

## 11. Heart and Home: Being Christian in an Age of Pluralism

Borg moves from *what it means to be a Christian* in the emerging paradigm to *why be Christian*. Earlier paradigm says you'll go to hell if you aren't a Christian. A majority of Christians do not believe that. A primary reason is our growing awareness of religious pluralism through classes, television, and personal acquaintances. Religious pluralism provides a way of seeing Christianity anew and we better understand, "Why be Christian?" Building blocks Borg explores: demographic reality of religious pluralism; a way of seeing religions since the Enlightenment; an understanding of their similarities and differences; and the role of religion in our life with God.

### Religious Pluralism

In the last 35 years, the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Recent immigrants who have non-Christian faiths are the main reason. Six million Muslims, four million Buddhists, one million Hindus, 300,000 Sikhs in the United States today. Religious diversity not just in major metropolitan areas but regional cities and rural areas as well. Fifty years ago religious diversity was Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. Much more diversity today!

PBS's Religion and Ethics Newsweekly and U.S. News and World Report poll in 2002 found a large majority of people felt that Christians should leave those of other faiths alone and not try to convert them. A large majority also said that all religions have elements of truth. Understanding other religions is an immensely practical need made more urgent by the events of September 11, 2001.

But it goes beyond cultural and political reasons. Understanding other religions can enrich our understanding of Christianity and what it means to be Christian. Religious pluralism can help us to see our own tradition better.

### Three Ways of Seeing Religions

Three ways of seeing religion (and religions) have emerged since the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century.

- **The Absolutist Understanding of Religion:** one's own religion is the absolute and only truth. God has disclosed God's will in the scriptures of that tradition as nowhere else. This is the earlier paradigm, especially in its harder form. Only one religion can be right.
- **The Reductionist Understanding of Religion:** sees religion as a human invention. Religion created out of our ignorance about the way things really are and to satisfy psychological (protection from vulnerability and death and provide meaning for our life) and social needs (reinforce the social order). Religions are all built on a mistake, for there is no God, no sacred, no "More". All religions are mistaken, no matter how beautiful, elegant, and compassionate they might be.

Much of the conflict about religion is between Absolutist and Reductionist understandings of religion. Both are products of modernity and many people see them as the only two options.

- **The Sacramental Understanding of Religion:** is an emerging view that sees religions as sacraments of the sacred; finite means of mediating the sacred.
  - Religions as *creative human constructions*. Filled with images that come from and address the human imagination.
  - These human constructions are *in response to experiences of the sacred*. They are not built on a mistake. Religions are human products created in response to the sacred in the particular cultures within which each came into being. Robustly affirms the reality of God, the sacred, the "More".
  - Religions are "*cultural-linguistic traditions*" that originate within a particular culture and use the language of that culture to express itself, even if it might be challenging dominant convictions of that culture.

Long-lived religions become cultural-linguistic traditions in their own right with their own language, stories, vision, ethos.

- Enduring religions are "*wisdom traditions*" that are about what is real and what is the way—how we should live. Although they contain some ideas that may no longer apply today, they also enshrine the wisdom from the past about "the real" and "the way".
- Religions are *aesthetic traditions* that value and create beauty because beauty is a mediator of "the real".
- Religions are *communities of practice* that provide the "thin places", practices of worship, prayer, deeds of compassions.
- Religions are *communities of transformation* that have the very practical purpose of transforming the self from an old way of being to a new way being and transforming the world through compassion.

All enduring religions share these seven characteristics. Each of the enduring religions is a mediator of "the absolute", but not "absolute" itself. For Christians, then, the point is to live within the Christian tradition as a mediator of the absolute, whom we name "God" and who for us is known decisively in Jesus.

### **Are All Religions Thus the Same?**

Some say that "all religions are the same, leading to the same place and it doesn't matter what you are". Sometimes that statement is made by those for whom religion of any form doesn't matter much and the "place" is heaven—the afterlife—not really about "this life" and transformation of the world. Yet while the religions share many common elements, they are very different in important respects.

Common elements: 1) All affirm the "More" and that the sacred can be known; 2) All affirm a way, a path that is a variant of a transformation of the self; 3) All provide a practical means for undertaking the way, undergoing the sacred journey; 4) All extol

compassion as the primary ethical virtue of life; 5) All contain a set of beliefs and teachings—their religion “put into words”.

Yet not all the same: each have their own stories, rituals, practices, ways of worshipping the “More”. The beliefs and doctrines (his fifth point—the “putting into words”) are what are most affected by the particularities of culture and language. Although the words differ, the views of reality and the lives they mediate are similar.

“Primordial tradition”—set of core beliefs underlying all the enduring religions: 1) what is real includes more than space-time world of matter and energy; 2) we are more than our bodies and brains and we open out in our depths into the sea of being that we name God, Spirit, Allah, etc.

