

**THE THIRD QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS
AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR POPULAR RELIGION:
MARCUS J BORG AS A TEST CASE**

by

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SUMMARY:

The most popular paradigm for Jesus is '*Jesus as the Divine Saviour*'. This image is inadequate for understanding the historical Jesus, because it is also inaccurate as an image for the Christian life. Marcus J Borg claims that the Christian life is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation. In advocating the 'Third Quest', Borg develops an alternative image of '*Jesus as Jewish mystic*', contrary to the idea of '*Jesus as Jewish/Christian Messiah*'. The image of Borg involves five universal religious personality types. The paradigm shift from '*Jesus as the Divine Saviour*' to that of '*Jesus as Jewish mystic*' is investigated as well as the relevance and consequences of this, for everyday religion and the conventional church. A plea for a positive assessment of the issue of the historical Jesus is presented. This could have existential implications for South African society as a whole.

Key terms:

Third Quest; Historical Jesus; Popular religion; Marcus J Borg; Christian life as journey of transformation; Relationship with God; Jesus as Jewish mystic; Religious personality types; Compassion; Metaphorised history; Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research; Functional Christology; South African society

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this dissertation to ...

my talented husband who painted and framed District Six,

my precious five-year-old daughter who wished her 'mamma' would finish her M as
quickly as possible,

my ingenuous stepson who think it is weird for someone to dedicate most of her time to
studies,

my intense and loyal stepdaughter,

my mother who is real,

my sister who supports me,

my wise colleague Maretha Jacobs, a New Testament scholar,

my friend and colleague Magdel Le Roux, an Old Testament scholar,

my supervisor who must himself be a sage,

my supportive editor,

everyone who encouraged me in whatever way.



SJD Oosthuizen – District Six (1997; Oil on canvas)

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE ISSUE—AN 'ULTRAMARINE' CREEDAL CHRIST; OR A 'MULTICOLOURED' JESUS OF HISTORY?

This part introduces the issue investigated: An 'ultramarine' creedal Christ; or a 'multicoloured' Jesus of history? The framework, the problem, the hypothesis, the approach and the presuppositions are stated. Furthermore, this part deals with the metaphor as mechanism for understanding and experiencing the historical Jesus in terms of the oil-painting (photo included).

CHAPTER 1: SKETCHING THE MECHANISM

1.1 The existential and scientific frame[work] of this dissertation

In keeping with more recent postmodernist trends in academe, this dissertation aspires to follow an approach which blends the researcher's own experience and that of others into the landscape of the topic to be investigated—the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, and its relevance for popular religion. In this way, I hope to attain something of a well-needed relevance in academic research.

My own experience is that of a personal search for the historical Jesus, part of which was my being a minister of the gospel. While searching for 'the truth', I have often looked at the oil-painting hanging on the wall above my desk, and somehow puzzled by it, I find myself staring at the central figure in the painting, wondering who this person may resemble (cf photographic resemblance of the painting). Several other questions cross my mind: What about this figure captured the imagination of the people; or what reason was there to follow him? Of what significance could this person dressed in a *blue* cape have been to them?

All I can surmise is that it is possible that this person gave some meaning to the lives of the followers in the painting. In the same way that any fixed impression of this person eludes me, so also he may create an ever shifting kaleidoscope of possible interpretations in the followers' imagination. In this way his being creates an ever changing possible array of meaning for their lives; his significance for them is never static or fossilised.

After some time another possibility crossed my mind. Perhaps, the figure in this picture can be parallel to the figure of the one and only historical Jesus, whom scholars are searching for, in a Galilean crowd. Maybe, this person in the painting is of significance to his followers. In their opinion this person could be a very reliable, yet enigmatic, presentation of the historical Jesus, as may have happened in the presentations by the Gospels for the first groups of readers.

After looking at this scene for a long time, the problem investigated in this project, began to unfold. Being intrigued or obsessed by the colour of the person's cape, (a colour artists call 'ultramarine'), the followers of the central figure in the picture just follow without seriously questioning their own understanding. They do not even bother to see the person's

face properly, they merely hear what others say about this historical person Jesus, without being critical. It could be that they do not desire to be informed.

The experience of other Christian-minded citizens of this country (South Africa) may endorse this state of affairs of being uncritical, and this strikes at the heart of popular Christian religion. Christians who fall in this category, are usually satisfied to follow only; they do not question or inquire. They are appeased by a second-hand religion, and the creeds of history are sacred to them; any critique is frowned upon. To my mind such people live their own daily lives in total ignorance, without even knowing that they are ignorant. Perhaps they only need encouragement to acknowledge the value of a historical inquiry, or the confidence to face the *real Jesus* and deal with the consequences.

In aiming to write up my research in this way, I am in no way intending to relinquish the usual rigours associated with scientific research of New Testament Studies. I merely intend to 'frame' this research within a narrative framework in which the painting plays an important role. The narrative is about my own aim to make historical research relevant; it is also about the search of everyday (non-academic) Christians' understanding of Jesus, and it is also about the 'odyssey' of Marcus J Borg in his personal and academic search for the historical Jesus.

Thus the painting becomes a frame[work] for my research, and in a way a *typology* and *allegory* in one, of larger academic and existential questions. However, in a concrete sense this painting informs and facilitates *metaphoric strands* of meaning. In turn this metaphor facilitates the coalescence of the relevance of the search for the historical Jesus, with the [re]search of Marcus J Borg for the historical Jesus. I need to immediately point out however, that by using this literary mechanism of metaphor, I do not intend to engage in the many complexities which notoriously beset the study of metaphor. My use of this[ese] metaphor[s] is merely pragmatic and didactic. I endeavour to interweave the chosen metaphor sustained more or less throughout my presentation; although it may recede at times, it always coheres the issue at stake.

The main metaphor is that of the painting (as vehicle) or that which illuminates, and the search of the historical Jesus (as the tenor) or that which is illuminated (cf also Harris 1992:223). The painting (quest) as main metaphor contains three embedded metaphors,

namely (a) an enigmatic figure (pointing at the historical Jesus); (b) the other figures, as those searching (Christians and Christian scholars alike). Thus the figure somehow suggests the historical Jesus, and the background and the characters captured on the canvas, in turn suggest the inquirers after the person of the historical Jesus and what he could mean to them. And lastly (c), there is the backdrop—District Six—a composite, complex microcosm of society; maybe adversely influenced and shaped by certain convictions. In this metaphorisation, colours also play a very important role (a further key for these colours is provided below in 2.1). In some way the respective colours become distinctive ‘metaphors’ in themselves.

The oil-painting hanging on the wall above my desk, has a dark azure blue moulded frame (as in the photo). The scene resembles a street in an old part of District Six, a once picturesque residential area, which is part of the Cape Peninsula. In the picture someone dressed in an *ultramarine cape* is busy walking up the street, in the direction of purple coloured mountains past several yellowish buildings. One can only see this person from behind. The impression is created that almost everybody is following this person. Departing from their dwellings and other buildings and from around corners, they had left whatever they were busy with, or whomever they were attending to.

District Six historically epitomised some segments of South African political, but also religious experience. ‘Formerly a rich, vibrant multicultural suburb,...District Six is now a desperate, desolate scar on the landscape, wedged between highways and a large Technikon, which has usurped a third of its land’ (Nabakwe 1998:1). However, a historic deal of redevelopment has been reached, that will now celebrate the community’s diversity, commitment to non-racialism, equality and justice. There are some striking parallels to the process of constructing the Jesus of history. Jacobs (see 1996:103-107) refers to the endeavours of New Testament scholars which is a task that ever remains a process, in which they are constructing the Jesus of history. These academics often do not regard it as part of their job, to reflect on the implications of their specialised work. However, since having been actually a minister of the gospel before, I urge the need for ‘framing’, even if only provisionally, one’s story of the historical Jesus. My objective is to campaign for the furtherance of ‘making public’ and relevant, the results of the Biblical Sciences.

In trying to prevent the occurrence of another ‘scar on the landscape’ of understanding the historical Jesus with this dissertation, the general Christian reader and I have to agree without being insensitive, to allow each other to enter one another’s private space. We, furthermore, have to agree on mutual respect, by avoiding a clash between our different worlds which have equal value, and by not allowing a wedge to be driven in between our respective sets of convictions. These are the convictions of the imperatival necessity of a quest after the Jesus of history, on the one hand, and the orthodox belief in the Christ of the creeds on the other.

There needs to be an open engagement of ideas in the presence of a compassionate God.

1.1.1 The problem statement more closely defined

The problem addressed in this dissertation, is the ‘academic’ search or quest for the historical Jesus. The search for the historical Jesus continuously gives rise to new questions. Does the search for the historical Jesus concern merely history in the sense of ‘metaphorised history’ for the most part? Is there any possibility for discovering the ‘real’ Jesus or can we only talk about probabilities? Can cross-cultural research be of any help? Is the shift from an ontological Christology to a functional Christology decisive in the quest for the historical Jesus? Would the research be furthered if systematic theology comes into full play in the Third Quest? Does current international research in this field, signal anything of significance for a South African audience? Are the results of the Third Quest relevant for popular religion in South Africa? Can the church benefit from the research done in the sense that contemporary Christian belief becomes more intelligible and relevant for the present?

1.1.2 Hypothesis

Motivated by the existence and the use of advanced methodologies into the inquiry after this historical Jesus, and the outcome of my personal search for the historical Jesus, I hypothesise that it is possible to make this international academic research relevant for everyday (non-academic) Christians in South Africa. Everyday contemporary South African Christians who are ready to internalise the latest results of the research conducted on the topic of the historical Jesus, and who were just waiting for guidance on how to see the *face* of the historical Jesus and journey entirely with God.

1.1.3 Approach and presuppositions

My approach is to select a scholar of international standing, who has had a very real and existential experience in his own personal search for the historical Jesus; my readers may be able to identify with his existential dilemma and the results thereof. My approach is to narrate this research in such a way that the portrayal of the [re]search by Marcus J Borg is to some extent blended in with the notion of the painting in question; thus I endeavour to metaphorise the results of a searching gaze into the painting, and the observance of that which is portrayed and etched there. As written language, so a painting is also a 'text', and that the reader has to keep in mind in the subsequent pages.

Firstly, I need to emphasise that *probabilities* (if then not certainties) can be a guidance in life. This viewpoint is also voiced by many so-called 'liberal' scholars some of whom are Morton Smith and Dominic Crossan. Borg, in following EP Sanders, similarly holds that in the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, scholars can be more confident that they can come to know, with a reasonable degree of *probability*, something about the historical Jesus. Even Burton Mack, the scholar who might justifiably be viewed as the most sceptical of major contemporary Jesus-scholars, affirms this possibility. Having said this, one not only has to bear the results of the historical-critical study of the Bible in mind, but one should also bear in mind the results of all other kinds of studies, to be highly *probable*.

However, an even stronger conviction is that historical Jesus-studies might lead the reader (and me) to rethink some fundamental popular Christian beliefs. The outcome of this possibly could enable one to cope better with the real world in some or other way. Borg (1994a:69) would formulate it thus: 'Basically, wisdom concerns how to live. It speaks of the nature of reality and how to live one's life in accord with reality.' This wisdom implies an ethic and it implies a Christianity as propounded by Jesus which convincingly embodies what people's daily lives are all about.

1.2 The universal and particular (South African) relevance of the Third Quest: Some objectives

I think it of extreme relevance for the South Africans in the Third Millennium, to investigate a topic which is highly significant in theological circles; a topic still destined to become a

popular issue in our own culture. The movement broadly defined as ‘the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus’ is currently still as ‘colour’ful as it could ever be. It is held that the onset of the third millennium will intensify the already thriving international interest in the historical Jesus, because although Jesus may not be considered to be a hero, he is still thought by some to be a ‘role model’. Funk (see 1996:17) avers that people around the world would rather view Jesus as a celebrity than as a hero—he is known to be known. Everybody knows *about* Jesus and in the popular imagination Jesus features at least on their mental, if not religious landscape. Therefore it is imperative that one should attend to this topic and give it the investigation it deserves, if also in our own country.

I consider the answer by Hollenbach (see 1989:22), to the issue as to why the need for studying the historical Jesus has reappeared, as a challenge. The rationale in my calling his answer another ‘Big Bang’, is encouched in his observation that the historical Jesus-studies should quest to overthrow, not simply to correct what is referred to as the ‘*mistake called Christianity*’ [italics mine] (so Miranda in Hollenbach 1989:19).

He explains that the mistake is, to have deified Jesus as Son of David, Christ, Son of God, Second Person in the Trinity, etcetera. According to him this deification was the specific Christian form of myth-making, endemic to practically all human societies. It is the foment that surrounds this topic, that I want to reflect in this study.

People who belong to those who espouse orthodox Christianity who are appeased by a second-hand religion and who do not quest for the historical Jesus at all, are typified by Du Plessis (1998:352): ‘They just take it for granted that their interpretation of the Bible is identical to the truth’, and most of them do not even realise that their understanding of the Bible is also just another interpretation.

Consequently, I surmise that what is necessary, is to replace the ‘creedal ultramarine cape’ by one that is multicoloured, and to thus confront the contemporary South African Christian with the *face* of the person wearing the cape.

This attempt of mine to help with the empowerment of my readers, is based on the study that I have made of the work of Marcus J Borg. He succeeded in turning Jesus of Nazareth’s face to me that I may ‘envisage’ him, whether I want to see him or not. He did this at this particular stage of my academic development and search (see Borg 1997a).

Because of this experience at this moment in time, I write the following pages and end with some conclusions and suggestions, keeping in mind the person, who believes according to the 'blueish convictions' (=popularised view) of some South African Christians.

Equipped with a case filled with 'multiple-coloured' scientific theological books and journal articles, I intend to 'colour in' some knowledge from academic scholarship into the painting. This scholarship is not guilty of irrelevance, but it has had a direct bearing on popular Christian religion. I am now referring to the work of the movement, broadly defined as the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus.

I also find it felicitous to refer the reader a few times to certain of three popular periodicals, namely the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the U.S. News and Newsweek, in order to substantiate that the historical Jesus search in fact does go public and is relevant for popular religion.

1.3 Borg's view of the nature of the Gospels

Borg, to be sure, is rated as the least threatening and most sensitive to the traditional populace (see Royce 1999:1). Borg does not regard the *Good News* as foolishness. It does not appear to be his aim to captivate the church academically. The ever-shifting colours of scholarly fashion are not his fundamental commitment. He does not play the judge and will not be bullied by threats of judgement by the Judge, for his God is compassionate (see Johnson 1996:168–171). For this reason, and because he is probably the one who has reflected the most and most explicitly on the relevance of historical Jesus research for Christian faith (cf also Jacobs 1996:107), he will play the main role within this dissertation. In Jacobs' (see 1996:105–107) survey of this Third Quest, following the Old Quest, the No Quest and the New Quest, she points out that since the middle eighties, the New Quest (Third Quest) increased in intensity and a number of different works were published on this subject.

She identifies the most important attribute of this quest to be *a new methodology*. To speak of an overarching aim or objective, she argues, is difficult, because of the diversity of the greater number of participants involved in the Third Quest. It is important to notice that it is not the motive of the present questers to reflect the relation of 'Jesus' to 'Christ'.

So, once one focusses more on the detail of the oil-painting the reader will notice that the methodology and central christological claims of the 'artist' in Borg's reflection, would also have been examined. Similarly, special consideration will have been given to Borg's addition of a 'theo-cosmic'-level, that distinguishes his work from Crossan's.

Mind-boggling for the orthodox reader, is to grasp what realisation also took place in Borg's mind. It is very important to be confronted with this realisation. My definition of the 'orthodox reader' comprises a person who quite unreflectively combines what is being heard about the Christ of faith, with his or her image of Jesus as a historical figure.

By way of showing respect for the viewpoint of the orthodox reader, I need to explain further. An orthodox reader is one who does not problematise the question of the historical Jesus; it is someone who accepts the well-known conventional kind of viewpoint that the Gospels reflect everything accurately. Borg realised that the Gospels are neither divine documents nor straightforward historical records. He clarifies this assumption as follows: 'They are not divine products inspired directly by God, whose contents therefore are to be believed (as I had thought prior to this). Nor are they eyewitness accounts written by people who had accompanied Jesus and simply sought to report what they had seen and heard' (Borg 1994a:9).

