fundamental hermeneutic of “trust” rather than suspicion, of continuity between the biblical texts and the subject matter to which they refer, of continuity between the Old Testament and the New, between the earthly Jesus and the Jesus of the apostolic witness, between the Bible and the historic Christian church and contemporary Christian faith. To name just a few names – in the area of Old Testament studies, one thinks of scholars of a previous generation like Walther

Eichrodt or John Bright. More recently, names such as Brevard Childs, Christopher Seitz or Christopher Wright come to mind. In New Testament, a previous generation included scholars such as Joachim Jeremias, C.H. Dodd, A. M. Hunter, or Oscar Cullmann. Among the current generation, N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, Ben Witherington, Richard Bauckham, and Craig Evans are just a handful of the numerous scholars who have argued that the New Testament provides a faithful witness to the earthly Jesus and that the risen Christ who is worshiped by the church is the same Jesus who lived and died in Palestine.

How then to account for such a fundamental disagreement between two groups of equally competent scholars? Given that scholars in both groups are equally capable in using the tools of biblical exegesis and historical reconstruction, the source of disagreement must lie elsewhere than the tools of biblical scholarship themselves. I would suggest then that the basic ground for disagreement does not lie in questions of biblical scholarship or historical method at all, but can rather be summed up in the phrase: It's the theology, stupid! Francis Martin points out that the diametrically opposed conclusions of New Testament scholars John Dominic Crossan (of the Jesus Seminar) and the more traditional John Meier raises the methodological question: "[O]n what basis do we judge one reconstruction of history to be better than another?"¹²⁴ Martin suggest that this question can be considered at two different levels. On the one hand, there is the discipline of history itself. On this first "intra-historical" level, different interpretations about how to interpret and relate historical data "derive from different heuristic structures, differing narratives, within which the data is organized." So Jesus Seminar scholars argue for a basic historical priority of *The Gospel of Thomas* over against the canonical gospels, while more traditional scholars such as Meier (or we might add N.T. Wright, Craig Evans or Ben Witherington) argue against the Jesus Seminar that *Thomas* shows evidence of being a late second-century Gnostic text that presupposes knowledge of the

synoptic gospels.¹²⁵ Similarly, arguments about whether or not Jesus' message was essentially eschatological in nature revolve around such questions as how to interpret the "kingdom" and "Son of Man" language of the synoptic gospels, and whether language of the future or presence of the kingdom is authentically historical.¹²⁶

There is another level operating, however, which is usually not recognized, resting not on historical judgments, but on more fundamental assumptions. This "second-order heuristic structure" is based on "the overall view of reality that can govern the relative importance attached to various elements of the data. . . ." The factors in this second-level structure "are not derived from the texts as such, but govern their interpretation and the value judgment made regarding the data." For example, there is the basic assumption that the New Testament documents distort the history they recount, or that the New Testament writers were not interested in biographical information about Jesus, or the uncritical acceptance of the "Bauer hypothesis," that orthodoxy did not come into existence until the second century¹²⁷. As fundamental is an assumption we have seen repeatedly in numerous advocates of the hermeneutics of discontinuity, that reality is closed to transcendent events beyond ordinary immanent causality, that is, "miracles do not happen," and God does not do things like raise Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. In addition, Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure must be understood in accordance with the principle of "analogy": Jesus was, at most, a human being who had an extraordinary openness of awareness of divine reality – as Borg puts it, a "spirit person," but Jesus was not essentially different from other human beings. He was not the Son of God incarnate.¹²⁸

The basic point can be illustrated by the diametrically opposite conclusions drawn a century ago by Wilhelm Wrede and Martin Kahler in response to the realization that the gospels

