

I have three rather wide ranging questions to deal with in this week's Readers' Mailbag: one on the understanding of Christ's death as a sacrifice (or not); one on whom I like to read among NT scholars; and one on how to publish a scholarly book.

This should be fun! If you have a question you'd like me to address, simply ask it in any comment on any post (whether it's relevant to the post or not).

QUESTION:

Would you agree with the statement of scholars like Marcus Borg that Jesus died BECAUSE of the sins of the world and not FOR the sins of the world? Scholars like Borg are quite emphatic that the death of Jesus is not a sacrifice in the way that most (i.e. fundamentalist) Christians understand it: Jesus died for our sins and by believing in Jesus we gain eternal life. Rather, Jesus' death is understood as a WAY to God: That by following the life of Jesus and offering up our suffering to God we walk in the footsteps of Jesus. Thoughts? Thanks.

Marcus Borg's books include [Reading the Bible Again For the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally](#) and [Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith](#).

RESPONSE

I have to admit, I don't read Marcus Borg's books (see the next question). There's a clear reason for that. He published only one book scholarly book, and that was his original PhD dissertation. I frankly didn't find it very persuasive. All of his many other books were written for a general audience, and scholars almost never learn anything from that kind of book. And so as a rule most hard-core scholars don't read trade books.

But as a result, I didn't know that Marcus had taken this line on the death of Jesus. The main point to stress, though, is that he is making this claim about the death of Jesus because of his personal theology rather than as an interpreter of the New Testament. He, like many other progressive and clear thinkers who are committed to the Christian tradition, was somewhat offended by the early Christian doctrine(s) of atonement, which indicate that Christ had to die in order to placate an angry God or in order to reverse the consequences of sin – that his death was some kind of human sacrifice (a rather repulsive idea to many people today: do you mean God has to kill somebody before he can forgive us? Is that how the world works? Is that how we ourselves should handle friends and family who “sin” against us?)

And so Marcus has altered the early Christian teaching into something more palatable. I think that's commendable. His idea of why Jesus died is indeed much more satisfying — to me at least. But it's not at all what the authors of the New Testament thought. They thought, and explicitly said, on numerous occasions, that Christ died for sins, in order to bring atonement, reconciliation, redemption, salvation. For them, without Jesus' death, sin would not be taken care of and people would be lost.

In the end, Marcus was advocating a non-biblical view, but one that is infinitely better to most progressive, modern minds.

QUESTION

I'd love to hear from you about other scholars that YOU like to read. In my training, I've been influenced by predominantly Catholic Scholars: Raymond Brown, Sandra Schneider, John Meier, Dan Harrington, SJ (who was my teacher while in Divinity School), et al, but it's sometimes difficult to find other people to read who come from other traditions/non-traditions.

RESPONSE

Yes, these are all fine scholars: Brown and Meier, in particular, were stars on the Catholic horizon. There are lots of really superb scholars whose work I appreciate very much, who have advanced scholarship in significant ways. But it all depends on how "deep" your reading can be (deep scholarship? Not so deep scholarship? Trade books?)

So, as I pointed out in the previous answer, I don't read trade books very often. And the scholarship I read is almost always what is most closely related to my current book project. But I can tell you whom I think are among the best scholars to read. This is a highly selective list (and only English-language writers): there are lots and lots of names that I should give but because of space (and probably limited interest on your part) I won't give. So if someone is left off this list (many are) (rather, most are), it is not meant to be a commentary on how valuable I think his or her contributions are.

For the Gospels and Jesus, I think E. P. Sanders is absolutely groundbreaking and essential. Among the best in the field are Dale Allison, Paula Fredriksen, Amy-Jill Levine; highly controversial but always interesting is John Dominic Crossan. For Paul's life and letters, again, E. P. Sanders. But also people like John Barclay, J. Louis Martyn, and Dale Martin. For early Christian Gnosticism: Bentley Layton, Karen King, David Brakke, and Marvin Meyer. For early Christian apocrypha: Francois Bovon, Tony Burke, Paul Foster. For New Testament manuscripts (textual criticism): Eldon Epp, Mike Holmes, and David Parker.

Well, there are lots of other areas and lots and lots of other fine scholars. So happy reading!

QUESTION

In this post you say that you "absolutely know how one gets his or her first scholarly book published," and I believe you. Can you write more about that or point me toward some other resources?

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RESPONSE:

So I'm afraid the answer is both good news and bad news. The good news is that there is one clear cut way to get a first scholarly book published. The bad news is that it involves getting a PhD in the field of study. I know some lay people don't like to hear it, they don't think it should be this way, they don't think it's fair. They think publishing a scholarly book

should be like learning how to fix your plumbing - you shouldn't have to be a professional in order to do it. All you need to do is figure out what needs to be done and then do it. But it's absolutely not like that.

The only way to be able to become a bona fide, trained, competent scholar is to do a PhD in the field. There is no way around it. I know dozens of people who have tried an alternative route (reading massively on their own). And it just doesn't work. Sorry! But it doesn't work. PhD training is more than reading dozens, hundreds, thousands of books and articles. It is being trained in a field by bona fide experts who direct you, interact with you, and challenge you; it is learning how to interact with peers and colleagues in intellectual discourse that is both guided and focused; it is taking seminars for two or three years, taking written and oral exams, composing a dissertation prospectus, writing a dissertation for a couple of years, getting feedback at every point from a real expert, defending the dissertation in an oral exam, and lots of other things. You just can't replicate this on your own.

And so, the short answer to the question: the way to get the first scholarly book published, for almost all scholars, is to publish a revised version of the dissertation.

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