I mean no offence when presenting the critique, offered by Borg, on how to understand the Gospels according to biblical scholarship, which has been developed in the last two hundred years. He believes the four Gospels represent a fourfold calculated set of theological interpretations in which disagreement is the outstanding characteristic. However, advocates of the Third Quest of the Historical Jesus do accept the historical reliability of substantial portions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when interpreting these in the light of an early first-century Palestinian Jewish setting. However, Jesus' more spectacular miracles over the forces of nature, the most exalted claims he makes for himself, and his resurrection are consistently rejected (see Blomberg 1995:27). It would be worth one's while—and I want to suggest this point of departure—that the Gospels be read as representing the developing traditions of the early Christian movement, where two primary propulsions or forces were at work. Firstly, the traditions about Jesus were adapted and applied to the changing circumstances of the early Christian movement. Secondly, the

movement's beliefs about Jesus grew during those decades. Besides realising that the Gospels can be seen as the developing tradition of the church, the reader also needs to learn about the sharp discontinuity between *the Jesus of history* and *the Christ of faith*.

A fair question would be to ask in what way the results of the quest for Jesus of Nazareth would differ, if one would allow the Q-Source and the Gospel of Thomas to speak for themselves.

1.4 Basic layout of this dissertation

Part One (Chapter 2) further develops the issue investigated namely that of an 'ultramarine' creedal Christ; or a 'multicoloured' Jesus of history. It deals with the metaphor of the oil-painting as mechanism, for facilitating understanding and experience of the historical Jesus. Chapter 2 also explains the colour code employed in the use of the oil-painting as allegory and metaphor.

Part Two (Chapters 3 and 4) considers the influences on Marcus Borg. His approach is being looked at closely. Lastly, his principal claims regarding an image of the historical Jesus are discussed.

Part Three (Chapters 5 and 6) regards the impact of a 'multicoloured' image of Jesus on a popular 'ultramarine' (creedal, orthodox) Christian image of Jesus. Some of the results negate various traditional viewpoints, while others endorse the Christian tradition.

Part Four (Chapters 7 and 8) comprises a discussion of several more relevant points by Borg followed by responses by other scholars.

Part Five (Chapter 9) concludes the investigation with an overall assessment of the value and the universal and particular (South African) relevance of the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus for popular religion.

CHAPTER 2: A PLAY ON COLOURS AS INTERPRETIVE KEY

2.1 A key to understand the colours

By now it is clear that the cape of the enigmatic figure is a synecdoche of the figure himself, as well as a particular faith in him. Now to elaborate more on these colours and the colour of the cape. Blue is the colour that represents orthodox or popular Christianity, since the central figure in the picture wears a blue cape which symbolises the colour of the popular Christian faith. The colour of the faith of the contemporary Christian in South Africa is sometimes actually an intense *ultramarine* blue, because they view their creeds and dogmas to be *ultrasacred*. These people are obsessed with the popular Christian religion. They are prepared just to follow ignorantly and uncritically. They are at ease by being captivated within the dark azure blue of the moulded frame of the painting. Thus they even see the boundary of their faith as preset within this frame.

Metaphorically speaking, the colour of Borg's childhood faith was also this blue. He believed similarly to orthodox Christians. But, in time, the blue colour faded and his faith became colourless (uncommitted faith). The process went even further, and his faith became black (scepticism). His faith lost all its dynamic. He became a sceptic and Jesus did not matter anymore. Then, his (faith) journey shifted to focus on that which made sense to him. His Jesus image covered in a black cape, shifted to a multicoloured (*vibrantly/brilliantly* so) image of Jesus as a religious *ecstatic*; a spiritual reality. This multicoloured image contains three dimensions, namely a historical dimension, a faith dimension, and a metaphorical/metahistorical (beyond experience) Jesus (seen as connected to the Spirit/spirit person) dimension. In this process probabilities were born. Borg started to cope better with the real world. Harmony, inclusivity and compassion came into being in his life as a Christian.

This dissertation is all about a (Christian) journey towards purple coloured mountains which symbolise a compassionate God/the Spirit—who was the source of everything that Jesus was. It may of course be that orthodox Christians who follow a blue image of Jesus are no longer certain and so the cape is fading or becoming black. Thus these Christians are in need of seeing the enigmatic figure in a multicoloured cape, in order to truly understand him. He sensitively wants to encourage orthodox Christians to blossom.

Although, because of our being human, Jesus will always be captured in a frame, but then a vibrantly coloured one. Clothing Jesus (person's cape) in *multicoloured* hues, could possibly cause upheaval in District Six (South African society as a whole)—formerly a vibrant *multicultural* suburb—but for this to happen it will take some catalytic action and encouragement; that is informing believers of the possibilities.

2.2 Dressing the figure in a *black* cape; Borg's experience

Born and raised of Scandinavian heritage in North Dakota, Marcus Joel Borg (11 March 1942) began his Christian journey, by singing Lutheran children's hymns and, eventually, progressed to study on college level at Concordia College in Minnesota. He is now a renowned theologian and scholar associated with the Jesus Seminar. In this part about Borg's life-story I need to rely on *Meeting Jesus again for the first time: The historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith* (1994a).

In becoming an adult, however, his childhood faith did not any longer make sense. The colour blue on the cape faded away, and in time became colourless. Only a stark black suited his view of Jesus. The once obvious dynamic in Borg's Christian faith and life was missing.

Borg's spiritual evolution included bouts of serious scepticism. As his years at the Lutheran college ended, he had become a 'closet agnostic' someone who did not have the necessary knowledge to know what to make of it all. Borg writes that the crucial point of that period was that he finally did not know what to do with the notion of God. He thought there probably was no such reality (see 1994a: 13–15). He either had to relinquish all faith, or had to colour in the cape again; this became an absolute imperative. He cried out for a new image of Jesus at the time.

Then Borg encountered tremendously illuminating years, while being at seminary. There he learned that the image of Jesus from his childhood—the popular blueish Christian 'image of Jesus as the divine saviour who knew himself to be the Son of God who offered up his life for the sins of the world—*was not historically true*' [italics mine] (Borg 1994a:9). On the contrary, the prevailing opinion regarding the historical Jesus was that of thoroughgoing scepticism. We cannot know much about Jesus; what we can know is that

he was wrong about the central conviction animating his ministry and message, and in any case it did not really matter, for the historical Jesus was theologically irrelevant (see 1994a:8–17). Of that period in his life, Borg furthermore writes: ‘It (also) seemed vaguely scandalous, and something I shouldn’t tell my mother about’ (1994a:12). He observes that this new ‘yellowish’ news that Jesus was very different from the Jesus he had heard about when growing up in church however, seemed an important piece of information to him.

Although Borg studied the Christian tradition and the quest for the historical Jesus, his unbelief deepened to such lengths that he became a ‘closet atheist’ (1994a:13), though he never acknowledged that to anybody. The central problem was, however, the collision between his image of God and his image of reality.

As Borg studied the all-blue Christian tradition (the more orthodox view), its human origins became more transparent. It seemed, at long last, to him that religions were usually manifestly, cultural products. It was time for Borg to leave whatever and whoever he was busy dedicating his time to, and to experience the element of Christian belief embodied in the notion of the person dressed in ultramarine cape. He had to face this person of whom he only had a view from the back. He needed to reject his unblinkingly conservative Lutheran upbringing, the Jesus of the blue cape, and rediscover a Jesus wearing a harmonious coloured cape. A Jesus who achieved to mix the colours of his cape thoroughly with a sense of purpose. A Jesus to whom one can give one’s heart.

Borg (see 1994a:18) did this and passaged from what Ricoeur called a conversion from ‘first naivete’ to ‘second naivete’. Borg began to see that the word *God* refers to the holy mystery—both immanent and transcendent. He embarked the road to the discovery of a Jesus who was more concerned about this life than the afterlife, who taught subversive wisdom and was intent on revitalising Israel. This Jesus was also a ‘healer or holy person’—something of a Jewish mystic. A person in whose life God/the Spirit, portrayed in the purple coloured mountains of the oil-painting, is central. Besides being deeply involved in the social world of the every day, Jesus’ relationship to the Spirit was the source of everything that he was (see 1994a:29–36).

Observing a certain need for colour in a ‘washed-out’ society, Borg started trying to lead people out of a literalistic understanding of the Gospels by a metaphorical sweep of

a pastel coloured brush (see Royce 1999:1). Tactfully, he points to the impossibility of literalising christological language due to the multiplicity of images for speaking of Jesus' relationship to God.

This all amount to a fairly multicoloured viewpoint of Jesus which involves a historical dimension, a faith dimension and a metaphoric/spiritual dimension.

2.3 Imposing a *multicoloured* cape could cause upheaval in District Six (South African society as a whole)

These differently portrayed coloured and framed portraits of Jesus of Nazareth, have accumulated to such lengths with lay-people and popular Christian religion in mind, that the need for more research on the topic becomes a prerequisite in order that the general Christian person may clarify in his or her heart and mind the exact hue that Christ may take in their lives. In order to arrive at this particular colour, one needs to embark and conclude this journey with God in the words of Borg (cf 1994a:3;17). The reason why this conclusion of discerning the 'exact' colour being a prerequisite, is that Christians may be wholly confused when confronted with the multicoloured scenaria of all the Jesus research; particularly the Third Quest.

For the sake of clarity one can refer to a few of these different images of Jesus. Smith (cf 1978), for instance, acclaims him to be a magician who practised exorcism and healing. A well-known South African theologian, the late WS Vorster (cf 1994:625) argued that Jesus was an eschatological/apocalyptic prophet or wisdom teacher. Davies (cf 1995:44;104;137) argues that Jesus of Nazareth was not a teacher, for we do not have the answer to the question: What did he teach? Calling him a 'spirit-possessed prophet/healer' would be more accurate. JD Crossan, author of the bestselling *The Historical Jesus (1991)*, portrays Jesus as a Jewish peasant, a Cynic from lower Galilee, who offered free healing and common eating. Craffert (see 1998:17–18), suggests the shamanic complex to offer a useful model for dealing with Jesus as social type and historical figure in Jesus' own context. However, he stops short from saying that Jesus was a shaman. This all necessitates asking the question whether the historical knowledge of Jesus is essential to being a Christian. An

additional question would be whether the truth of Christianity is at stake in the historical study of Jesus.

In order to answer these questions, Borg reasons that a different definition of faith is required. When faith refers not only to one's relationship to God, but virtually becomes a synonym to the entire notion of Christianity, then historical knowledge of Jesus would obviously be relevant. Underlying Christians' understanding and visualising of Jesus, is their understanding of the Christian life. Given this, the importance of the image of Jesus, whom a Christian confesses to, becomes overwhelming.

With faith seen to be the *spiritual core* of a person/people, my own empathy has shifted fully to the side of the conservative Christian, with his or her probable orthodox-orientated mind and spirit. This shift of empathy was incited on account of the apprehension, doubt and compassion that may beset the conservative Christian, and I pray that they may also be freed from any fear and confusion when being confronted by this inquiry into this historical Jesus research.

Therefore the reason why I urge addressing the issue in question, is my overall concern for the relevance of the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus for popular Christian religion. Embodied in the term *relevance*, I want to contain and adapt the unsettling nature of the critical study of Jesus of Nazareth, with reference to the faith of everyday people (*homo sapiens*) and their innate sense of religion. In order to accomplish this, the following needs to be discussed and unravelled.

2.4 The popular *ultramarine* Christian image of Jesus challenged

Popular Christian religion is probably the belief of most contemporary South African Christians. Taking the popular Christian image of Jesus seriously, I refer to the widespread image of Jesus, that most Christians in the contemporary South Africa have received as children, whether they grew up within the church or only on its fringes.

Grounded on the creeds accepted as the last word by most churches, such an ultramarine image could be defined as follows: Jesus is the Lord and the Christ; the Son of man and the only Son of God. As both divine and human before God, He was crucified (the Nicene Creed (5th Article) speaks of the saving significance of Jesus' death as the very

reason he came). He was resurrected by God. He is the Saviour who serves as the Mediator of the divine. One has to believe in him with one's heart, one's soul and one's mind, *in order* to be washed clean from sins and be rewarded with the eternal life in the coming kingdom of God. What is important with this kind of image, is that everything involves faith/believing (see Borg 1994b:193).

A second, fairly common, image of Jesus, is him as teacher. In this image of Jesus one encounters a moral dimension of the Christian life. Borg is convinced that this dimension (the moral) fits in well with a 'blue' view of Christ, and Christians accepting this, is generally complacent with this (see Borg 1994b:194).

Thirdly, one has to take note of the construction of Jesus as an eschatological prophet. This kind of image has led to either a 'strange silence' (Borg 1994b:194), or to an existentialist understanding of the Christian life. The latter has generated a highly individualised and internalised understanding of the message of Jesus.

In trying to highlight the normative issue (the particular image) even further, Borg uses the example of a Christian who becomes persuaded that Jesus countered the purity system of his day. This does not ought to affect how he or she sees purity systems in his or her day, but it does have theological significance at the very practical immediate level of his or her understanding, devotion, and piety.

For centuries, Christians cherished the belief that the picture that the creeds drew of Jesus is a picture which seemed to correspond totally with that which one finds in the New Testament (see Spangenberg 1999:6–7). However, 'serious' problems arise when these Christians are confronted with facts that are at a variance with traditional Christian dogmas like those mentioned previously.

Given this, it was not up to some far-fetched or idiosyncratic methodology, but to historical-criticism, to dare to scrutinise these popular *ultramarine* dogmas, and in the process to reveal them not to be of such *ultra*-sacred status as Christians have thought after all. A particular viewpoint of Funk applies here in order to illuminate the discussion on orthodox Christianity. Calling himself a spiritual descendant of Bultmann and Barth, Niebuhr and Tillich, and the neo-orthodox movement they engendered, Funk (see 1996:304–305) with whom Borg agrees, criticises this neo-orthodoxy to be a last effort to

salvage orthodoxy for the modern world. Neo-orthodoxy, he argues was a powerful and subtle form of orthodoxy, designed to protect against the negative effects of historical-criticism and the modern scientific temper. Funk (1996:304) employs a simplistic version of orthodoxy and calls it 'popular creedalism'. This creedalism then endeavoured to present a religion that superseded Jesus, replace him, or perhaps even displaces him, with a mythology that depended on nothing Jesus said or did, except his death. The founder of the Jesus Seminar (Robert Funk), on the contrary, proposes a revitalised Christianity etched by the 'spatula of history' (my metaphor), not orthodoxy, and based on the unparalleled power of the authentic teachings of Jesus. The canvas is on our radial easel to sketch what we see or imagine. What we paint on it is our choice and responsibility. Are we going to let the implications of historical inquiry be largely unrecognised, unconscious, and unchallenged because of some restricting form of fear besetting us when the salvific act of Jesus is threatened? Or are we going even to move the easel to a position to catch the best light while portraying the life-painting? Showing us being conscious and intentional about the correlation between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life?

In brief, however, critical research can either merely disturb an already fading 'blue' (indicating peace) religious conviction, of an orthodox Christian, or it may actually result in a disturbing experience, 'because historical scholarship about Jesus affects our image of Jesus and thus our image of the Christian life, it matters' (Borg 1994b:195).

PART TWO

MARCUS J BORG AS A TEST CASE

This part deals with several other intriguing themes. Firstly, a brief focus on the influences which shaped Borg. Following this, his views on methodology are being dealt with in detail. Special consideration is given to his inclusion of a theological substratum. Thirdly, the focus will be on his predominant claims regarding an image of the historical Jesus, on the journey of exposing the face of the person in the painting now being dressed in a vibrantly coloured cape.

CHAPTER 3: INFLUENCES ON BORG'S POINT OF VIEW

The consistently rational approach that is evident in the results of historical criticism, especially the strong positivist strain of historical critics, exerts a major influence on Borg's viewpoint. The results of his work, similar to that of historical criticism, makes one realise that a viewpoint based on a 'first naïveté' (Ricoeur's term) or a 'pre-critical naïveté' is no longer viable. Involved in this approach, Borg(cf 1994a:6) maintains that whoever the significant authority figures were in one's life, and whatever they may have taught one before, this may not necessarily be true.