are dogmatic documents through and through; Both Wrede and Kahler agreed that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the hermeneutical key to interpreting the New Testament texts. Wrede, however, did not believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. Accordingly, he concluded that belief in the resurrection had fundamentally distorted the New Testament witness to Jesus. There was a fundamental historical discontinuity between the Jesus who actually lived in Palestine (who did not regard himself as Messiah, who was not the Son of God and who did not perform miracles), and the faith of the New Testament church in a risen Lord, a faith that had fundamentally distorted the gospel accounts of Jesus. Kahler did believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. He concluded accordingly that it was the "so-called historical Jesus," the non-resurrected non-miraculous, non-dogmatic Jesus reconstructed by historical Jesus scholars like Wrede, who was the distortion. For Kahler, the risen "Christ of faith" is the "historic Jesus." That is, the Jesus who was raised from the dead is the same Jesus who lived in Palestine in the first century, and the same Jesus to whom the gospels provide faithful witness. For both Wrede and Kahler, it is the "dogmatic" content of the gospels that provides the crucial clue to understanding the texts. Does "dogma" distort? Or is it the hermeneutical key to rightly read the texts?

>The crucial role of the resurrection as the clue to Jesus' identity and the hermeneutical lynchpin of continuity between the Jesus of the first century and the gospel witnesses, and, in turn, the continuity of Jesus with the Old Testament Scriptures is well put by Karl Barth:

It was neither a "historical Jesus" nor a "Christ of faith" which [the apostles] knew and proclaimed. . . [T]hey proclaimed concretely the one Jesus Christ who had encountered them as the one who he was, even when they did not yet believe in him. Having their eyes opened by the resurrection, they were able to tell who he was who had made

*himself known to them before the resurrection. A twofold Jesus Christ, one who existed before and another who existed after Easter, can be deduced from New Testament texts only after he has been arbitrarily read into them. . . . The origin, object, and content of the New Testament witnesses were and are the one history of salvation and revelation in which Jesus Christ is both God's deed and God's word. Before and behind this history, all that the New Testament witnesses could reflect and contemplate was its commencement in the history of Israel as evidenced by the Old Testament.*¹²⁹

The second factor leading to a "hermeneutics of discontinuity" lies in the area of epistemology, and the relation between religious language and religious experience. Martin is again helpful here: "If we move the discussion to the plane of the more overarching, second order heuristic structures, we see that they involve a philosophy of religious experience. . . . [O]ne aspect of the flaw in the larger hermeneutical spiral is the notion that religious language is 'instrumental' not realistic. That is, language about God is useful for orienting the subject and enhancing self-knowledge, but it can have no verifiable referent."¹³⁰ The dominant epistemology embraced by advocates of discontinuity combines what might be called a "Cartesian" or radically "Kantian" epistemology with an understanding of religious experience that George Lindbeck has dubbed "experiential expressivism."¹³¹ Cartesian epistemologies begin with the knowing subject and struggle with the question of how the subject can know anything outside its own consciousness. Kantian epistemology pushes the Cartesian "turn to the subject" to its logical conclusion by introducing a distinction between phenomena and noumena. Kant insisted that the knowing subject cannot know the object in itself (*noumena*) but only the *phenomena* of the object as experienced in one's own consciousness. Experiential-expressivism tends to interpret "religious experience" as something pre-linguistic

and pre-cognitive which is then expressed in symbols, metaphors and language that are “expressive” of experience rather than having cognitive content. Fairly clear examples would include McFague and Borg discussed above. Kantian epistemology combined with “experientialism” results in a subjectivism that makes it impossible to hear the text as a voice other than that of the self. As McFague acknowledges, religious language and images are projectionist, and all religious metaphors become metaphors of “immanence.” In the end, what sounds at first like language about God is actually only talking about ourselves.

The problem with such an account of religious experience can be illustrated by the story of an “Uncle Pat” from my childhood, who, after he had a little too much to drink, regularly “saw” the “little people” (leprechauns). While his family spoke of Pat “seeing the little people,” what they meant was that when Uncle Pat drank too much alcohol, he hallucinated. Uncle Pat certainly believed in the “little people.” His relatives did not. Although real enough to him, what Uncle Pat “experienced” was merely a psychological phenomenon. The critical reader needs to ask how the religious “experience” of the advocates of the hermeneutics of discontinuity differs from Uncle Pat’s “experience” of the “little people”? The biblical writings do not understand language of God’s acting and speaking as projections of psychological experience. The gospel writers speak of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as something that happened to Jesus, not something that happened in the psychology of the apostles.

