

FROM THE EDITOR

BELIEVING “IN”

By Dan Wotherspoon

EVERY HOLIDAY SEASON, I go through the same process, re-ask the same questions: Okay, what do I *really* think about the Christmas story? About Jesus? About the Atonement? I call myself a Christian, but what do I *really* believe about what happened two millennia ago, about the man whom many call Christ? I suspect this may be a familiar ritual for others as well.

It's not just the December sermons and general seasonal focus that bring me back to Christological questions. For me, much of the impetus comes from the music—in particular, the strange grip it has on me. In addition to the usual reasons for re-assessing beliefs and my sense of who and what Jesus is, part of what drives my quest is how much I like Christmas music—and how odd I have found that autobiographical fact to be. I don't like all the songs, though. I'll generally switch radio stations when a song about roasting chestnuts, winter wonderlands, or city sidewalks/busy sidewalks comes on. It's not the anthems to the winter season that grab me. But put on “Silent Night,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” or “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and mysterious forces take over. Something deep within me begins to stir.

The first time I really became conscious of the hold these songs had over me was during the four or so years when I was actively trying to forget all about things divine, to forget all the Sunday lessons and scriptural stories that had once captured my imagination but were then bringing me down, making me feel guilty for not living up to the shining examples they put before me. Even then, even in the midst of being fully engaged in the “high life,” every November and December, I'd catch myself adding Salt Lake's FM100 and other soft-sounds stations to my radio buttons, hoping to hear “O Come All Ye Faithful” or something about tidings of comfort and joy. “What the hell is up with me?” I'd wonder as my hard-rock self furiously scanned for another fix of that manger hay.

IN this and several other ways, my adult life has been, to borrow Flannery O'Connor's phrase, “Christ-haunted.” Coming to a place of personal peace con-

cerning Jesus' question to the Pharisees, “What think ye of Christ?” (Matthew 22:42), has long been a major quest for me. I have come to feel at home in my skin—to feel loved and even liked by God. I feel fully and truly forgiven of my sins (and Christ is the one who makes all of this possible, right?). Yet, even as I've found the peace I sought, I have been driven again and again to question how all of that works. I've taken New Testament and Christian history courses at each level of my schooling. I've studied Christology proper as well as pursued Christological topics as part of other courses and within various theological traditions. I own five or six shelf-feet of books on Jesus scholarship, and it was partly my obsession with getting to the bottom of the Christ question that I studied classical Greek for two years largely because I wanted to read the New Testament in the original. I came to realize that language studies wasn't where I shone before trying to dig into Aramaic or Coptic, but I did think about pursuing those, too. I was determined to figure out for myself who Jesus was and is, and I wanted to understand the world in which he ministered and from which Christianity arose.

I've gained many wonderful insights from my studies, appreciations for many things about Jesus' life and character. My examinations into the formation of the Gospels and epistles have given me a compassionate view of scripture. After two-plus decades of attentive sifting, I also sense I have a decent handle on what is wheat, what is chaff among competing views of the canon's essential messages. But even given the care with which I've pursued my questions about Jesus, I've been far less successful in getting my brain around the Christological claims, around how and why the atonement works, how it is that Jesus can be both man and God, and whether or not Christ's truly is the *only* name through which anyone can be saved.

SOME of the good sense in Marcus Borg's new book, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperSanFrancisco,

2006), has helped me feel better about my relative failure. Borg's book has even led me to a better sense of why my understanding has failed and has provided some comfort about the anomaly of my left-brained self being so drawn to songs about angels and claims about a king in a manger, claims that don't sit particularly easy with me.

Borg reminds me first about the huge difference between *believing that* and *believing in*. He explains that before the seventeenth century, the “object of the verb ‘believe’ was always a person, not a statement” (20). Up until the Enlightenment and the emergence of modern science,

believing in God and Jesus did not mean “I believe *that* the following statements about God and Jesus are true.” Rather, to believe in God and Jesus . . . meant to *trust* in God and Jesus. Not to trust in *statements* about God and Jesus (for this would be ‘believing *that*’), but to trust in God as known in Jesus. . . .

Believing that and *believing in* are very different. The first leads to an emphasis on correct belief, on believing the right things. The second leads to a transformed life. (20–21)

Borg goes on to discuss the subtle way that science led to this shift from *belief in* to *belief that*. Because modern Christians recognize that their claims fly in the face of the scientific worldview, religious testimony has come to be tinged with a felt need to declare belief “in spite of” science and the reasons it gives to cause one to question its claims (22). Borg's explanations make sense to me. They help me recognize and understand my strong desire to be aligned with the best scientific and philosophical thinking while at the same time reminding me that genuine faith truly is a matter of trust, fidelity, loyalty. Its home is in the mystery called love.

Borg offers a brief glimpse into his own worship life that also helped me. In a section dealing with Christian doctrines and his own doubts about many of them, he writes: “I belong to a church that recites the creeds in its worship services, and I have no difficulty doing so. But this is because I understand the creeds as later Christian testimony to the significance of Jesus, . . . [as] their deepest convictions about Jesus—about who he was (and is) and why he matters” (17).

Jesus matters to me, too. I may not know exactly what it means to claim that he is “the Christ,” nor am I fully comfortable with many statements about God and the Savior in the hymns I love. But, by golly, I can still joyfully sing “*Gloria in excelsis deo!*” ☪