Jesus-scholars systematically began to implement insights and models gleaned from the history of religions, cultural anthropology, and lately the social sciences. Borg along with GB Caird as his scholarly mentor, follows this cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach, which to some extent is the result of developments in the discipline. He (1994b:7) highlights his opinion by saying: 'These not only provide comparative material and theoretical understandings, but also models constructed from either empirical or historical data which can then be used to illuminate historical periods for which we have only scanty data.'

He apparently shares many methodological convictions with other scholars, like with Crossan for instance. Borg likewise, draws heavily on a multi-disciplinary approach to set the parameters for examining the historical Jesus. His use of this approach is, however, partly the result of his teaching situation which is within secularised institutions. Thus, for pedagogical reasons, he needed to find non-Christian ways of speaking about Jesus (see O'Keeffe 1997:176–180).

A consensus may now have been reached in Jesus-studies. This consensus now becomes the backdrop of Jesus-studies, including Borg's own, and that is reached because of studies in the social world of Jesus that have become central. This more recent emphasis is, to some extent, the result of new information. Archaeological excavations continue, highly specialised studies of extant materials proliferate, and ongoing analyses of recently discovered documents such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts (part of which is the fifth Gospel, the Gospel of Thomas), unknown until 1945 when it was discovered in Upper-Egypt buried with the fifty other early Christian manuscripts, add to

our understanding. For the study of the teaching of Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas has turned out to be the most significant manuscript discovery ever made. The collection as a whole is known as the Nag Hammadi Library (see Borg 1994b:164,180).

Having said this, we can turn to a compact description of the Lost Gospel Q, which is a collection of Jesus' sayings passed along orally at first, and then eventually being recorded in written form. This Sayings Gospel, presented the original version of some of Jesus' most profound teachings. It, however, contained very little narrative material and did not mention Jesus' birth or death. According to Q, it was his teachings and not his crucifixion that were important.

The first Gospel was compiled by some of the earliest followers in his native Galilee. Written about two decades after Jesus' death, it is older than the traditional Gospels, older than the Christian church itself. Q, quite simply, is the closest we can come to the historical Jesus. More than any other document, this text holds the answer to the mysteries surrounding Jesus (Borg 1996:25).

This Lost Gospel Q was found 'buried' within the literary layers of the New Testament itself. It all started when historians began discovering unusual patterns in the text. It was discovered that Matthew and Luke had copied heavily from the Gospel of Mark, as well as from a second source. This second source was named Q (German: *Quelle*). Fitting in as a missing link between Judaism and Christianity, the Lost Gospel Q, is in a sense 'pre-Christian'. In this Gospel Jesus is the last in a long line of Jewish prophets. 'He is a charismatic teacher, a healer, a simple man filled with the spirit of God. Jesus is also a sage, the personification of Wisdom, cast in the tradition of King Solomon' (Borg 1996:28). Furthermore, his words were probably very similar to the message about a new age and a higher form of happiness, that lies within Q.

The main reason why this Lost Gospel Q does not form part of the New Testament, is the fact that Matthew and Luke were more complete, and could have eventually replaced the earlier Gospel. But, the fact that 'Q is, after all, both a doorway into the world of

ancient Christianity and a window onto the soul and spirit of Jesus' (Borg 1996:30), cannot any longer be withheld from being asserted.

Over one third of the sayings that the Gospel of Thomas contain, are similar to those from the Lost Gospel Q. Thus Q was more than just a collection of quotes. It was a Gospel; the first Gospel (cf Borg 1996:23–30).

Partly because of new archaeological evidence contained in writings, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, but mainly because of new methods to interpret previous studies, Borg believes that contemporary scholars understand the world of Jesus better than any generation since perhaps 200 CE (see Sheler, Tharp & Seider 1996:50). 'We simply know more about the world of first-century Palestine than earlier generations of scholars did' (Borg 1994b:10).

Borg's (1994b:10–11) observation in this regard, is crucial: 'But the surge of interest in Jesus' social world is not due primarily to the accumulation of additional information.' Rather, the surge of interest in Jesus' social world flowed from new ways of *construing* that additional information, made possible by interdisciplinary borrowing. Central among these is the notion of 'a social world' which refers to the total social environment of people, including especially the socially constructed reality of people. Borg (see 1994b:16) considers Berger's (1967) study of the relationship between religion and culture, *The Sacred Canopy*, to be of crucial significance. This work of Berger is employed when Borg talks about each particular culture making up a social world, an *invisible canopy* of shared ideas, under which its members live. By these shared ideas such as beliefs, values, customs, and so forth, the group orders and maintains its world (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966). When Borg (see 1994b:8) writes about the renaissance in historical Jesus scholarship, he states that it is marked not only by new methods, but also by the new results, of which the first one, is the growing conviction that the mission and message of Jesus were 'non-eschatological'. A second consensus element of this renaissance, in Borg's view, 'is a new understanding of Jesus as teacher, especially as *a teacher of subversive wisdom* in contrast to the notion of conventional wisdom' (1994b:9).

But, concerning the former—the collapse of the notion of the eschatological Jesus—this happened because of a crisis in the social world of Jesus' times that called for

a radical change. Borg replies: 'Jesus sought a transformation in the historical shape and direction of his social world' (1994b:13). He was so deeply involved in his social world, and this drew him away from otherworldly eschatology (see Borg 1994b:27).

What is clear from all of this, is that for Borg the great increase in our understanding of the social world of first-century Palestine was due to discovery, publication, and the analyses of new archaeological and manuscript material. But to an even greater extent, it was due to the accelerated use of methods and models from other disciplines, especially the social sciences, cultural anthropology, and the history of religions. In this 'interdisciplinary quest', a term borrowed from Scott (Scott in Borg 1994b:36), the dynamics of the social world came to be understood better.

In conclusion, one needs to emphasise the most important trend of the new quest for the historical Jesus that has influenced Borg's view of the historical Jesus, namely the zooming in on the *relationship between* the ideas of the *historical Jesus* (pre-Easter Jesus) and the *Christ of faith* (post-Easter Jesus). Furthermore, also its reflection on the problem of the continuity between these two foci.

CHAPTER 4: BORG'S VIEWPOINTS

4.1 On method

In correlation to the 'no quest' period, Borg explains, that the new quest continued to share the central characteristics of the 'no quest', namely a minimalist portrait of the message of Jesus conceived in eschatological terms, coupled with existentialist interpretation. Its methods and results remained largely the same. But: 'What made it "new" was a theological concern: the question of the degree of continuity between the message of Jesus and the preaching of the early church' (1994b:5).

It should be pointed out that Borg's method is actually very lucid; in reality it is quite straightforward (see Borg 1999a:3–14). To Borg (cf 1999a:3–14) the construction of an image of Jesus involves two crucial steps. The *first step* is to decide which tradition about Jesus in the Gospels, is early. This activity boils down to discerning the early layers of the developing traditions about Jesus.

The most objective test for this discernment of what is early, is to have multiple attestation from two or more independent sources, of which at least one is early. This implies that if a tradition appears in an early source and in another independent source, then not only is it early, but this also excludes the unlikelyhood of fabrication.

Borg distinguishes two layers of tradition or two kinds of material in the Gospels. Some material goes back to the pre-Easter Jesus, and some of this is the product of the early Christian movement. Constructing an image of the pre-Easter Jesus involves separating these two voices. If we separate these layers from one another, then the written sources emerge which can answer the question about the image of the pre-Easter Jesus; even though these are usually very difficult to decide on (see Vorster 1994:624). Most important, are the early layers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as sources. The Synoptics contain sayings of Jesus, typical actions, and a skeletal framework of his adult ministry.

A second criterion entails that when a core of material has been established through multiple attestation, then texts that have only single attestation can be accepted if they are coherent with this core. That implies that their argument should be based on common subject matter or form.

A third procedure is to identify demonstrable tendencies of the developing tradition. This can function both negatively and positively: 'When a saying or story reflects such a tendency, one must be suspicious of it. Alternatively, one that counters a demonstrable tendency of the developing tradition may well be historical, a survivor from an earlier stage' (Borg 1999a:13).

Borg (see 1999a:11-12) accepts the following common scholarly consensus about our sources of material about Jesus:

- Paul is our earliest New Testament author and not a major source for the historical Jesus.
- Q is the earliest written layer in the Gospels (50 CE).
- Mark is the earliest of our existing Gospels (70 CE).
- Matthew and Luke each had a copy of Mark when they wrote their Gospels (70+ CE).
- John's Gospel is very different from the Synoptic Gospels and is not a primary source for the historical Jesus as such.
- The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings. Although this does not play a major role in Borg's work, nevertheless Borg does rely on various noncanonical sources, particularly the sayings of the early layer of the Gospel of Thomas. He sees similar patterns developing within the assembled texts which lends credence to nontraditional conclusions. Furthermore, he avoids John's Gospel.

The *second step* in constructing an image of Jesus, involves the notion of *contextualisation*. Borg sets this material in the historical context of the Jewish matrix in the first century. The reason for this step is that words spoken and deeds done, only take on meaning within a particular context. Borg argues that the crucial context for reconstructing the meaning of things said and done by the historical Jesus, is not the literary context of the Gospels, but a sociocultural context or world.

Although Borg agrees largely with Crossan's method, according to O'Keeffe (cf 1997:180–183), Borg substantially departs from the latter in one respect, namely by inserting *a third set of questions* before the examination of actual texts; this involves

theological considerations. He does so, since 'all that [Jesus] was, taught, and did flowed out of his own intimate experience of the "world of the Spirit"' (1997:180). O'Keeffe (1997:180) explains further, that to account for this 'world', Borg inserts what may be defined as a 'theo-cosmic' level, that relies upon cross-cultural and cross-temporal religious anthropology.

Borg (see 1994a:29–30) expounds on this, averring that familiarity with a *typology of religious figures* (derived from the history of religions, cultural anthropology, political economy, sociology of religion, and psychology of religion) provides an illuminating vantage point for the study of Jesus. In the same vein Davies (cf 1995:7–15) argues that the known social type, could be the metaphor of the healer.

According to Borg (cf 1994b:12–13) five types of religious personalities known cross-culturally and in the Jewish tradition are particularly relevant: the charismatic 'holy man', the healer, the sage, the prophet, and the revitalisation movement catalyst. This implies that a model is established by a cross-cultural typology, and then validated by what we find in the Gospel texts themselves. A *Gestalt* for locating and understanding the traditions ascribed to Jesus is thus provided.

Two data help to understand Borg's methodology. The first is the so-called 'primordial tradition', which means that reality is not only one, but two-dimensional, undergirded by the presence of the 'sacred' or 'nonmaterial reality' which he calls 'spirit'. Borg uses the term spirit just as a way of speaking about the sacred. Once we become aware of this dimension, then the entire cosmos becomes 'filled with the radiant presence of God' and He can be perceived, most clearly, in 'holy persons' who become 'mediators between the two worlds, delegates from the tribe to the other world' (O'Keeffe 1997:181; cf Borg 1994a:42–43).

Although undeveloped, the general thrust of this idea of Borg is clear; God as Spirit is not merely 'believed in' but 'experienced' (see O'Keeffe 1997:182; Jacobs 1996:108).

The second datum which helps to understand Borg's methodology, consists of a second step, namely to insert Jesus into this theological construct, considering Jesus to be a 'Spirit Person'. It clearly was his relationship to the Spirit, that was both the source and energy of the mission which Jesus undertook. Jesus was one who knew the 'other world'.

He stood in a long line of mediators, stretching back to Elijah and Moses. According to the canonical Gospels he was the climax of that history of mediation. This agrees with the Gospels' presentation that Jesus began his ministry, with an 'intense experience of the Spirit' and continued to live out his life in communion with the Spirit. On account of the operation of the Spirit in Jesus' life, people experienced Jesus to be enveloped by a 'cloud of the numinous', and so Jesus 'spoke from the vantage point (and with the authority) of one whose perception had been transformed by the experience of another reality' (O'Keeffe 1997:182).

To conclude: It is maintained (see O'Keeffe 1997:182) that Jesus possessed a 'tradition transcending authority' and functioned as the 'mouth' of God. He perceived himself to be, and was perceived by others, to be a prophet; one who had been anointed by God for a specific purpose.

4.2 On an image of Jesus

In this part on Borg's image of Jesus, I rely on both his *Meeting Jesus again for the first time: The historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith* (1994a) as well as his *Jesus in contemporary scholarship* (1994b).

A claim made by Borg (cf 1999b:53) both as a historian and as a Christian, is his central observation that the pre-Easter Jesus is a Jewish mystic, and the post-Easter Jesus is the Christian Messiah.

Although Johnson (see 1996:44) accuses Borg of entirely removing Jesus from his Jewishness, Borg (see 1994a:22–39) considers that he views the pre-Easter Jesus as out-and-out Jewish, and he remained a Jew all of his life. So for instance he writes (1994a:22):

He did not intend to establish a new religion, but saw himself as having a mission within Judaism...The separation of Jesus from Judaism has had tragic consequences for Jews throughout the centuries. The separation is also historically incorrect, and any faithful image of Jesus must take with utmost seriousness his rootedness in Judaism.

One could argue therefore that Jesus was a *marginalised Jew*. According to Borg (cf 1994a:26), a carpenter (τέκτων) from Galilee was even more marginalised, than a peasant who at least owned a small piece of land. The nonhistorical birth stories, however, tell us that he was such an extraordinary person, that these kinds of stories were told about him. Stories about the birth of Jesus are not regarded as central to the early Christian movement, but as symbolic narratives *created* by this movement. The reason for postulating this, is the two very different accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, both of which are relatively late sources, since both were written in the last twenty years of the first century.

Fanciful tales assign extraordinary powers to him when still a child. Those are the products of early Christian imagination, in which the divine status of the post-Easter Jesus is uncritically retrojected back earlier and earlier into his life. A probable early stage of this process is represented by Luke's account of how Jesus amazed the teachers in the Temple, at age twelve. For a possible biographical account of the life of Jesus, see Borg (1994a:25–28).

Borg (1994a:27) reasons that: 'At some point in his life, Jesus must have become a religious seeker and embarked upon a religious quest. This is the most obvious explanation of one of the most certain facts we know about him: in his late twenties or around the age of thirty, he left Nazareth and became a follower of a wilderness prophet named John.' Jesus underwent a '*conversion*' which took place as a process which began with John the Baptist, whom Jesus came to follow, and also about Jesus' internal transformation by which religious impulses and energies came to be central in his life, that his personal story became public history.

Borg's distinction of the two Jesuses comprises the historical person of Jesus before his death, namely the pre-Easter Jesus and the fabricated person of the post-Easter Jesus. This pre-Easter Jesus was a powerful witness to the reality and character of God, and he was a radical cultural critic who preached the politics of compassion (see Sheler, Tharp & Seider 1996:50).

Borg (cf 1994a:29–30) concisely sets the process in motion by using the previously mentioned cross-cultural and interdisciplinary typology, to present a sketch of the adult Jesus. This consists of five broad strokes on the canvas. He talks of these, as reflecting his

conviction that we can know such strokes with greater probability than we can know many other details. Jesus as Jewish mystic, contrary to the idea of Jesus as Christian Messiah, involves five religious personality types, each of which corresponds to a type of religious figure known cross-culturally in the religious experience of humankind (see Borg 1994a:29–30; Borg 1995:8; Borg 1999b:53). These types—metaphorical in character—include the following:

- The religious ecstatic/spirit person (4.2.1, below)
- The healer and exorcist (4.2.2, below)
- The sage or teacher of wisdom (4.2.3, below)
- The social prophet (4.2.4, below)
- The movement catalyst (4.2.5, below)

All five of these religious personality types share a vivid sense of another reality and the ability to mediate that reality.

4.2.1 The religious ecstatic/spirit person

Borg is convinced that Jesus was a religious ecstatic, and this is the most fundamental ‘stroke’ of his historical Jesus, namely that he was a *spirit person*. This clearly relates to Jesus’ own experience and history, and it is to be found within that which we know about Jewish mysticism in first century Palestine (see Jacobs 1996). He was a type of person who experienced reality quite differently from most other people.

By calling Jesus a ‘religious ecstatic’ or a ‘spirit person’, Borg (1994a:32) understands this to imply ‘a person to whom the sacred is an experiential reality.’ Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. They are people who have vivid and frequent subjective experiences of another level or dimension of reality. This does not only include a feeling of ecstasy, but a knowing of the sacred which they experience frequently and vividly. Jesus had an experiential relationship to the Spirit, and this realisation is central to his historical identity. He not merely believed in God, but he knew Him in his own experience. Jesus was ‘a charismatic healer with a vivid sense of the reality of God’ (Borg 1994b:27).