Similarly, the hermeneutics of suspicion embraced by advocates of discontinuity means that their interpretive lens is found outside the text and imposed on it. The authority of the Bible is acceptable precisely to the extent it confirms the prior political commitments of the interpreter. The result of such an alien interpretive lens is that the text cannot be heard

for itself. It cannot challenge the reader and at best can only confirm one in one's initial prejudices. Anything else is filtered out. As Karl Barth has pointed out, the key hermeneutic task is not a matter of our bringing the Bible up to date so that it can speak to our time, but rather our willingness to look back to, and to be formed by the apostolic witness found in the Scriptures.¹³²

Finally, as we have seen in the writings of McFague and Borg in particular, a commitment to a Cartesian epistemology leads to models of immanence or monism in ontology. If we can know nothing of God in himself, and the prophetic and apostolic witness of Scripture is incapable of speaking truthfully of a God who speaks and acts, then Scripture rather becomes a vehicle for entertaining our own metaphors. In the area of ontology, the crucial question of continuity is an ontological rather than a merely sociological or historical question. The church is not simply a continuation of the historical community who just happened to have won the battle with gnosticism in the second century ("winners write the history"), but the community who have been gathered by the Triune God, who live in continuity with prophets and apostles, who are united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, a constitutive understanding of Jesus Christ's person and work is indispensable. To view Jesus Christ as a way of salvation among many is to deny the very reality of the church.

1See my essay "General Convention and Its Aftermath: Non-Theological Interpretations and a Theological Alternative," *Trinity Journal for Theology and Ministry* (fall 2008); willgwitt.org/general-convention-and-its-aftermath.

2Historical biblical interpretation does not make a clear distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics, but in the last two centuries, "hermeneutics" has come to be understood to refer not to the question of the interpretation or exegesis of

Scripture in its original historical setting, that is, "What did the text mean?," but, rather, its contemporary application, "What does the text mean for contemporary people?" or "How can we apply the meaning of the text today?"

3Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* is available in numerous English translations.

4John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967) 61-76.

5Classic texts in this regard include Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, 1985); Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, 1993); Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, 1996); Though not primarily a feminist, retired Bishop John Spong presents the basic point of view in *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005). For a [Catholic] feminist account, see Sandra M. Schneider, "The Bible and Feminism," *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 31-57. Schneider lists the following feminist concerns with the Bible: (1) It privileges the male as the "normative human" and women as "inferior in themselves"; (2) The Bible is a book written "largely if not exclusively by men, about men, and for men." (3) The biblical text legitimates "patriarchy," the domination of men over women (and other inferiors); (4) The God of the Bible is portrayed in "overwhelmingly male terms." This "assimilates masculinity to divinity," not only masculinizing God, but divinizing males. (5) In the New Testament, a "male-gendered God" sends his Son as a "male savior" who addresses God as "Father" and redeems "men" to make them "brothers" and "sons of God." (34-36).

6"[T]he approach of much medieval [and I would add

“patristic”] theology in shifting the entire semantic range of the Old Testament to a non-literal metaphorical level, in order to retain a reference to Jesus Christ, destroyed the integrity which the Christian canon had assigned to this portion of scripture.” Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 8; John Bright refers to this approach as “saving the Old Testament by reading a Christian meaning from it.” Bright, *Authority*, 79. On allegorical reading in general, see Bright, 79-82.

7Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J.A.Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, 1975) 27, 28.

8Eichrodt, 28-31.

9Christopher Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of the Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 173-190.

10Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 55-69. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 9; Also see Bright, Eichrodt, and Seitz.

11G. E. Lessing, *Fragments from Reimarus: Brief Critical Remarks on the Object of Jesus and his Disciples as Seen in the New Testament*, trans. Rev. Charles Voysey (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1879).

12 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “Of the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, H. B. Nesbitt, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 83-88.

13David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. Marian Evans (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1860).

14Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?* Trans. T. B. Saunders (New York: G. B. Putnam Sons, 1902).

15Harnack, 30, 32, 74, 154.

16George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-roads* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), 44.

17Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. Christopher Home (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1909).

18“Jésus annonçait le Royaume et c’est l’Église qui est venue.” In the older English translation: “Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the church that came.” Loisy, 166.

19William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J.C. G. Grief (Cambridge: J. Clarke & Co., 1971).

20Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1961).

21Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965).

22See especially ch. 19, “Thoroughgoing Scepticism and Thoroughgoing Eschatology”; Schweitzer, 330-397.

23Kahler, 52-53,55, 63-65, 69.

24Schweitzer characterized the choices as between “thoroughgoing scepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology.” “In either case, He will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the day can ascribe its own thoughts and ideas . . . the historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma.” Schweitzer, 398.

25“[W]e can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show

no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary." Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise P. Smith & Erminie H. Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934).

26 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 14.

27 *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. H. W. Bartsch, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 5.

28 "The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself." Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1. Trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 3.

29 Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 31, 69.

30 Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 80, 82, 84.

31 Ernst Kasemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1965); Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1964); Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* trans. Irene & Fraser McLusky with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960).

32 Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover, ed. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

33 On the circular reasoning of Crossan's methodology, see Howard Clark Kee, "A Century of Quests for the Culturally Compatible Jesus," *Theology Today* (April 1995) 17-28. Also helpful are Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity

Press, 1995) 42-92; Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

34John Dominic Crossan, *Who is Jesus?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 97. For Crossan, see especially *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

35Crossan, *Who is Jesus?*, 80.

36Crossan, *Who is Jesus?*, 162.

37Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 17.

38Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 2,4.

39*Meeting Jesus Again*, p. 29.

40C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 55-56.

41Borg, in Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 146. In other words, where Lewis had argued that, since we can be certain that Jesus was neither a liar nor insane, we must take his claims to divine authority seriously, Borg argues that only an insane person would make claims to divine authority. Since we can be certain that Jesus was not insane, we cannot believe that he ever made such claims.

42Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 92. “[W]e

can speak of Jesus sacrificing his life, being willing to die because of his love for others, without in any way implying that God required his death as a sacrifice so that we can be forgiven." *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 105.

43 *Meeting Jesus Again*, 32.

44 *Meaning of Jesus*, 152-153.

45 *Meeting Jesus Again*, 37.

46 Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 179.

47 Pagels, 56.

48 Adolf Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, 7 vols., trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1902 ff.).

49 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*, trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

50 Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ From the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

51 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 304, 306, 322.

52 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Trubner & C., 1881), 2nd edition.

53 Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), x-xi.

54“[W]hat constitutes this book [Scripture] are a number . . . of experiences and communities witnessing the transforming power of God in their lives, interpreted in terms not of some past time but of their own time. If we wish to take Scripture seriously and see it as normative, we should take it on its own terms as a model of how theology should be done, rather than the authority dictating the terms in which it is done.” McFague, 43.

55McFague, 14.

56McFague, ix.

57McFague, xii.

58McFague, 39.

59McFague, 192-193.

60McFague, 195.

61McFague, 41.

62McFague, 49, 150.

63McFague, 45.

64McFague, 54.

65McFague, 55.

66McFague, 59-60.

67Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

68Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 8, 9, 11, 82; *Speaking Christian*, 1-2, 10, 11.

69Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 30.

70In a discussion of genre, Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), distinguishes between “figures of speech,” which include “metaphor” and “hyperbole”; literary expressions such as “parables, allegories, myths, and riddles”; “history,” “dramatic epic,” “apocalyptic,” “poetry,” “wise sayings.” Ramm recognizes that “truth and fact may be conveyed in other than straight prose reporting or exposition.” (143-144). I mention Ramm because this is an older work and represents the kind of “literalism” against which Borg makes his case. Ramm makes clear that the older orthodoxy was well aware of distinctions between “metaphorical” and “literal” readings. The question is not a failure to distinguish between “literal” and “metaphorical” sense, but one of genre. More recent discussions of metaphor by theologians who would be “literalists” by Borg’s definition include: Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Ian Paul, “Metaphor,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Craig R. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Trier and N.T. Wright, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 507-510.

71*Speaking Christian*, 32.

