

Journey of Transformation

communion meditation

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John 6:28-35, 51-55, 60, 66-69

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Harvey Cox, a preeminent American Baptist theologian, was Professor of Divinity at Harvard University 1965 through 2009 and author of many books, including *The Secular City*, the book which first gained him national attention. Participating at the approach of the new millennium in a *Jesus at 2000* seminar (1998, pp. 89-105), Cox shared a fascinating story, a story he would later share in detail in his 2004 publication *When Jesus Came to Harvard*. In 1982 the school administrators called on him to design a course on moral reasoning as a part of the school's recently devised core curriculum. The course, entitled "Jesus and the Moral Life," met with astounding success, regularly enrolling 400 to 800 students. When enrollment reached 1000, the course was relocated to the school's theater, normally reserved for visiting orchestras and rock bands. Everyone, Cox acknowledges, was astonished—the administration because it thought Harvard students were uninterested in religion and the school's detractors who denounced Harvard as "a den of agnosticism." The course, which Cox taught for the next 15 years, would introduce the students to the newly flourishing studies of Jesus in the scholarly world; and the students in turn would inform Cox about the nature of Generation X, the generation born between the early 1960's and 1980's, the children of the Baby Boomers. It soon became apparent that more than fulfilling a requirement for graduation (there were 40 other moral reasoning classes they could have chosen) and more than idle curiosity, something else seemed to be at work. As he interacted with the students, Cox was profoundly impressed at two points—the students' interest in Jesus and their interest in the degree to which Jesus was of interest to other religions.

The students, to be sure, were suspicious of religion and particularly suspicious of the Christian faith, the majority religion with which they were familiar. They had their doubts about doctrines and rituals, ministers and theologians and seemed determined to keep organized religion at arms' length. Yet they were fascinated with Jesus. They were not ready, Cox observed, to accept religion as a "full-blown system of truth or as an authoritative institution," but they did seem open to a "deinstitutionalized Jesus," one who did not come bearing any institution's "imprimatur." They were suspicious of religion; but as Cox read their papers and listened to their music and dialogued with them, he became aware that they were also "painfully aware of their lostness and confusion." They seemed aware that their dilemma was somehow related to the fact that "they had trouble believing anything." The fact that they had lost faith in traditional religion did not mean that they had lost interest or even deep concern.

The first generation born into an America of radical religious pluralism, the students were repelled by religious claims of superiority and exclusion. One pre-med student, turning to Cox for counsel on available courses on the world's religions, explained his interest this way: "My roommate is a Muslim, my girlfriend is a Buddhist, and my lab partner is a Hindu. I'm beginning to think it's time for me to find out where they're coming from" (95). The students in Cox's course were amazed—and yes, *relieved*—to discover an inclusive Jesus—a Jesus who not only Christians admired, but who was admired and studied by significant personalities from other religions as well. India's esteemed Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu his entire life, claimed that he had been influenced by Jesus more than any other single person in his life. Gandhi's biographer, on visiting the ashram upon Gandhi's death, found a single picture on the wall of Gandhi's room—a picture of Jesus with the words "He is our peace" printed underneath. Similarly, the extraordinary Moses Mendelssohn, who fueled the Jewish enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries, led the way in coming to recognize Jesus as "a like-minded Jew;" and Russian artist Marc Chagall, known as "the quintessential Jewish artist of the twentieth century," recognized Jesus as a Jew who shared the historic suffering of his people at the hands of Anti-Semites. Chagall's paintings of the Crucifixion depict Jesus the Jew, suffering amidst the pogroms, the holocausts, the generations of inhumanity the Jews had suffered over time at the hands of governments and the church. When Chagall was himself forced to flee to the United States in the spring of 1941, he depicted himself as the crucified painter. I urge you to go online or to the library and view pictures of his White and his Yellow Crucifixion. They are sobering, depicting a Jesus suffering exactly because he is a Jew, crucified along with countless Jews by Rome and then through

the centuries of human history. Calling anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism “the single most catastrophic, embarrassing, and humiliating aspects of Christian history, Cox concludes, “Jesus himself, as a Jew, would have been rounded up by the SS and sent to Auschwitz. That’s where he would have been. Not outside looking in, not maintaining his Aryan purity—he would have been inside and incinerated” (104).

Reflecting on the interest in and the depictions of Jesus within Judaism in the last several decades, Rabbi Alan Mittleman observes, that in a sense, Jesus “has been returned to his ancestral home” (95).

That is extremely powerful, is it not? Our journey which began a couple of weeks ago with our consideration of the Jesus Seminar and its efforts to get in touch with the historical Jesus reveals that indeed, coming to know Jesus does not happen in four easy steps. It is the journey of a lifetime. Dominic Crossan, one of the co-chairs of the seminar, relates that after his long and intensive investment in seeking to know more about that Jesus and publishing his monumental work, he looked to Jesus and asked whether he had done enough. The Master, he said, responded in clear and simple terms: “No, Dominic, you have not.”

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar, reflected upon ways we in the church tend to look at Jesus. We may focus our hearts and minds on what we believe *about* Jesus. We may focus on getting it all just right; and indeed, people judged for not getting it right have been burned at the stake both literally and figuratively in every generation. Or we may focus on Jesus’ excellent moral instruction with Jesus as the source of our code of ethics; and again, we focus on getting it right. But there is another way, a way more in keeping with the Jesus who called disciples to walk alongside him. We may seek to enter into relationship with Jesus and in the process enter into a lifelong journey of coming to know who he is. This journey, you see, is not about proving ourselves right, and it is certainly not about judging others. What it is about, in the words of Albert Schweitzer we considered a couple of weeks ago, is just this: It is about one who will “reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which [we] shall pass through in His fellowship.” It is about “an ineffable mystery” that we learn in our daily walk and in our presence to one another. It is, in the words of Marcus Borg, about discipleship where we sit at Jesus’ table and experience his banquet. It is about the discovery that his banquet “is an inclusive banquet, including not just me and not just us, but those we tend to exclude. It means being nourished by him and fed by him.” And it is just that, Borg goes on to say, that seems to be the point of Jesus feeding the five thousand in the wilderness, just as Israel was fed in the wilderness on its Exodus journey. Christ’s table around which we gather is a powerful symbol of journeying with Jesus and being led by him on that journey. “Take, eat,” he said to them and he says to us today, “lest the journey be too great for you.” [*Meeting Jesus Again*, 135].