Jesus’ relationship to the Spirit was the source of everything he was (see Borg 1994a:15). Spirit persons become mediators of the sacred and they mediate the Spirit in

various ways. They become 'funnels or conduits for the power or wisdom of God to enter into this world' (Borg 1994a:33).

Borg (see 1994a:35–36) maintains that the following indicates that Jesus was clearly a spirit person. He, for instance, engaged in spiritual practices, such as fasting and prayer. Furthermore, he addressed God in an intimate way by calling Him 'Papa'. Also, the initial *amen*, with which he began his sayings, (rather than ending it with *amen*), is evidence of the authority with which he spoke. This suggests that he perceived himself as speaking 'from the mouth of the Spirit', and not simply as reciting tradition. At the centre of his life was a profound and continuous relationship with the Spirit of God.

4.2.2 The healer and exorcist

Secondly, he was a healer and an exorcist. To his contemporaries the most remarkable thing about Jesus was the fact that he was one of the 'men of deeds'. Paranormal healings are reported within many cultures including in Judaism; both before as well as in the time of Jesus. Such healings are typically the work of religious ecstasies, though not all religious ecstasies become healers. But some do, becoming mediators of the sacred. Strikingly, more healing stories are told about Jesus than about any other figure in the Jewish tradition. Therefore he must have been a remarkable healer who both cured disease and healed illness (see Borg 1995:9).

O'Keeffe (cf 1997:183), points out that perhaps the most surprising affirmation by Borg about the claim that Jesus was a spirit person, stems from Borg's commitment and acknowledgement that the extraordinary or uncommon do exist. For Borg such a claim is possible, precisely because cross-cultural and cross-temporal religious anthropology affirms such realities, and renders Christian claims conceivable. Therefore whatever complication and problems miracles evoke in the modern mind, it is almost beyond doubt that Jesus was indeed a healer and an exorcist. Evil spirits were driven out of many possessed people by Jesus as an exorcist. As a healer Jesus served as a channel for the power of another realm, healing all those he met. Borg does not particularly develop this perspective, but he clearly affirms the reality of such events (cf Borg 1987:60–67). To him they reveal *Jesus' history* and not merely stories regarding Jesus.

4.2.3 The sage or teacher of wisdom

The following three roles Borg ascribe to Jesus can all be understood as ‘*salvific*’. It is most important that Jesus was a teacher of wisdom, who regularly used the classic forms of wisdom speech to teach a subversive and alternative wisdom. Thus he was a sage and a teacher of wisdom like Moses, Lao-tzu, or the Buddha, who offered a way of life that would lead to personal transformation. Borg (cf 1994a:102–9) holds the view that this was the most important offering of Jesus, and that his role as teacher became the basis for the claim that he was the embodiment or incarnation of Sophia.

Regarding the importance of wisdom to understand what the Gospels contain about Jesus, Borg (see 1994a:69,75) points out that the strongest consensus among today’s Jesus-scholars, is that Jesus was a sage or a teacher of wisdom. Jesus was not a conventional sage, but a subversive sage, one who questioned the conventional wisdom or the dominant consciousness of his culture, even of our contemporary culture. Conventional wisdom ‘is a culture’s social construction of reality and the internalization of that construction within the psyche of the individual’ (Borg 1994a:75). The wisdom of subversive sages is the wisdom of ‘the narrow way’, in contrast to the most taken-for-granted understandings of a culture. In practising this subversive and alternative wisdom, Jesus used aphorisms and parables which functioned as invitational forms of speech. These provocative forms of speech imply a fundamental transformation in perception. Because of their provocative form, the parables do not invoke external authority, but invite to consider something in an alternative way of seeing (cf Borg 1994a:70–74).

Jesus deconstructed the world of conventional wisdom—as Johnson (see 1996:43) reminds us, that world was responsible for the death of Jesus—by using the language of paradox and reversal often. Besides speaking of this kind of wisdom as the ‘broad way’, he also invited his hearers to an image of God who was gracious and compassionate. This is illustrated by the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Contrary to the just-do-this-and-just-do-that (requirements), as a guide to living the Christian life, Jesus grounded his alternative wisdom in an image of God as gracious and compassionate. Borg (see 1994a:85–88) opines that the way less travelled, is the path of *internal transformation*. This idea is underscored by the imagery of the heart (a *new heart*,

as representative of the self at its deepest level) and the imagery of death (one has to die to the world of conventional wisdom as well as to the self at the center of one's own self-interest). Both these imageries contain an *invitation* rather than an imperative, to see God in a radical new way, namely as gracious and compassionate—'womblike' (see 1994a:47–48). Furthermore, 'it is an invitation to the path that leads away from the life of conventional wisdom to a life that is more and more centred in God. The alternative wisdom of Jesus sees the religious life as a deepening relationship with the Spirit of God, not as a life of requirements and reward' (1994a:86). It leads from a life of anxiety, to a life of peace and trust. From the bondage of self-preoccupation, it leads to the freedom of self-forgetfulness; from a life centred in culture; to life centred in God.

Borg (1994a:96) argues that the early layers of the Christian movement's developing traditions portray Jesus not only as a teacher of wisdom, but also as intimately related to 'the wisdom of God'. He was God's Sophia who became flesh. Jesus was the embodiment of the wisdom of God according to embryonic wisdom Christology. Not only the Synoptics portray this message, but Paul also speaks of Jesus as the embodiment of Sophia, and so also the Gospel of John (see Borg 1994a:102–108). Because this involves more on Christology, a specific discussion on this follows later (5.3) in this dissertation. But Jesus was more than a sage. He was a charismatic wisdom prophet and movement initiator (see Borg 1994b:28).

4.2.4 The social prophet

Jesus was a social prophet, similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. He was a social critic, or as Borg calls him, 'a nonapocalyptic prophet', bent on changing the social order. He 'indicted the ruling elites of power, wealth, and religion who are responsible for the shape and direction of the nation's historical life' and criticised a politics of holiness that fostered internal and external divisions (O'Keeffe 1997:185). He sought to transform this life, rather than being concerned about a kingdom that would exist after death, so that this transformed life would reflect the will of God right now. To do so, he attacked not only a misguided attempt to confront Roman imperialism, but the ruling elite themselves, who used the 'politics of holiness' to justify discrimination and to legitimise exploitation (O'Keeffe 1997:185).

Thus for the pre-Easter Jesus Borg negates two data. He avers that Jesus was (a) a non-eschatological figure, (b) whose message seems nonmessianic. The self-understanding and theo-centric message of the pre-Easter Jesus were in all likelihood nonmessianic. By this Borg (cf 1994a:29) simply means that we have no way of knowing whether Jesus actually thought of himself as the Messiah or Son of God, in some special sense. Borg thus describes him in nonmessianic categories.

About Jesus being a non-eschatological figure, what is being denied, is the notion that Jesus expected the supernatural coming of the kingdom of God as a world-ending event in his own generation. On the aspect of eschatology, Borg (cf 1994b:30–32) thinks this is only the beginning of the debate. There seems serious confusion in the discussion on the meaning of eschatology, and this is also true of the related ‘kingdom of God’ terminology in Jesus’ message.

However, Borg informs us that he does not exclude eschatology from Jesus’ message as such (see also Witherington 1995:93–98).

In addition to speaking of the kingdom of God as a present power, Jesus apparently used kingdom language to refer to the eschatological banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11–12; cf Luke 13:28–29) and seems to have affirmed a life beyond death in response to a question about resurrection (Mark 12:18–27) (Borg 1994b:41–42).

The two questions which are thus intertwined and central to the renaissance in Jesus research, according to Borg (see 1994b:30), are (a) Jesus and eschatology, and (b) Jesus’ relationship to his social world on which the emphasis is still fresh in Jesus scholarship. Although the question of this relationship is likely to become more central in Jesus-studies (cf Borg 1994b:32). Concerning Jesus and eschatology, Borg evidently speaks of the breakdown of the old consensus of an eschatological Jesus (cf Witherington 1995:93).

When O’Keeffe (see 1997:189) talks about some features in Borg’s construction he particularly mentions Borg’s emphasis on praxis and the need to build a ‘Kingdom of God’ right now. He describes Borg’s Jesus as a ‘teacher’, a ‘sage’, who sought to reform Judaism

and became a nonapocalyptic prophet in the process. This is a Jesus deeply involved in his culture, and concerned about the welfare of the poor and the oppressed, whose aim was not to open the gates of heaven, but to create a more peaceful and just world.

According to Johnson (see 1996:43), what Borg finds most compelling and relevant, is Jesus as prophet and founder of a renewal movement within Judaism. Borg understands Jesus' ministry as a kind of cultural critique of the 'politics of holiness' and accordingly argues that the dominant ethos of the Jewish social world in first-century Roman Palestine, its cultural paradigm or core value, was *holiness*, understood as *purity* (Borg 1994b:26; cf Johnson 1996:43). In need of proclaiming such a political system, Jesus came to attack this purity system as part of a politics of holiness (see Borg 1994b:26) which created a world with sharp social boundaries (cf Borg 1994a:61). A world of purity in which the Temple and the priesthood play the 'buddy-buddy-game' at the centre, while persons and social groups were divided by sharp boundaries (see Borg 1994b:26).

Jesus criticised holiness, as the dominant *imitatio dei* or paradigm which structured first-century Judaism in a radical way, thus also his own social world (cf Borg 1994a:49; Borg 1994b:26). We can only realise how radical his message and vision were, when we appreciate the dimension of Jesus' emphasis of an alternative social vision, centred in compassion *versus* the previously mentioned (purity) dominant vision. He introduced a *politics of compassion*. He chose to play with the ideas of an open and inclusive socioreligious table, which represented mutual acceptance, one of his most characteristic activities. The meal practices of Jesus had sociopolitical significance. Jesus tried to advocate a body of equals in the mission of discipleship, honouring an egalitarian praxis which proclaimed to be inclusive. As Borg (see 1994a:58) points out, whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. (A discussion of the role of purity follows at a later stage; 6.7, 6.8).

4.2.5 The movement catalyst

Besides being a social prophet, Jesus was also a 'reformer' or what Borg (1994a:30; 1999b:73) identifies as a 'revitalisation movement catalyst', since he sought to chart a new course for Israel's communal life. Although Borg decided against calling him a movement founder, a movement came into existence around him. He was a catalyst who brought into

being a Jewish renewal or revitalisation movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian Church. He did so by embodying the central importance of compassion, and confronting the religious leaders of his day, with whom Jesus' counterculturalism got him into trouble, for their lack of compassion. Jesus then worked to create a community that would be radically inclusive, egalitarian, and nonhierarchical, which eventually became the 'peace party' within Israel, committed to reconciliation and pacificism. To characterise this community and its aims, Jesus spoke about 'Kingdom of God' or the 'coming of the Spirit' which would transform life into the reign of God (O'Keeffe 1997:185).

Therefore Jesus' statement in Luke 6:36 was rooted in the Jewish tradition, an early tradition also closely paralleled in Matthew 5:48; thus with an underlying Q-Source: *Γίνεσθε οἰκτίρμονες καθὼς [καὶ] ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν οἰκτίρων ἐστίν* (Aland & Aland 1983). This is translated as 'Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate' (NEB), or in Borg's (1994a:46) version: 'Be compassionate as God is compassionate'; and 'Be like a womb as God is like a womb' (Borg 1994a:48). It is to feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life giving and nourishing way (see Borg 1994a:48–49).

In the light of his experience of the Spirit, Jesus knew God to be compassionate; 'wombish' in the sense that God embraced all life and remained tender towards all according to Borg (see 1994a:60–61). Borg then continues about the implications of this God 'for us', claiming that since God is compassionate, the true followers of God should be compassionate, and should be busy with the task of transforming the world to make God's compassion known. Jesus did so by touching the sick, embracing the outcast, liberating the possessed. He invited all persons into communion with him, particularly: women, [the] untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalised. Moreover, in his treatment of the marginalised, Jesus implicitly affirmed the *equality of all* persons, which he symbolised in his 'open table fellowship' (see O'Keeffe 1997:184). Thus Borg (cf 1994a:46–47) argues that Jesus' compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centred in God.

Borg's (cf 1994a:1) foundational claim logically consists of a certain link between how we think about Jesus and what we think of the Christian life. Borg believes this to be

about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation. Already at the opening of his book, *Meeting Jesus for the first time again* (1994a), Borg underlines the important, and often quite unconscious, connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life.

To further the discussion, according to Borg, the notion 'Spirit' carries a part of what was essential to the Jesus figure and so does the word 'compassion'. Borg uses compassion strictly in the sense of a sociopolitical paradigm, expressing Jesus' alternative vision of human life in community. As for feeling, compassion implies to feel the emotions of somebody else 'in a visceral way', and this feeling leads to being compassionate (see 1994a:46–47).

In conclusion: To return to the initial heuristic tool (allegory *cum* metaphor), it is clear that the strokes of Borg's portrayal of the Jesus of history, is beginning to colour in the enigmatic figure in the painting, with multicoloured hues, since he (the Jesus of history) defies a monochromic rendition. The multicolouredness is not only clear from the fivefold roles whereby Jesus can be described, but both the essential notions of *Spirit* and that of a *compassion*, constitute the two most central attributes that we might connect with Jesus. These roles and essentials shed more light on who the, by now, *multicoloured colourfully dressed* person in the District Six painting may be. This is all possible since the notion of *compassion* entirely underlies the sociopolitical paradigm, which expresses Jesus' completely different vision of human life-in-community. Jesus did *feel with* the people of his time. He advocated compassion as the alternative paradigm for the transformation of Israel's life which was at stake (see Borg 1994b:26).

PART THREE

THE IMPACT OF MARCUS BORG'S *MULTICOLOURED* IMAGE OF JESUS, ON A POPULAR *ULTRAMARINE* CHRISTIAN IMAGE

This part intends to sketch the impact of Borg's particular 'multicoloured' image of Jesus on a popular 'ultramarine' Christian image. Some of the results negate various traditional viewpoints, while others endorse the Christian tradition.

CHAPTER 5: REFLECTIONS THAT NEGATE SOME TRADITIONAL VIEWPOINTS

5.1 The *truth* is more important than the church

It is well-known that the questers of the historical Jesus often seem to call into question some of the most common and cherished of Christian beliefs (see Borg 1994b:183). Hence these questers of the historical Jesus are sometimes seen to be not as devoted to the Jesus of history, as what they are to the Christ of dogma.

However, no overt distrust in a belief in the Jesus of history is intended by these advocates of Jesus-studies. Nevertheless, they are still called ‘faithless objectivists’, as they were called even long before the Third Quest, such as in the time of the previous Quest (see Kähler’s 1964:11–23, remarks on the latter). This is not the case, however, since Borg would not even *consider* using a ‘palette knife’ as a painting instrument, because he does not agree to the use of the heavy chunks of paint on the canvas of the history of Jesus. Instead, he uses a ‘brush’, which is infinitely more sensitive to the situation. Although it may seem threatening and destructive to the Christian faith, Borg reckons that much of the scholarly renaissance has important positive significance, for the life of the church (cf 1994b:13). As Jacobs (1996:108–109) points out, Borg ‘is of the opinion that his “historical Jesus” has direct relevance for Christian faith and life.’

However, the Jesus(es) of the New Testament and of the church’s confessions do require some ‘de-dogmatising’, in a mild way, like Borg would suggest. Therefore the christological dogma of the ancient creeds need not be destroyed in some iconoclastic way; what needs to be done, is taking into consideration the premise that the *truth* is more important than the church. Küng (1968:246) tries to illuminate the notion of truth in correlation with the church, by arguing ‘[w]hen the Church says that it fundamentally preserves all truth, this is *primarily a statement of intent* [italics mine], and a good one, indeed the best possible one.’

We need not be afraid to declare that we can no longer ethically maintain the fictions of biblical infallibility and canonical authority. Although Jesus still makes sense, and although there are even striking similarities between Borg’s view and that of orthodox Christianity, if the charismatic figure of Jesus is no longer the only way to God, the Jesus

scholar must be willing to state that (cf Jacobs 1996:109). Jesus-scholars must be willing to declare what he or she thinks and, more importantly, what he or she personally thinks, and not only what the church allows him or her to think. In Lüdemann's (see 1996:xvi) opinion, this implies we must be prepared to be *heretics*.

