

Historian and theologian Marcus Borg dies at 72

by [David Gibson](#) in the [February 18, 2015](#) issue

Marcus J. Borg, who for a generation helped popularize intense debates about the historical Jesus and the veracity and meaning of the New Testament, died January 21. He was 72 and had been suffering from a prolonged illness.

Borg emerged in the 1980s as academics and theologians were bringing new energy to the so-called quest for the historical Jesus.

Alongside scholars such as John Dominic Crossan, Borg was a leader in the Jesus Seminar, which brought a skeptical eye to the scriptures and in particular to supernatural claims about Jesus' miracles and his resurrection from the dead. Borg tended to view Jesus as a Jewish prophet and teacher who was a product of the religious ferment of first-century Judaism.

But while Borg questioned the Bible, he never lost his passion for the spiritual life or his faith in God as "real and a mystery," as he put it in his 2014 memoir *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*, the last of his more than 20 books.

"Imagine that Christianity is about loving God," he wrote. "Imagine that it's not about the self and its concerns, about 'what's in it for me,' whether that be a blessed afterlife or prosperity in this life."

Borg was the youngest of four children, born March 11, 1942, in Minnesota and raised in a Lutheran family. He attended Concordia College in Minnesota, where he majored in philosophy and political science.

He remained fascinated by the New Testament and accepted a fellowship to do graduate work at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he delved deeply into the Jewish background of the Gospels and Jesus of Nazareth. Borg then went on to further studies at Oxford and taught at various universities in the Midwest on his return to the United States.

In 1979 he joined the faculty at Oregon State University and taught religion there until his retirement in 2007.

Borg gravitated to the Episcopal Church, which was his home for much of his life. His wife, Marianne, is an Episcopal priest and former canon at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, where Borg frequently lectured and was given the title of canon theologian. With characteristic humor, he said his wife informed him that *canon* means “big shot.”

Borg’s 1987 book *Jesus: A New Vision* launched him to prominence. He summarized and explained recent New Testament scholarship for a popular audience while presenting Jesus as a social and political prophet of his time who was driven by his relationship with God. Borg viewed this relationship as more important than traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus.

In subsequent books, three of them cowritten with Crossan, Borg continued to press and expand on those ideas, becoming a hero to some Christians and a target for others.

Borg loved to debate but was no polemicist, and over the years he maintained strong friendships with those who disagreed with him, developing a reputation as a gracious and generous scholar in a field and a profession not always known for those qualities.

For example, Borg coauthored a 1999 book, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, with N. T. Wright, an Anglican biblical scholar who took a more orthodox view of the Gospels. Wright also recommended many of Borg’s books and lectured alongside him on occasion.

[Though the two disagreed on the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, for example, Wright told the *New York Times* that he and Borg shared “a deep and rich mutual affection and friendship.”]

Frederick W. Schmidt Jr., professor of spiritual formation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, counted Borg as “a cherished friend.”

“Marcus shaped the conversation about Jesus, the church, and scripture in powerful ways,” Schmidt wrote on his blog after hearing of Borg’s death. “I came to different conclusions about a number of issues, but Marc was always incisive, tenacious, thoughtful, and unfailingly gracious.”

During a question-and-answer period with parishioners at one event, someone asked Borg, “But how do you know that you’re right?”

Borg paused and responded: “I don’t know. I don’t know that I’m right.” —Religion News Service

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