All religions have a similar experience of the sacred, “the real”, “the More” (internal core) but have different particular expressions, words, worship (external core). All paths leading to the mountaintop which is not “heaven” (the next life, afterlife), but “the sacred” that transforms the here and now.

External forms do matter and we do recognize that the external forms of religions are quite different. We can learn to appreciate and relish the distinctiveness of the different cultural-linguistic traditions. When the external forms are absolutized (as in fundamentalism), then religious exclusivism and conflict is the inevitable result. But the differences can be positive when we see that the external forms mediate the sacred and that they are the path: practical means for living life with and in God.

**Spirituality vs. Religion:** spirituality as personal and religion as tradition, institutions. Religion is to spirituality as institutions of learning are to education. Institutions of learning are the way education gets traction in history so we don't reinvent the wheel every generation. The external forms of religion is the way spirituality gains traction in history. We learn from and appreciate what has been passed on to us just as we hope to pass on to those who will follow us.

### **Why Be Christian?**

For centuries, the conventional Christian answer has been that Christianity is the only way to salvation. Only through Jesus can one be saved. But taking religious pluralism seriously, negates Christian exclusivism. Christians cannot be the only ones in a saving relationship to God. Does it make sense that “the More” whom we speak of as creator of the whole universe has chosen to be known in only one religious tradition, which just fortunately happen to be our own?

The classic Christian emphasis on grace is another reason to reject Christian exclusivism. If one *must* be a Christian in order to be in right relationship with God, then there is a requirement—no more grace. If our relationship with God is based on grace, then it is not based on requirements, not even the requirement of being Christian. Of course, we continue to pay attention to our relationship with God, but the relationship is not about requirements.

Seeing the similarities between Christianity and other religions adds to the credibility of Christianity rather than threatening it. When Christianity claims to be the only true religion, it loses much of its credibility.

So what about passages in the New Testament like John 14:6 or Acts 4:12 that proclaim Jesus to be "the only way" to God? (Recall discussion in "Dying and Rising in John" of chapter 6—page 2 of the chapter 6 study guide.) These are expressions of both truth and devotion.

- Truth: the path seen in Jesus of dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity and way of being lies as the heart of Christianity *and* the other religions. For us as Christians, Jesus is *the way*, even though not the only expression of the way. (Recall the illustration from Joseph Campbell about each religion as a kind of software from p. 20-21 of "The Power of Myth" I shared when we discussed chapter 6.)
- Devotion: "Jesus is the only way" is the language of love and gratitude, "hyperbole of the heart." Poetry can express the truth of the heart, but it is not doctrine. We can sing our love songs to Jesus with wild abandon without needing to demean other religions.

Borg's reasons why he is Christian:

1. Being part of a religious community and tradition of practice mediates and nourishes our relationship with God.
2. Community and tradition articulate, embody, and nurture a path of reconnection and transformation in this life.
3. Religious community and tradition put us in touch with the wisdom and beauty of the past that can deliver us from the provinciality of the present, our limited way of seeing that we seldom recognize as a form of blindness.
4. Though all the traditions have examples of perverse or brutal distortions, they have also incubated lives remarkably filled with compassion, courage, and joy. The vision of life articulated by the traditions is both appealing and important, not only for us as individuals but for us as sharing the earth.

These are reasons for being religious, not reasons for being specifically Christian. By living more deeply in our own tradition as a sacrament of the sacred, we become more centered in the one to whom the tradition points and in whom we live and move and have our being.

So why be a Christian? For Christians, the Christian tradition is familiar, it is "home" for them like no other tradition could be. The ethos of Christianity—its vision and way of life, its scripture, worship, language, music, thought, vision, and so forth—is home. And we do not need to feel that our home is superior to every other home in order to love it.

Home is about more than familiarity and comfort. Home is also about growing up, about maturation, about learning and living a way of life that one takes into the larger world. At the heart of Christianity is the way of the heart—a path that transforms us at the deepest level of our being. The heart of God is a passion for our transformation and the transformation of the world. At the heart of Christianity is participating in the passion of God.

## **Questions**

1. Borg writes of an increasing religious pluralism in the United States in the past few decades. How does what he writes about our changing "religious landscape" match up with your experience in the past few decades?
2. What are the characteristics of the "sacramental understanding of religion" in the emerging paradigm? Which one(s) do you most agree with and which one(s) do you have questions about?
3. What does Borg mean when he writes that each of the enduring religions is a mediator of "the absolute", but not "absolute" itself?
4. What are the common elements among the world's enduring religions?
5. What is unique about Christianity when compared to the world's other enduring religions?
6. How would you describe the difference between "spirituality" and "religion"?
7. What are some arguments does Borg give against Christian exclusivism? Do you agree with him? If yes, why? If no, why not?
8. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." How can this statement by Jesus in the Gospel of John be inclusive of all enduring religions and not a statement that Christianity is the only true religion?
9. Borg gives four reasons for why he is a Christian. Which ones are most meaningful to you? Are there other reasons why you are a Christian?