Debating the possibility of Jesus-scholars being called *heretics*, one has to seriously think about the presence of the element of *truth* in heresy. It is a fact that heresy often draws its strength from a good deal of the *truth*. Furthermore, selectivity, an essential feature of heresy, does not necessarily lead to error, however, it often leads to a concentrated focus, in which the 'real centre' of the Christian message can be presented in a new way. This value of selectivity is all too often neglected by the church (see Küng 1968:245).

Closely connected to this, is Borg's very important statement of the multiplicity of images, which opens the possibility of a much richer understanding of the significance of Jesus, as experienced and expressed in the early Christian movement. All these presuppositions will of necessity have an impact on the depiction of Jesus, since this inevitably leads to a multicoloured Jesus. This in turn, will disturb the usual tranquil view of an ultramarine (orthodox) Jesus.

5.2 The question of Jesus' uniqueness

With the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach (which he identifies as a main characteristic of 'the contemporary renaissance in Jesus scholarship') in mind, Borg argues: 'Imaging Jesus as a particular instance of a type of religious personality known cross-culturally undermines a widespread Christian belief that Jesus is unique,..' (1994a:37).

Borg maintains that as remarkable as Jesus is, it is possible to go too far in stressing the uniqueness of Jesus.

In the sense that Jesus is not exactly like any other religious figure, he is unique (and so are the Buddha, Muhammad, Lao-tzu, and, for that matter, every person). But in popular Christian usage, the "uniqueness" of Jesus is most commonly tied to the notion that he is the uniquely and exclusively true

revelation of God. It is this meaning of his uniqueness that I deny (Borg 1994a:44-45).

Thus he stresses that Jesus is like other 'spirit persons' who acted in similar ways, both personally and communally. He never performed or offered unique and solitary means of salvation for the entire human race. But as a devoted religious person he was actively involved in the social and spiritual world of his day. The image which Borg sketches therefore sees Jesus differently; rather than being the exclusive revelation of God, he is one of many or various mediators of the sacred. In Witherington's (cf 1995:98, 236) opinion, Borg considers Jesus as only *one of many* people who affects other people. He is one among many ways, by which a modern person can come to know and experience God.

Yet, even as this view detracts from the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian tradition, in Borg's judgement, it also adds to the credibility of both (see O'Keeffe 1997:183).

5.3 Self-correction of the Christ of faith?

The terminological shift by Borg (see 1994b:195) could definitely affect our thinking and conversation about this subject; therefore his replacement of the phrases 'the Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith', with 'the pre-Easter Jesus' and 'the post-Easter Jesus'. With this shift Borg wants to address the hypothetical reality that can only be believed in, since the phrase 'the Christ of faith' can mislead one, when contrasted with the 'real' Jesus of history. Furthermore, Borg wants to disseminate the message of an element of experience encapsulated in 'the post-Easter Jesus' and not simply that of 'faith'; as if this is the only obvious element contained in 'the Christ of faith'.

Subsequently Borg discusses the 'privileged position' which the dogmatic concept of *Christ of faith* offers the study of 'the Christ of faith'; this 'privilege' undermines any further inquiry into the Jesus of history. Rather than being subjected to historical inquiry, 'the Christ of faith' is to be believed in. It implies that the Christ of faith in whom people have to believe to be saved, is immune to the relative and changing character of historical scholarship, since 'we in fact know "the Christ of faith" of early Christian experience and

tradition (the biblical Christ) only through the same processes of historical investigation and reconstruction as are involved in the study of the pre-Easter Jesus' (Borg 1994b:195).

Fact is, the different Christs of the Gospels and of Paul are being differently interpreted by scholars. This led to disagreement in the notion that only the historical Jesus involves historical construction, while the biblical Christ does not. Not only historical Jesus constructions, but also that of the biblical Christ are constructions (see Vorster 1994:629). In this context Keck (quoted by Borg 1994b:200) argues:

Historians of Jesus carry no heavier disability than anyone else. Just as the theologian's God-talk has no fixed Archimedean point but reflects his own historicity without diminishing his intent to talk about God as accurately as possible, so the historian intends his reconstruction to be an accurate comprehension of Jesus, and both the theologian and the historian are open to self-correction by means of the critical method itself. We should no longer be intimidated by the theologian's taunt, "But whose historical Jesus shall I interpret?" as if that made refusing to deal with any historically recovered Jesus legitimate! This sort of objection has been around long enough; it is time to send it packing.

5.4 The implementation of the 'Christological Equity Act'

In order to follow Borg's (see 1994a:97–111) argument on Christology, we can agree with him that the Nicene Creed—which was produced by the bishops at Nicea—has been especially important in shaping Christian images of Jesus or popular level Christology (cf Crossan 1994:200–201). Furthermore, the Creed not only defines orthodoxy, but its usage in Christian worship services over the centuries, 'deeply ingrained a "Son of God" Christology within the collective Christian psyche, and thereby within the psyche of the West' (Borg 1994a:97). We have thus become so familiar with this Son of God Christology, that it became easier to think of it as the normative or definitive Christology. I am convinced, that this is the result of misinformation and it cannot be captured on the canvas. Finding space for this kind of 'normative', or 'definitive Christology', which seeks

to only depict an 'accurate' and balanced portrayal of the historical Jesus, can just not be allowed within the 'new frame', since the Christ of dogma will impose a stiltifying effect onto the new dynamic landscape seeking to envisage a dynamic, multi-imaged Jesus of history.

Borg agrees that this 'normative Christology' had not yet taken shape in the New Testament period, neither did any official Christology exist. Rather, the New Testament contains a variety of christological images, which function as metaphors to portray the significance of Jesus and his relationship to God and to people. In the light of this, Borg endorses the interesting development of an embryonic wisdom-Christology, that ultimately saw Jesus as the embodiment or incarnation of 'the wisdom of God'; this alongside the early Christian movement's embryonic son/father Christology. This development is grounded in the Synoptics, Paul, and the Gospel of John, according to whom, that which was present in Jesus was the Sophia of God. The early Christian movement saw Jesus as both the spokesperson and the child of Sophia. Borg points out that Schüssler-Fiorenza suggests that perhaps Jesus might have spoken of himself in these terms. For Paul, Jesus is the embodiment of Sophia, and according to the Gospel of John, Jesus is equal to the incarnation of the divine Sophia; thus, Sophia becomes flesh (see Borg 1999e:148–153).

In stark contrast to those who assert the importance of a Trinitarian context, Borg (cf 1994b:7, 55–56) uses other resources as normative; cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology, history, and archaeology augmented by the primordial tradition. In view of these resources, Borg regards it useful to realise that the dominance of father/son imagery reflects the fact that Trinitarian thinking took shape in a patriarchal and androcentric culture. Again, we can state that Jesus is not *literally* 'the Son of God'. It is only metaphorical language that points to the intimate and deep relationship that existed between Jesus and his Papa. In the oldest stratum of the Christian movement's developing traditions, we find both the imaging of Jesus as 'Son of God' and as 'the wisdom of God'. This has led to the presence of both *son (male)* and *wisdom (female)* Christologies in the early Christian movement, which affects the popular Christian image of Jesus. Their presence points to a *gender complementarity* in thinking about Jesus, which is new to many people.

Because Borg's construction grounds Jesus' mission in the Spirit, he gives more emphasis to the experiential relationship to God, and in fact offers a type of 'Spirit Christology' that rivals more systematic attempts, even if truncated. To Borg, Jesus is not merely a teacher, but a 'way' that leads to deeper communion with God. So soteriology is grounded in theology, and both are closely tied to pneumatology. The end of Jesus' mission is not merely a reformed temporal order, but a mediated spiritual order, that involves communion with God and with one another. Consequently, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as 'God', the 'risen living Christ', or the 'Spirit'. A Christian is one who lives out of his or her relationship to God within the framework of the Christian tradition (cf O'Keeffe 1997:189–190). 'Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one's heart, one's self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit' (Borg 1994a:137).

In commencing this line of argumentation, the truth is, that although traditionally the church has spoken of Jesus as the Son of God and the one who exclusively mediates this reality, Borg makes no such claims. He in fact feels, that contemporary 'Spirit Christology' must be open to other salvific manifestations of God and new ways to speak about Jesus' relationship to God. Borg's aim is to uncover a 'pre-Easter Jesus' that will renew our faith, both in God, as well as in the Christian community given responsibility for bearing witnesses to the Spirit of God. Far from merely an academic exercise or, even worse, a publicity stunt, Borg is convinced that his effort to recover the historical Jesus will renew personal and corporate life, beginning with the church and ending with all life (cf O'Keeffe 1997:190).

5.5 The salvific meaning of Jesus' death

The question of Jesus' death demands some attention. This relates to the question of whether Jesus saw his death as the purpose of his life. In contrast to Wright, Borg (see 1999c:80–82) maintains that Jesus did not need to carry the conviction of a salvific understanding of his death. It is a *post-Easter product* of the early Christian community. On the contrary, Wright views Jesus' death from the usual Christian perspective: Jesus'

death was central to his messianic vocation and purpose. To Wright 'Jesus not only knew that his life would end in crucifixion, but he also saw it as the climactic kingdom action that would defeat the powers of evil and bring about the real return from exile' (Wright in Borg 1999c:80).

Behind this thinking of Borg there are several reasons. In order not to be idiosyncratic, Borg along with the majority of mainline scholars view the passion predictions in Mark as post-Easter creations. Besides, there is some evidence in the Gospels that show that Jesus' death upset his followers, and destroyed their hopes. This is hard to understand, if Jesus himself had spoken so clearly about his upcoming execution (cf Borg 1999c:81).

A second reason which Borg mentions for believing in the improbability of Jesus' fore-knowledge, is that he sees the use of passages from the Hebrew Bible generally as prophecy historicised (kind of *ex eventu* applications) and not as predictions fulfilled. This implies that early Christians used the Hebrew Bible as *they* themselves fabricated their story of Jesus' death. It is often difficult to know when using the Bible thus to create details in the passion narratives, rather than mirroring events that actually happened. The frequent use of Psalm 22:2 illustrates this issue: 'My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me....'

Thirdly, the notion of Jesus seeing his own death as salvific, sounds strange to Borg. How could it be affirmed that Jesus thought that his own death would accomplish all that was accredited to him through the Nicene Creed? What is being ascribed to Jesus, definitely attributes to his attraction, but one needs to bear in mind that what is important, is the act of honest historical judgement or strong historical evidence.

5.6 The relevance of the empty tomb

Although Easter is undoubtedly central to Christianity, the representatives of the New Quest have agreed that undue consideration of the historical nature of the resurrection is an unwarranted attempt to seek a 'basis' for faith in Jesus as the Christ. To them, the faith of the days after Easter knows itself to be nothing else, but the correct understanding of the Jesus of the days before Easter. In Borg's (see 1999d:130) words, it is a product of a developing tradition and a powerfully true metaphorical narrative.

While highlighting that ‘God raised Jesus from the dead’ (Borg 1999d:129) as the peak avowal of the New Testament, Borg (cf 1999d:135–137) expresses his view of the twofold meanings of Easter:

- Jesus was experienced after his death (Jesus lives).
- Jesus is both Lord and Christ.

Borg (cf 1999d:130–135) elaborates on the twofold meaning of Easter, by way of postulating three major reasons why he perceives the empty tomb, and whatever happened to the corpse of Jesus, to be ultimately irrelevant to the truth of Easter. The first deals with the crucial distinction between two words that are often confused: *resuscitation* and *resurrection*. *Resuscitation* means: ‘a person dead or believed to be dead comes back to life again’ (1999d:131). The meaning of *resurrection*, Borg (1999d:131) formulates tersely and somewhat abstractly: ‘[R]esurrection does not mean resumption of previous existence but entry into a new kind of existence.’ Resuscitation intrinsically involves something happening to a corpse; resurrection need not, although it could have. Borg thus maintains that Easter is about resurrection, not resuscitation (see 1997b:93).

The second reason, is because of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul does not mention an *empty tomb*/τὸ μνημεῖον. Furthermore, Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5-8) thinks of the appearances as ‘apparitions’ (ἡ ὁρασις/ὄφθη) that could refer to paranormal kinds of experiences.

In trying to elaborate on the resurrection, one can employ Pilch’s (see 1997:59) argument about the notion of experiences in altered states of consciousness (ASC). Pilch is of the opinion that Jesus’ contemporaries ‘truly’ experienced the risen Jesus in an ASC. Perhaps this is what the ‘resurrection’ could have been. Paul also radically distinguishes the resurrection body from a flesh-and-blood/physical body—the two bodies are as different as a plant is from seed.

Borg’s third reason for being convinced of the irrelevance of the empty tomb, relates to the nature of the resurrection stories; namely whether one should interpret them literally or metaphorically. At the end of this specific discussion, Borg (see 1999d:129–137) arrives at his statement of seeing the post-Easter Jesus as an *experiential reality*.

As Pilch (cf 1997:59) explains, the ASC tomb-experience helped Jesus' contemporaries understand his life, his teaching, and his present location in God's ordered creation with greater clarity. It also lessened their grief and disappointment.

5.7 Christianity as a vehicle for experiencing the sacred

Borg's argument on faith proceeds from the one of Crossan (cf 1994:200), when the latter unambiguously affirms the importance of the historical Jesus in this regard. In an important book of his, *Christian belief*, he emphasises, is an act of faith in the historical Jesus as the manifestation of God.

When Borg talks about faith, he describes it as the response to the divine initiative of grace. 'Faith is the human response to God' (1997b:168): As the human response to God, faith has three primary dimensions of meaning. First, there is faith as *fidelity*, or faithfulness. This implies that to have faith, is to be faith'ful' (opposite of infidelity) in a relationship with God. It means to give one's heart to God. A second meaning is, faith as *trust*. To trust (opposite of anxiety) God. A last meaning is faith, as *belief*. But belief only in a very general sense. Namely, the belief that there is something to all of this. Although, faith involves enough belief to respond. Coming to the relationship between faith and will: Faith is not to be simply a matter of will; we are led into it. It grows.

This leads to the conclusion that Christian faith, as Crossan (cf 1994:200) defines it, preceded the kerugma. 'Negatively,' Borg (1994b:191-192) says, 'Christian faith therefore cannot be defined primarily as faith in the kerygmatic Christ. Positively, because the historical Jesus is seen as the manifestation of God, it follows that what he was like and what he was up to is a disclosure of God'.

Borg (see 1994b:193) agrees with Kähler and Schweitzer that *historical knowledge* of Jesus is not essential to being a Christian. That seems to be self-evident. Moreover, he is sure that the truth of Christianity is not at stake in the historical study of Jesus.

Its truth has at least a relative immunity to historical investigation....What I mean is that Christianity seems clearly to "work": it is a vehicle by which people experience "the sacred", with faith referring then to one's relationship

to God. No historical discovery or claim would cause it immediately to cease to “work” (Borg 1994b:193).

In his notes, Borg admits that perhaps, over a long period, an absolutely outrageous discovery would weaken Christianity too such length, that it would cease to ‘work’ for many people and cause it effectively to disappear. ‘But my point is that the core validity of Christianity has to do with its ability to mediate the sacred, not with the historical accuracy of any particular claim’ (Borg 1994b:199).

A most positive evaluation of Christianity as a vehicle by means of which people can experience the sacred, is offered by Wright (1999:221), when he writes in the context of politics. Once, after attending a seminar, where he was in the company of speakers from Africa and Europe, and where the urgent issue of debt in two-thirds of the world was addressed, and hope for a ‘jubilee’ in the year 2000 was discussed, he was of the conviction that the *salvific death of Jesus* could serve as basis for such a jubilee: ‘I said there, and have no hesitation in saying here, that if Jesus is lord and Caesar isn’t, it is also true that Jesus is lord and mammon isn’t. The idea of debt remission is anathema to those who worship mammon; they think up all kinds of excuses to stop the proposal being taken seriously.’

He goes on saying that it has been done before, when Germany’s huge debt was remitted in 1953, giving that country a fresh start. Thus, it is perfectly possible, but even more importantly, it is exactly in line with the programme articulated by Jesus in Luke 4. Following Jesus (the lord) leads one into direct political action. As a contemporary Christian, Wright (cf 1999:222) interprets everything as part of the ‘sacred-in-action’. Christianity, in this case, definitely is a vehicle to experience the sacred.