72*Heart of Christianity*, 13-14. The logic here is certainly odd. Americans celebrate Independence Day every July 4, and the “meaning” of “Independence Day” is certainly about “liberty,” but this does not imply that the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolutionary War were not events that took place in history or were mere metaphors. In the Bible, miracles do function as an “audiovisual” of “deeper spiritual reality.” To use the language of John’s gospel, they are “signs,” indications of God’s presence and witnesses of his activity. That miracles function as pointers in this way does not imply that they did

not take place. Indeed, it seems odd to suggest that an event can be a "sign" in this sense only if it did not occur. On miracles, see Darrell L. Bock, "Miracle," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 515-517.

73Heart of Christianity, 82, 84-85

74Heart of Christianity, 13-14.

75Heart of Christianity, 94-95.

76Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," Letty Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 130.

77Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread or Stone*, xii.

78Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread or Stone*, 144.

79"[A] critical theology of liberation cannot take the Bible or the biblical faith defined as the total process of learning through ideologies as *norma normans non normata*, but must understand them as sources alongside other sources." Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread or Stone*, 59.

80Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread or Stone*, 60.

81Schüssler Fiorenza *Bread or Stone*, xiii.

82Pagels, 7.

83Pagels, 40.

84Pagels, 170.

85Pagels, 180.

86Crossan, 162-163.

87"[T]he trend is away from Jesus' egalitarian community toward investing authority either in a leadership group (the Twelve) or in specific individuals (e.g. Peter or the Beloved Disciple). Already we're on our way toward a church led by a male hierarchy. And that's a long way from where Jesus started." Crossan, 164.

88McFague, 224.

89Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 74.

90Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 74.

91Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 214.

92Moses Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204) was a Medieval Jewish theologian who argued in his *Guide for the Perplexed* that all religious language is essentially negative. It tells us what God "is not," but provides no positive knowledge of what God is.

93Borg, *Speaking*, 70.

94Borg, *Speaking*, 74.

95McFague, 72.

96McFague, 106.

97McFague, 85.

98Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 65.

99McFague, 73.

100 Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 67.

101 Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, 70, 185.

102 McFague, 110, 108.

103 McFague, 136.

104 Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 66, 70.

105 McFague, 113, 133.

106 McFague, 112.

107 McFague, 75. “[I]s God, then, not in some sense responsible for the horrendous evil . . . In a monist ontology, one has to give a qualified yes . . . since there is no evil power comparable to God, God is in some sense responsible for the worst that happens in the cosmos.”
McFague, 141.

108 Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 67, 73.

109 Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 72.

110 Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 73.

111 Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 73, 73.

112 Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 73.

113 Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 72.

114 Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 73.

115 Gal. 1:12.

116 Heb. 1:1-4.

117 McFague, 36.

118 Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 88.

119 McFague, 183.

120 Borg, *Speaking Christianity*, 203.

121 Borg, *Speaking*, 208.

122 Borg, *Speaking*, 209, 211.

123 Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 214.

124 Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 77.

125 See, for example, Evans on *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Peter*, and other "questionable texts" (Evans' description) in *Fabricating Jesus*, 52-99.

126 At the same time, Howard Clark Kee argues that there is an ideological agenda behind the Jesus Seminar's "flight from apocalyptic." "[M]anipulation of the evidence in order to rid Jesus of an apocalyptic outlook and any sense of himself as God's agent of renewal is only the late twentieth-century counterpart of earlier scholarly attempts to recreate Jesus in a form more compatible with the current intellectual climate." Kee, "A Century of Quests," 25.

127 Martin, 80.

128 "[T]he Jesus Seminar view . . . of Christian origins is judged adequate by Crossan and others not because of the superiority of its fit between data and heuristic structure, but because of its fit between the first-order spiral and a larger, more embracing view of religious knowledge which denies the possibility of revelation in the usual Christian sense and either does not know or rejects the Christian understanding of how God and the created universe relate." Martin, 82

129 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 29-30. Edward Oakes, S.J. uses the expression “retrospective narrative” to describe the manner in which the resurrection provided the “benefit of hindsight” to enable the evangelists to understand “who he [Jesus] really is in a way that Jesus’ disciples were not able to do during his ministry. According to Oakes, “a single pattern . . . runs through the history of the New Testament . . . and explains the basic dynamism of early Christianity: *all theological problems and puzzles were referred back to the resurrection and found their resolution there.*” [emphasis in original] *Infinity Dwindles to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 72-73.

130 Martin, 81.

131 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 20 ff., 30-45.

132 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 34-36.