Borg (cf 1999f:233) believes faith not only to be a way of knowing about the historical Jesus, but he prefers to speak of the role of metahistorical factors in the study of Jesus. Such a factor or conviction is grounded in experience but it also goes beyond experience. Christianity indeed is a vehicle, like Borg says, by which people experience the sacred and also go beyond all experience.

5.8 Life is no longer a matter of reward and punishment

One may now turn to the problem of conventional wisdom as the dominant consciousness in our own time and culture. The first general feature is the matter of providing comprehensive and pervasive guidance on how to live. This wisdom embodies the central values of a culture, something we assimilate, simply by growing up in that culture. A second issue is that this kind of wisdom is intrinsically based upon the dynamic of rewards and punishments. Life thus becomes a matter of requirements and rewards, failure and punishment. Thirdly, conventional wisdom has both social and psychological consequences. Socially, it creates a world of hierarchies and boundaries, while psychologically it becomes the basis for identity and self-esteem. It is internalised within the psyche as the superego, the internal judge to whom I must answer. According to Borg (see 1994a:78–80), God is portrayed primarily as lawgiver and judge, when conventional wisdom appears in religious form. He then becomes the one whose requirements must be met. Borg (1994a:78) maintains that when this happens in the Christian tradition ‘it leads to an image of the Christian life as a life of requirements. Indeed, this happens so frequently that it is the most common form of Christianity.’

Coming to our own self-understanding as Christians, our salvation depends on grace through *faith*, and not on ‘works of the law’. But, argues Borg, here the emphasis is being put upon *faith* rather than grace, and *faith* becomes the new requirement. Thus, from *good works* as the requirement, it has now changed to *faith*. The consequence of this requirement of *faith* is that it naturally divides the world into those who have *faith* and those who do not. Jesus’ own subversion of conventional wisdom, should thus become a subversion of many common forms of Christianity as well.

The narrow way of Jesus, invites us to move from previously mentioned ‘second-hand religion’ to firsthand religion. Borg (1994a:87–88) explains that

[s]econdhand religion is a way of being religious based on believing what one has heard from others. It consists of thinking that the Christian life is about believing what the Bible says or what the doctrines of the church say. Firsthand religion, on the other hand, consists of a relationship to that which

the Bible and the teachings of the church point—namely, that reality that we call God or the Spirit of God.

5.9 Society is no longer structured as a system based on norms of purity

Furthering his discussion on the impact of his image of the historical Jesus, Borg (see 1994a:49–56) points out that the central conflict in the ministry of Jesus between the two earlier discussed different social visions, and especially his alternative vision, continues to have significant implications for the life of the church today.

To see this, we need again to look at the role that purity played in Jesus' social world. What is important, is to grasp that purity, in first-century Jewish Palestine, was neither trivial nor individualistic, but political—the ideology of the domineering elite. The reason for calling it purity, was that it structured society into a system of the pure and the impure, where purity and holiness meant the same, and at the centre of this were the Temple and the priesthood. This purity system established a spectrum of people ranging from the pure, through varying degrees of purity; to people on the margin; to the radically impure. One's degree of purity or impurity depended on, for example, birth and behaviour. Also sin became a matter of being impure, a connection preserved in some Christian confessions of sin, that speaks of being 'sinful and unclean'. The paradigm of purity was both a *hermeneutic* and *social system*, meaning it formed the lens through which they saw sacred tradition and provided a map for ordering their world. Jesus' critique of a way of life ordered around purity, is for example, the story of the Good Samaritan. Here Jesus attacks the purity system and advocates another better way, namely the way of compassion. *Compassion*, not holiness, should be seen as the dominant quality of God.

5.10 The Bible has to be interpreted through the lens of compassion

To Jesus, the relationship with the Spirit led to compassion in the world of every day life. As Borg (1994a:61) explains: 'The spiritual life and the world of the everyday are not split apart in the message and activity of Jesus, as they sometimes have been in the history of the church and the lives of Christians.'

The intra-Jewish battle between Jesus and the advocates of the purity system can be seen as a conflict between two very different ways of interpreting the sacred traditions of Judaism. It was not just an academic hermeneutical argument, but a hermeneutical battle about the shape of the world, and as Borg (1994a:59) puts it, 'the stakes were high.' Jesus not only advocates a kind of moral fine-tuning that would eventually perfect human society, instead he offered a radically different notion of how to order human life (see Patterson 1995:47).

Borg claims that the same hermeneutical struggle goes on in the church today. Very important is that not holiness and purity, but compassion, need to be the lens through which the Bible has to be interpreted. A practical example of not honouring this most important fact, is the extremely negative attitude towards homosexuality.

It appears when one closes in on the living area of the Christian Church that living a life of feeling unclean and guilty is imperative. The criteria for leading such a kind of life, are being described in detail, without any attention given to the negative consequences of this process. Whether it is divorce, different levels of depression, suicide, etcetera.

5.11 The church has to practice inclusivism

Borg's approach is refreshing and invigorating, because he presents a historical challenge to the way churches function. For example, Borg portrays Jesus as radically egalitarian and radically inclusive, dedicated to creating a community that should be open, inviting, accepting, compassionate, and just. Jesus, still living within the sphere of the most common form of ancient social organisation, namely a system regulated by domination, turned no one away (cf Borg 1999c:71–72). He made no exceptions, but treated all persons equal, despite their circumstances, as unconditionally loved by God.

Because of this vision of Jesus to act in a thoroughgoing inclusive manner, we are challenged to ask ourselves whether we are faithful to the historical Jesus. Do we really celebrate, nourish, cherish and embody the new way of being, that we see in the attitude of Jesus? Should we continue the practice of an exclusive eucharist, or the practice of making some people feel so unworthy that they cannot participate in the eucharist? Should the churches endorse policies that restrict ordination to some members of the community, either

those of one sex or to those who practice sex exclusively within the confines of legal marriages?

Borg (see 1994a:55–61) argues that there is obviously more to both issues, than simply the historical Jesus; but what Jesus stood for, should weigh heavily in our considerations of what we ought to do.

. Can a reader hesitate to agree that by taking Borg seriously, we can probably be imitators of Jesus, and our communities may be better equipped to embody the reign of God, which Jesus proclaimed?

Many lay-people would agree that they have experienced the devastating impact that the practice of exclusivity can have. The church would never be willing (or able) to announce honestly, the number of ‘lost souls’, for which the church herself was responsible. The reason for this may be that the number of those would be innumerable.

CHAPTER 6: INFERENCES FROM BORG'S 'PORTRAIT' THAT ENDORSES CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Before we discuss these different impacts, mention needs to be made about the overarching framework involved under which Borg works here. I am referring to Borg endorsing the movement known as *story theology*. This movement has called attention to the narrational character of the Bible. It states that the Bible has its origins mainly in story and storytelling.

Three most important features of the Bible underline this datum: (i) There is the narrative framework of the Bible as a whole; (ii) furthermore, the Bible does contain literally hundreds of individual stories; (iii) finally, at the centre of Scripture are a few 'macro-stories'. The latter implies the primary stories that shaped the religious imagination and life of ancient Israel and the early Christian movement.

Story theology also criticises much of Christian theology and modern scholarship, for having obscured or eclipsed this narrational feature of the Bible, while it seeks to recapture the narrational character of the Bible.

Borg (see 1994a:121-133) identifies the importance of three 'macro stories' to be at the heart of Scripture that shape the Bible as a whole: the story of the exodus from Egypt; the story of the exile and return from Babylon; and thirdly, the priestly story. Understanding these stories and how they portray the religious life can greatly enrich our imaging of Jesus and our imaging of the Christian life. Noting the impact of each story on popular religion is important for this study, because each of them portrays the religious life in a particular way.

To the people of ancient Israel, the story of the exodus from Egypt was their 'primal narrative', which was nevertheless seen to be not simply as a story about the past, but as a story about the present. This story imagines the human condition and God's relationship to us during all phases of history.

The exodus story is largely one of bondage, liberation, a journey, and a destination. The important question that needs to be answered is: What is it saying as a story about God and us? It tells that our problem is being in bondage to many things, for example to cultural messages—about gender roles, etcetera. The solution from this is then of course liberation from whatever lordship we are under. However, it does not stop here, but with a journey

to a place where God is encountered and known. The destination is life in the presence of God. Likewise, the story of exile and return is grounded in a historical experience. To the Jewish people this story also became a metaphor for their relationship with God. What is this story saying to the living? That our problem is being in exile; being estranged or alienated, longing for home, seen as a place where God is present. The solution is a journey of return. The religious life is portrayed as a journey to the place where God is present, a journey of return.

The priestly story, on the contrary, is grounded in an institution of ancient Israel—namely, the Temple, priesthood, and sacrifice. Within this story, the priest puts us right with God, by offering a sacrifice for us. This is a story of sin, guilt, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Also, is it linked to images of cleansing, washing, and the covering of sin. Seen through the lens of this story, our religious life becomes a story of sin, guilt and forgiveness.

All three these stories shape the message of Jesus, the New Testament, and subsequent Christian theology, including the church's theology. Yet, for Jesus, in the early movement, and subsequent Christian theology, the priestly story has dominated the popular understanding of Jesus and the Christian life until today. The popular image of Jesus as the dying saviour is related to this.

Seen thus everything is fine. The meaning of the priestly story is simple, direct and radical; we are accepted, just as we are. Nevertheless, says Borg, when this story becomes *the only story* for imagining Jesus and the Christian life, it has serious limitations. Then it produces severe distortions in our understanding of the Christian life.

Borg lists six such distortions, namely:

- It leads to a static understanding of the Christian life (a repeated cycle).
- It creates a quite passive understanding of the Christian life (God has already done what needs to be done).
- It leads to an understanding of Christianity as primarily a religion of the afterlife.
- It portrays God primarily as lawgiver and judge.
- It is a story that is hard to believe (to many people it simply makes no sense).

- A problem with this story, is that some people do not have any sense of guilt (for them the story has nothing to say).

However, if all three these macro-stories play equivalent roles, these problems disappear. Furthermore, beneath their differences the stories of suffering and hope all portray the Christian life as a journey whose central quality is a deepening and transforming relationship with God, who is then only an experiential distance away.

6.1 God can be experienced

Returning yet once again to the metaphor of the painting: Considering the brilliantly dressed person of the historical Jesus to be a religious ecstatic, implying him to be a spirit person, does hold some implications for the life of the Christian church today and for the question of who God is. God is not simply an article of belief. Borg explains: ‘The image of the pre-Easter Jesus as one who *experienced God* is quite different from the common understandings of Jesus. It is very different from my childhood image of Jesus as one who *was God*,...[italics mine]’ (Borg1994a:37).

This implies that God becomes an experiential and compassionate reality, who can be known in a direct and intimate way, not merely believed in. This reality again leads to some implications which determine how we modern Enlightenment human beings think about God. Do we understand God in a *deist* sense, conceiving Him as a supernatural being ‘out there’, who created the universe a long time ago and established natural laws, but who no longer has anything much to do with the universe? Imaging God in a *supernaturalist way*, differs from deism only by affirming that God from time to time supernaturally intervenes in this world (see Borg 1994a:37–39).

In our capacity of being fully human only, the terms we use for talking about the sacred, can be human only. Given this, *panentheism* (not pantheism) is perhaps the more applicable and positive idea of God to live by. However, one needs to bear in mind Borg’s affirmation of both the transcendence and immanence of God. Biblical texts explicitly, along with central figures (cf Borg 1997b:37), speak of *God as a presence* (not simply a power or force or source of energy that suffuses all things) being right here; continuously involved

on a personal level. One thus, not only knows about God, rather one *knows* and *experiences* him in this world. This way, God becomes real (cf Borg 1997b:32–51).

Furthermore, for God to be real, he has to love real people. He thus has to love us for the very people we are. This, one can experience every day, and hope is generated by this experience.

6.2 The Christian life as both experiential relationship and transformative journey with God

Borg's (see 1994b:54–55) central claim concerning the relevance of Jesus-studies for popular religion, is that the motive for evangelism as suggested by new understandings of Jesus, is the particular vision of life we find in Jesus. This vision is first, that of the Christian life as *a relationship* with God of the beyond, who is nevertheless right here. This implies a relationship to the same Spirit that Jesus knew, and evangelism implies the inviting of people to enter into that relationship. In contrast to the older approach of evangelism as *believing* the Christian story, now it is *living within* the Christian story that is profoundly life-giving. Secondly, it is a vision of the Christian life as a journey of transformation.

Viewing Jesus as a person in relationship to the Spirit, the focus of the Christian life moves beyond believing in God, to being in relationship to the same Spirit that Jesus knew.

This points to the movement from second-hand religion, to that of firsthand religion, where believing suggests giving one's heart to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned towards us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit. The post-Easter Jesus is, according to Borg (see 1994a:16,137), not just the product of early Christian belief and thought, but an element of *experience* (cf Borg 1994a:16). Distinguishing between these two Jesuses, says Borg, made it possible for him to be a Christian again.

With Borg's claim of making Jesus a 'Spirit person' (not only spirit person), with all its implications, he has a perspective to account for Jesus' theological importance; a perspective that is distinct from that of the traditional Roman Catholic on the one hand, and mainline Protestant Christologies on the other. However, O'Keeffe (see 1997:182–183) criticises Borg rather bluntly, when saying that he (Borg) is not operating within the context

of a 'tradition' that is, the community's shared reflections on the Christ-figure, which grew out of the New Testament; reflections which became the classical expression of the Councils, and thereafter have continued to serve as the 'necessary' parameters for understanding Christology, pneumatology, and the Trinitarian theology ever since. For that matter, Borg and Crossan have effectively

...one-upped the Reformers, substituting "sola historica" for "sola scriptura," and focussing almost exclusively on the fact that Jesus was fully human, like us in all things, and thus can be understood with the same historical approach that we use to understand any other important person. As such, their work reflects the influence of post-modernism and the effort to substitute competing historical claims for doctrinal foundationalism (O'Keeffe 1997:183).

To shed some further light on the discussion of seeing the Christian life as both experiential relationship and transformative journey with God, mention needs to be made of the notion of *faith*. When faith becomes virtually a synonym for the whole of Christianity, it seems obvious to Borg that historical knowledge of Jesus becomes relevant. In this context he thus comes to his second claim (see 4.2.5): Images of Jesus *in fact*, very much affect images of the Christian life. In explaining this, he starts his argument with the descriptive statement that images of Jesus do affect the lives of Christians. Borg argues, that because of Jesus' central place in the Christian tradition, how we as Christians think about Jesus, shapes our understanding of the Christian life itself.

Returning to the painting, the popular image one may have is Jesus dressed in a *very blue cape*. This image reflects Jesus in an orthodox manner as the Divine Saviour; the divinely begotten Son of God, whose mission was to die for the sins of the world. It also includes the belief that his message was about himself. The saving purpose of his death, and the importance of believing in him may be that to which one clings. This leads to the acknowledgement that the essential quality of the Christian life is believing that Jesus is *one's saviour*.

Another common image (also mentioned earlier, see 2.3) was not of Jesus as saviour, but of him as a *teacher of ethics* or morals, that lead to a '*moralistic*' understanding of the Christian life. The emphasis thus falls on 'being good'.

A more comprehensive image (see 2.4) of Jesus, is him being an eschatological prophet. This sort of image led either to a 'strange silence', or to an existentialist (individualised and internalised) understanding of the Christian life.

The same relationship between how Christians think of Jesus and how this determines how Christians think about the Christian life, is found if we move from global images of Jesus to more particular claims about him. Borg succinctly points at this, saying that because historical scholarship about Jesus affects our image of Jesus, and thus our image of the Christian life, it does matter.

6.3 The development of the Trinitarian doctrine is not all wrong

Borg (cf 1999e:153) makes a personal observation about belief in the Trinity: He has no difficulty saying and affirming the Nicene Creed, because he sees it both as the crystallisation and indigenisation of early Christian theological development.

Both the terms *substance* and *persons*, as they are used in the Creed and the doctrine of the Trinity, are derived from Hellenistic thought; thus they are culturally related terms, (like all language in the Bible).

This cultural relativity of biblical and creedal language, struck Borg 'with considerable force' when he was in South Africa, soon after the official end of apartheid. He learned that the Black church was being encouraged to develop its own creed, because the status of 'only son' was not a very high status in that particular Black culture. Of much higher status was 'our oldest brother'. Thus, what hit home, was that if the Nicene Creed had been formulated in a different culture, its language would have been very different (cf Borg 1999e:153–154). This awareness, relativises the Creed and the doctrine of the Trinity. The fourth-century context was their frame within which these has to be interpreted.

Some further elaboration is needed. The post-Easter Jesus (the notion and how he is talked about), originated because of the combination of ongoing religious experience and

the initial emergence of a metaphorical tradition, which ultimately resulted in an ontological tradition for speaking about it.

Metaphors and images are the first language of religious experience; ideas and doctrines are the second language, says Borg (see 1995:12–14). To select a central image to illustrate the process of moving from experience to metaphor to doctrine, ‘Son of God’ initially was a relational metaphor. So it was in the Jewish tradition. But as the post-Easter tradition developed, this relational metaphor became virtually *biological* in the birth stories. Metaphor had thus been superseded. Finally, relational metaphor and biological claim became ontological; reaching classic expression in the doctrine of the Trinity and the Creeds: Jesus is of the same substance as God, indeed, is God.

This process of development should not be seen as wrong. On the contrary, argues Borg, it is very natural: Experience gave birth to symbols (metaphors) that gave birth to thought (doctrines). Experiences of the post-Easter Jesus as divine made a doctrine like the Trinity *necessary*. Because, says Borg, how, within the framework of monotheism, could one do justice to the experience of the post-Easter Jesus as a divine reality? Only by affirming that God and Jesus are, in an important sense, one.

6.4 The Christian doctrine of incarnation justifies Jesus-studies

Borg informs us that it seems to him that the Christian doctrine of incarnation implies that the historical Jesus is important. He argues the claim by returning to the New Testament itself:

Jesus was God’s Word—God’s disclosure—become flesh. I do not presume to know what this might mean comprehensively, and it is important to guard against interpretations that verge on docetism (“Jesus was *really* God”) or that restricts God’s disclosure exclusively to Jesus, as if he were God’s only revelation. But minimally, it seems to mean this: from the point of view of his earliest followers and for Christians in the centuries since, Jesus was the epiphany or manifestation of God. The product of the historical study of Jesus— a historically reconstructed image of Jesus—is, of course, not itself

that epiphany. But to the extent that it provides a glimpse of Jesus, it provides a glimpse of the epiphany of God that he was (Borg 1994b:196).

6.5 Jesus' healings were done by power

Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist. Borg is not dogmatic when he suggests that the purpose of the mighty deeds may be symbolic rather than historical. According to him, we do not know if the wonders in nature really occurred. A clear historical judgement is thus impossible. Even Jesus' healings are not quite so simple. While many think of them as faith healings, sometimes the faith of the healed person was not involved at all. Jesus' healings were done by power, and to know its extent and range exactly is difficult (see also Habermas 1995:124–129).

Three reasons apply, as to why the historicity of Jesus' healings and exorcisms are virtually undisputed by the vast majority of critical scholars. These occurrences are attested by the 'earliest sources'. In addition, they were common in the world around Jesus. Finally, not only did Jesus' opponents not challenge the assertion that he did miracles, but they claimed that his powers came from the lord of the evil spirits. Thus, both friends and foes alike admitted his abilities (see Habermas 1995:129).

PART FOUR

IN DIALOGUE WITH BORG

This part intends to, in one chapter, offer even more pertinent points by Borg; and then to follow this up by another chapter containing responses by other scholars on various of Borg's convictions.

CHAPTER 7: BORG ARGUES....

On account of his great respect for Crossan, Borg (see 1994b:34) endorses numerous observations (especially on matters of methodology) by the former, and wishes that he himself could have been as original. Crossan's method respects and uses the models and insights from Cultural and Social Anthropology, medical anthropology, the sociology of colonial protest movements, the dynamics and structure of pre-industrial peasant societies, honour-shame societies, patron-client societies, and so forth.

Borg (cf 1995:10) agrees with EP Sanders, that developing one's methodology by beginning with the sayings of Jesus has not often been productive. Focussing on sayings often generates a pervasive scepticism that paralyses historical construction, making it seem questionable to the point of futility. By concentrating on the micro-analysis of texts, it inhibits seeing a larger picture. However, the cross-cultural typology of varieties of religious personalities provides a way out of this *impasse* (see Borg 1995:10).

In the recent past of the Third Quest research, the questions employed in the inquiries were supposed to be less specifically Christian. This resulted in a different framework for conducting the search for the historical Jesus in the Third Quest. These positive changes in cultural consciousness and in the institutional settings where Jesus scholarship is done, are largely responsible for this state of affairs. Most valuable is the fact that the questions have become more related to the broad sweep of human history and experience. An example of such a question, is how the figure of Jesus is similar or dissimilar to religious figures in other traditions (see Borg 1994b:6).

Part of Borg's contribution, entails his suggestion of the demolition of the sharp *either/or* demarcation between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. He emphasises the dialogical and dialectical relationship of the two perspectives, that shows that a *both/and* approach needs to be acknowledged. He claims that theology should deal with both the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus, and should thus not talk about '*the norm*' for Christology, but speak about a plurality of data that it needs to take into account.

Following this Borg divides modern biblical scholars into three groups:

- Those who say that historical evidence reveals a much different portrait of Jesus than the one in Christian creeds.

- Those who have denounced the historical quest as a frontal assault on Christian faith and an attempt to undermine the Bible's authority.
- The proponents who find hope in it for a more rational basis for belief and a clearer essence of Jesus' teachings.

At the heart of the debate lies the issue of whether it is possible to improve on the reliability of the words and images of Jesus, as presented in the Christian scriptures. Many scholars think the Gospels are unreliable records since they were written as proclamation and they could therefore not be regarded as objective history.

Here we encounter the already known notion of 'metaphorised history'. In trying to clarify what he means by this term, Borg (see 1999b:54) explains that instead of seeing any of the exalted metaphors as reflecting Jesus' own self-awareness, he rather considers them as the early Christian movement's pronouncements, as to what Jesus had become in their experience. Tracy (quoted by Borg 1994b:196) explains, that historical scholarship about Jesus, helps to keep alive 'the dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus'. Borg explains further that such scholarship guards against the tendency of dogma and doctrine to categorise and domesticate; of doctrinal formulations to become ideology. We have the obligation to keep the liberating memory of Jesus alive

as one who provocatively and courageously protested against systems of domestication and domination, who pointed beyond himself to the sacred mystery in which we live and move and have our being, and who brought into existence an alternative community with an alternative and egalitarian vision of human life in history (Borg 1994b:196).

CHAPTER 8: OTHER SCHOLARS WOULD RESPOND....

Borg's writings are thus theologically sophisticated, and spiritually challenging. One has to admire his perceptiveness to *integrate* what is too often kept apart in contemporary biblical scholarship, namely the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus.

Rather Borg brings Jesus' identity as 'Spirit Person' and 'teacher of alternative wisdom' into an intimate relationship to his identity as one who advocated an alternative, inclusive, social, and religious vision; he pushes beyond this historical evaluation of Jesus, in order to ask how the early Christian tradition came to understand Jesus, on account of the Jewish Wisdom tradition and their experience of Jesus' resurrection, as the Wisdom of God incarnate. This exalted Wisdom Christology should not be seen as a radical departure from the pre-Easter Christology, as some New Testament scholars have argued. Borg (see 1994a:110) contends it can and should be seen as a natural and consistent development of patterns already discernable in the pre-Easter Jesus.

This recognition of both the continuity and the discontinuity between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus, the teacher of wisdom and the Wisdom of God incarnate, surely makes the work of Borg valuable and encouraging to the scholar and the contemporary seeker: 'Borg helps us recover a sense of Jesus as a flesh-and-blood human being without in any sense "reducing" him. Rather, the reader is invited to feel the texture of Jesus' particular and dynamically prophetic human life *and* enter a limitless transforming journey of relationship with the Wisdom of God' (Burton-Christie 1995:292).

It seems to Jacobs (1996:111) that in Borg's view, the relation of *Jesus* to *Christ* is left intact by the historical Jesus scholarship. Her argument runs further, by saying that although Borg's main focus is on the historical Jesus and he thinks his reconstructed Jesus has significance for the Christian life, 'this does not cancel or replace the "post-Easter Jesus".' To her, it also seems as if he is saying that context will determine which one (pre- or post-) will be necessary and meaningful. Borg furthermore does not really give a historically consistent answer to the question of the relation between *Jesus* and *Christ*.

The role of reductionism in the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, however, is too obvious and too serious to ignore. Extreme reductionist theses are rejected even within the natural sciences. Du Plessis (cf 1996:46) argues that certain aspects of reality in the physical

world, have been 'upward' rather than 'downward' emergent. 'In other words, there are some concepts which may only be understandable as a function of some whole entity, rather than in terms of the behaviour of that entity's constituent parts' (Fuller in Du Plessis 1996:46-47). Holism is a good counter to any reductionist viewpoint. Also, holism is of tremendous theological significance concerning the dimension of mystery in the theological disciplines, and this mystery should be taken very seriously in determining the role of the key figures in this discipline.

Some scholars will interject at this point, by arguing that the most obvious problem of this modern quest, is how the interests and personalities of scholars intersect with their work. In other words, the dominating beliefs of a scholar, determine what kind of Jesus he or she is looking for by defining what kind of Jesus is or is not possible. The pictures of Jesus in this quest tell us *more about their authors* than they do about the 'real' Jesus of history. That is why examining the *lives* of leaders in the historical Jesus movement is a key to understanding their findings (see Braaten 1995:12; Sheler, Tharp & Seider 1996:47).

Johnson (cf 1996:43) enters at this point with a sharp comment that foundational to historical Jesus research, lies the cultural assumptions of the contemporary American academy. Therefore

Jesus' "relevance" turns out to be the way in which he can function as the prototype of the sort of "cultural critique" that many academics think the rest of the world needs: the "politics of holiness" that is overly concerned with rules and status and exclusion should be replaced by a "politics of compassion" that is committed to freedom and equality and inclusion (Johnson 1996:43).

However, others would gainsay this. Any analysis of a historical Jesus must be open to the disciplined historical methods of its *contemporary* world and must be able to stand up to its judgements without special pleading. At this point a closer examination of a certain explanation by Crossan (see 1991:423; 1994:200) applies. What needs to be part of the debate, is the notion that not *a* compelling image of Jesus is needed, but—and this is

important—*many different* visions of the historical Jesus present a certain dialectic with different theological interpretations. Undoubtedly, the New Testament itself is an obvious expression of that plurality's inevitability. Thus, the basis of all religion and all human life, are acts of fundamental belief, incapable of proof or disproof. Crossan's work presumes the everlasting existence of divergent historical Jesuses with divergent Christs built upon them. Thus, the structure of Christianity will always be as follows: '*this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now*' (Crossan 1994:200).

He thus proposes that the dialectic between Jesuses and Christs that is at the heart of both tradition and canon, is perfectly valid. It has always been with us and probably will always be. This proposal is seconded when one admits the fact that in referring to 'Jesus Christ' one is in fact dealing with the combination of a fact (Jesus) and an interpretation (Christ) (see also Du Plessis 1996:45–46; Craffert 1995: 306–310).

The previous discussion also takes care of another common critique, namely that journalism about the new Jesus scholarship consistently highlights the disagreements between scholars and fosters the impression that the experts cancel each other out. Those who read books on the historical Jesus know for themselves that there is little consensus among biblical scholars. Thus even those fascinated by the historical Jesus debate may be bewildered by it (see Miller 1997:27).

With this in mind, one has to pay attention to Brueggeman's (1997:4) (according to Borg, today's foremost Hebrew Bible scholar) remark that 'every interpretive effort is local and provisional.'

This implies that interpreters have to recognise that interpretations other than one's own, may be equally appropriate, and needs to be taken seriously throughout. Not everyone allows for this needed recognition of the work of others. Also, professional academic recognition is required, when someone like Borg puts his picture of the historical Jesus to the vote. Instead, scholars (like Witherington 1995:99–108, etcetera) apparently accuse Borg's picture of not accounting for *all* that we learn about Jesus. The question is whether *any* one picture can actually account for all the different things that all various scholars seem to learn about Jesus.

Another, 'mis-stroke' occurs, when Witherington (see 1995:105–106) asserts that Borg endeavoured to present us a no-fault religion as the essential teaching of Jesus; Borg does not even bother to discuss the notions of 'fault' or 'transgression'. Borg (1994a:14) however, does attend to this element, and would probably reply that there is nothing that is not filled with faults or sins, but in dealing with these phenomena, one's perception should be particularly coloured with compassion and commiseration for 'everything is in God'.

O'Keeffe (see 1997:189–190) criticises Borg's work concerning an entirely different matter. He points out that it is unfortunate that Borg does not develop the distinctions between the 'living Jesus', the 'Spirit of Jesus' and 'the Spirit'. This critique does not need any detailed refutation, except to note that in the historical studies such dogmatic differences do not feature at all.

I shall now turn to certain comments from the journal article 'Searching for the historical Jesus: Examining the work of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus J. Borg', by O'Keeffe (1997).

Another shortcoming in Borg's work may be the absence of a detailed examination of the precise relationship between Jesus and God, or the particularities of how Jesus unites us with God in Borg's work. Based on Borg's world religions perspective, these concepts are used interchangeably for the deeper dimension of life. Whenever Jesus 'functions' to reveal the truthfulness of God, and whenever he makes our union with God and with one another possible, he becomes salvific (see O'Keeffe 1997:189–190).

Some remarks on the effectiveness of Borg's work, and the broader project associated with the New Quest for the Historical Jesus is needed. First of all, it is important and necessary to note the truncated role that Christian doctrine plays in Borg's construction. Although Borg is not post-Christian, it would perhaps be fair to describe his line of thought as post-doctrinal, in the sense that the conciliar claims of Nicea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, and the ongoing tradition of the church do not function as theological parameters for doing Christology (cf O'Keeffe 1997:190).

Furthermore, although Borg enriches our historical understanding of Jesus, and helps to place Jesus within a wider context than simply first-century Palestine, he does not explore, in any *sustained* way, the relationship between the historical, pre-Easter Jesus and

the church's understanding of him, or the theological implications of Jesus for a contemporary understanding of God.

One may applaud Borg for concentrating on the practical relevance of Jesus' life, that is, on his concern for this life and how one ought to live under the reign of God. Although such a view is now commonplace, 'the dogged concern about this life was not central in traditional Christology' (O'Keeffe 1997:191). When asking people about Jesus, they seldom begin with his reform of Judaism or his commitment to that end. Most follow the creeds, and move from birth to death in one fleeting moment, and view his primary mission as eternal salvation.

Borg's challenge to traditional Christology is praiseworthy. He focusses on what Jesus focussed on, namely, the here-and-now, the poor, the lame, and the marginalised—Jesus' desire to fashion a community of justice, reconciliation, and peace. Jesus thus emerges as politically aware, deeply involved in the politics and culture of his time. This important political thrust of Jesus needs to remain central (see O'Keeffe 1997:191).

Many scholars argue, the historical Jesus can never be the entire and only valid content of faith. A truncation of the eschatological person of Christ to the private person of Jesus will end up making Christology irrelevant. This will make Christianity a movement that tries to stand on one leg instead of two (see Du Plessis 1996:46).

Other scholars, however, think it refreshing when Borg presents a historical challenge to the way churches function. He does this by depicting Jesus as radically egalitarian and radically inclusive, dedicated to creating a community that would be open, inviting, accepting, compassionate, and just. Borg's Jesus turns no one away, and treats all persons, despite their circumstances, as unconditionally loved by God (see O'Keeffe 1997:191).

With reference to the previous debate, Borg perhaps contrasts Jesus as a preacher of compassion and a preacher of holiness too sharply; the former urges solidarity and the latter, separation. Borg emphasises the Lucan 'Be compassionate as God is compassionate' (6:36) compared with the Matthean (5:48) 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' The latter has been more misused in the history of Christian spirituality than any other single

verse in the New Testament (see Cunningham 1995:27–28). Witherington (cf 1995:103–104) endorses this by pointing out that the reading ‘Be compassionate’ is less strongly attested than many other teachings by Jesus about moral purity.

The serious Jesus-scholar who does some honest scientific research, cannot agree with the popular claim (which is intended to devastate the questers), that the quest for the historical Jesus has reached a dead end after a period of 150 years. It is claimed that there has been no new data about the person of Jesus since the Gospels were written. Though scholars continue to piece together information from archaeology and other disciplines, these are valuable mainly for fashioning a better understanding of Christian origins and how the Gospels were composed (see Woodward 1996:46).

In conclusion: From this dialogue brilliantly coloured contradictory facts flow from this study, persuading one that Jesus is not completely inscribed in the words of those who wrote about him. Indeed, all of them proclaimed his resurrection from the dead. They also claimed that after his death, Jesus entered an entirely new form of existence; one in which he shared the power of God and in which he could share that power with others. Jesus’ death and resurrection are viewed as united to the New Testament, with his ascension and the apostles’ Pentecost experience. Sharing in Jesus’ new life through the power of the Holy Spirit is an essential dimension of the resurrection, however, not everyone has, can or ever will accept that belief. But without that event there is no Easter.

One can respond to this with a question: But does Easter not happen repeatedly? Moreover, it could be averred that though Jesus died and rotted away, the resurrection still has value as a symbol of his continuing presence and Christianity can go on as if nothing were changed. ‘Sure’, another person could say, ‘But without the historical resurrection, Jesus would not have been unique anymore.’ ‘In fact, he would have been just another prophet like many before and many after him.’ Is it not true that trying to talk in metaphorical terms do not take away the hard fact that Jesus is dead? So, what sense would believing in a myth about a dead man have? Why should such a Christian myth direct my days and nights? If that divine miracle did not take place on that day, one might as well try some of the other myths to live by, or perhaps choose not to follow any myth at all (see Craig 1995:166). Cunningham (see 1995:27–28) formulates his questioning of Borg’s

treatment of this facet, since it lacks detail when Borg treats the significance of the Passion of Christ and the central datum of the resurrection. However, he thinks what Borg does discuss, is well done and demands a careful reading.

Not only do scholars write against the quest for the historical Jesus, but they write against historical-critical scholarship in general. Some regard this kind of approach as an experiment that went awry. Certain views even maintain that the entire historical-critical approach in which the quest is rooted, is intellectually misguided and religiously dangerous from a religious point of view (see Miller 1997:28).

Affirming this in a way, some scholars try to remind us that the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, can construct only a fragment of a mosaic. However, when it assumes the status of a controlling view of reality, then it eclipses not only every other view concerning Jesus, but even our relationship with God and the notion of salvation; it then also builds a barrier to meaningful interaction with those who do not wish to let purely rationalistic categories determine what they consider to be important, existentially and also epistemologically (cf Du Plessis 1996:46).

Such anti-Third Quest scholars, furthermore argue that it seems problematic that the polemic embedded in early Christian traditions is not revealed truth, but human attempts at self-definition. Although a historical approach is totally valid, the dominant question is whether or not it is really the only approach from which one can start. One needs to be reminded at this stage that the *postmodern mind* prefers to have an open mind to a diversity of approaches, focussing on the *richness of meaning*, instead of only on the *clarity* of it. Contrary to this openness, the endeavours of the Western analytical mind, working only with the insights and information that can be gathered from historical research, will most probably end up with a different and rather reduced picture of Jesus (see Du Plessis 1996:47–48).

Raising a different (and again a negative) note against Borg sounded by others; when Borg remarks that he never thought he would be so 'politically correct', with his son who is gay, and his adopted daughter who is Black. Sheler, Tharp and Seider (cf 1996:50) cuttingly remarks that maybe this is the only thing about Borg and his work that is 'politically' correct.

With this antagonism levelled against Borg, one should defend him by admiring his courage to bring his faith into the debate on Jesus. Although he does not believe Christianity to be the only way of salvation; or that the Bible is the revealed will of God; or that Jesus is the unique Son of God, he returned to the church because of his desire to be part of a tradition and community which celebrates and mediates the reality of the Spirit. To him the Christian tradition is not something to be believed in, but something to be lived in. The Bible and Christian tradition are mediators of the sacred. He does not believe in them, but wishes to be in a relationship to what they mediate, namely to God, to the Spirit, to the sacred. Unfortunately, the distinction Borg makes between *believing* and *having a relationship* is not clearly explained (see Du Plessis 1996:48;52).

One can argue that like Lüdemann, Borg perhaps does not totally co-venture onto the road side by side with the historical Jesus. To explain this, Lüdemann (see 1994:177–178) espouses the view of Renan, of a Jesus risen into the sentiment of his disciples. This implies that the resurrection is nothing else but a projection or an unrealistic way of thinking, or to put this rather bluntly, totally fictional. Borg does not share this conviction at all. Because, as this investigation has shown, to him the resurrection has tremendous significance.

Lüdemann would perhaps suggest that the act of 'stripping outer layers of paint', and so arriving at the image of a Jesus wearing a *multicoloured cape*, is not adequate. Rather, one needs to, on a clean canvas, re-outline the image of Jesus, in faint outline that is provisional (as by means of pencil or charcoal), and only then select to colour in that image.

PART FIVE

CONCLUSION: AN *ULTRAMARINE* OR A *MULTICOLOURED* JESUS?

This part intends to conclude the study by an assessment of the value and the relevance of the Third Quest for the historical Jesus for popular religion on both a universal as well as a particularly (South African situation) level.

CHAPTER 9: FINALLY OPTING FOR A *MULTICOLOURED* HISTORICAL JESUS

9.1 A positive assessment of the Third Quest

For us living in an age in which pre-critical understandings of Christianity have become problematic, the work of the historian can be very helpful. However, the historical approach is not essential. Being a Christian is perfectly possible without it. Nevertheless, the historical approach may be very helpful in its effects on Christian understanding, worship, and vision. It can reopen the possibility to be a Christian for a 'modern' person, like it happened for Borg.

Although, in investigating the work of Borg, it becomes clear that it was a long and winding road that led to the conclusion of his *critical* enterprise; that the historical Jesus was a spirit person, a healer, a subversive sage, a social prophet and a movement catalyst.

The use of these types not only enables us to see the traditions about Jesus more clearly, but also gives them a credibility, that they do not have when they are seen simply as Christian claims about Jesus. All these many pictures whereby Jesus may be portrayed should not confuse us. On the contrary, one needs to accept the supposition, that the more the historical images of Jesus, the more accurate we can work. The meaning of the idea of 'accurate', is of course then determined within our sphere of understanding. In the light of this, each person has the choice of which Jesus to live by, and to decide what life is all about.

Although the historical Jesus remains, and always will remain, 'elusive' (see Witherington 1995:248), I think that as New Testament scholars, we dare not ignore the task of informing Christians in general about the origin of their tradition, and informing all of us of our own christological convictions because we dare not ignore analysing our own christological convictions. Therefore I would definitely advocate the one thing new about the Jesus Seminar (see Johnson 1996:20), namely that it has made a point of 'going public' with the relevance of the results of professional scholarship. Historical Jesus-studies try to inform and rectify our faith in him and our beliefs about him. We are obliged not to long for the pre-critical paradise of traditional beliefs any longer, but to put our beliefs to the test. We need to seriously [re]consider our own views on the identity of Jesus. However, we should not consciously fall into the trap of being anachronistic, but realise and act upon both

contexts at stake, namely that of the first century and that of the contemporary historian/theologian.

When a literalistic understanding of the Bible becomes questionable to one; or modern science *versus* the Bible causes major conflicts within one's mind; or differences within the Gospels themselves become confusing; or one becomes aware of religious traditions in other cultures and develops a sense that Christianity cannot be the only way of salvation, it may result in an inability to cope with life, since this shift of certainties could lead to an existentialist crisis.

When this shift takes place in one's life, then an alternative mechanism of believing may be seriously needed. To some this shift may imply a favouring of *fundamentalism*. This may take place on account of an aversion to liberalism, and an insistence that the Gospels are literally and historically true, despite any difficulties one might have with them. Another choice would be outright doubt, and a deepening scepticism, often accompanied by a sense that one is no longer really a Christian. A third possible shift could imply a positive linkage with the outcomes of modern historical scholarship. Among other things, this latter approach endorses that one no longer takes literally, something that is metaphorical, and that one should not accept a claim made much later, in this case the post-Easter claims about Jesus, as an ontological or as a historical statement about Jesus. Choosing this third shift, one can still recite the creeds without any hesitation. The point is not to believe everything in a literalistic sense, but to understand *the meaning* of it.

My study has shown clearly that scholars participating in the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, in no way aim at discrediting traditional orthodox Christianity as such. The perspective of this 'esoteric little group' (as some negative critics call them) is scientifically viable, and their input needs to be considered seriously. I also explicitly tried to show that it was not Borg's intention to bring traditional Christianity into discredit. His quest did not begin with a declaration of hostility to the church, or to its preaching about Jesus, or its worship of him as the Son of God and its dogma of the incarnation (cf Braaten 1995:12). On the contrary, as a Christian and a committed layperson, deeply involved in the life of the church, he tried to do some honest research, irrespective of whether the outcome would be positive or negative.

Borg (cf 1994a:110) quite convincingly argues the recognition of both *son* and *wisdom* Christologies, in order to subvert the popular impression that Christian faith of necessity involves believing that Jesus was *literally* 'the Son of God'. This subversion is helpful in that it subverts the literalistic reading of 'Son of God' which narrows the scope of Christology too much, by giving primacy to only one image. Borg also thinks it is hard to believe in the literalistic reading, in part because of uncertainty about what is being affirmed when one says Jesus was *literally* the Son of God.

By applying the notion of metaphor, Borg maintains that one opens up the possibility of a much richer understanding of the significance of Jesus, as experienced and expressed in the early Christian movement, when 'Son of God' is seen as only one metaphor among several. This implies that one no longer need to believe that Jesus was *literally* the Son of God. On the contrary, the metaphorical use of images, shifts the issue to that of appreciating the richness of meaning, suggested by the multiplicity of christological images.

Thus, a sensible conclusion for the reader could be captured in confessing that Jesus was the Son, *but also* the Logos and the Sophia of God. All three of these images necessitate a metaphorical understanding of images. Just as Jesus is not *literally* the Lamb of God, or the Shepherd, so he is not *literally* any of these latter mentioned images.

There are also scholars from systematic theology that do take active part in the debate concerning the historical Jesus. Veldsman (see 1995:321) for one, views the metaphorical image of Jesus as being the *yeast* in the continuing interpretational process in which people feature as the story of God; this could all be of tremendous significance.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, one has to admit the usual reluctance of scholars from systematic theology to take notice of the results and implications of the historical Jesus-studies. They neither resist this approach actively, nor do they try to link up with it in a partnership, thus engaging in a specific methodology. In this vein, the New Testament scholar, Botha (see 1993:64), accuses systematic theologian, König of giving far too little attention to the various constructions of Jesus' teachings and endeavours. König ignores the problems we are faced with, when the stories in the New Testament are interpreted historically. Furthermore, König indicates no problems for our contemporary faith which may arise out of an apocalyptic approach as framework. Botha appeals for the

implementation of mechanisms, which could lead to meaningful interactive conversation between these disciplines (see Botha 1993:65).

To deny that any truth is being reached by means of the Jesus-studies, is a matter of personal choice; the same applies if one has to decide whether one wants to actively engage in this debate. However, none of these systematic theologians can deny that the historical Jesus confronts us with the basic issue of the reality of God (see Du Plessis 1996:48).

I, therefore, propose a logical positive linkage with the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus. If a systematic theologian accepts a positive link, a functional Christology appears. This functional approach, which acts from below, endeavours to search in the historical Jesus for traces of Jesus's supernatural meaning and for his divine secret. This should be done in order to give content to the religious proclamation about Christ by the first congregations and in the confession of the church later on. Furthermore, this functional approach strives to design a Christology from below, that succeeds to comply with the requirements of 'intellectual reasonableness' and to comply with the results of the historical critical exegesis, while it also involves the role/function of Christ in the establishment of salvation. An example of a scholar following such a functional approach, is that of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (see Jonker 1977:62-77; Vorster 1994:619).

The systematic theologian, Venter (1995:389), furthers a positive linkage by debating the changing role of the intellectual. He concludes his article on historical Jesus research and systematic theology, by stressing a point made by Bauman, namely that the task of both the New Testament scholar and the systematic theologian, that they are to become interpreters who ease 'communication between autonomous partners, communication between systems of knowledge enclosed within their respective stocks of knowledge and communal systems of relevance.' Venter argues that for too long, fragmentation and alienation have destroyed our society. He pleads for a desire to search for a common vision to *represent Jesus as the truth*.

If systematic theology were to link up with Bultmann and his school (ontological Christology) who maintain a Christology from above, this will be unfruitful, since in the Bultmannian school of thought, the historical Jesus is irrelevant. Their Christology is only understood in a supernatural sense. These practitioners need, however, to be confronted

with the fact that no absolute truth exists, but only the possibility of the highest probability. It is all about truth, but then a truth that only involves that which is the *most probable* and not some absolutistic truth. Consequently, one can say that the conclusions arrived at by the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, represents an alternative model or another possibility to the traditional dogma, living in the minds and hearts of the people (see Davies 1995:7–21).

Although Christian scholars are usually eager to consider Jesus to be a historically credible person, the fear remains: What if we find that the real Jesus is the product of an ecclesiastical ‘scam’? (see Crossan 1994:201). In other words: What do we do when we find ourselves in the dilemma when our scientific endeavour seems to clash with our deepest convictions (see Long 1995:3; Du Plessis 1996:48)? For this very reason the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus (undertaken with present-day historical methods) is of direct interest, because of its repercussions for contemporary Christianity, the churches today, and the entire civilization and culture directly or indirectly as is codetermined by Christianity.

Since history is the place where God speaks, we have an obligation to study history. The history of Jesus clearly does not exist for the sake of being fashionable only. A remark by Miller (see 1997:27) on the work of Johnson relates to this, namely that this advocate of an extreme defence of Christian orthodoxy, ironically, happens to believe that the search for the historical Jesus is misguided, precisely because, in Johnson’s view, *the Gospels are virtually worthless historically*. Johnson (see 1996:168) one of the sharpest critics of the Quest, and a champion among conservative Christians, finally concludes that the Second Testament writings cannot yield reliable historical information about Jesus beyond a few biographical facts. He (see 1996:167) admits that history provides only a limited mode of human knowing. This refers to the well-known truism about the perspectivistic nature of knowledge, that entails that different kinds of knowledge convey different kinds of perceptions; and such knowledge is determined by different perspectives. However, according to Miller (cf 1997:33) one has to stress the value of using a comprehensive method, for example the historical critical method in the Third Jesus-quest. In the light of the aforementioned, one cannot but agree that the quest for the historical Jesus needs to continue, no matter what the consequences (see Long 1995:4; Fredriksen 1995:97).

9.2 Returning to the District Six painting

At this stage it is imperative to resume the original questions. Firstly, what about the matter of the enigmatic figure himself?

Jesus takes on a new reality. Contrary to the notion of 'Jesus as the Divine Saviour', he now figures as a 'Jewish mystic' whose whole life and being depends on his intense and unbroken relationship to the Spirit of God. An oversimplified ultramarine coloured creedal Jesus is not warranted. The empowerment that is lacking and after which Christians seek, actually lies in accepting a multicoloured Jesus of history who fits into a wide range of religious roles or types of the time.

Jesus was real against the backdrop of his own first century setting; he is somehow still real to contemporary society. The answer lies in facing the complexities into which Jesus was born. Jesus' own time testifies to a composite complexity of cultures, religious convictions, traditions and politics. He was Jewish by birth and thus formed part of a Roman-oppressed Jewish people and for Christians to anti-Semitise Jesus, and identify him with Christianity and his opponents with Judaism, would be wrong.

Jesus' environment was cosmopolitan. Galilee was Hellenised to a great extent. The rebuilt Sepphoris, only four miles from Nazareth (where Jesus was born), was quite cosmopolitan. So were four other cities which were within about fifteen miles of Nazareth. Trade with other parts of the Mediterranean world was extensive. The area contained a substantial number of Gentiles, and the Greek language was widely used. Most Jews could have been bilingual, speaking both Aramaic and Greek. It is important to mention that the whole of Palestine was under Gentile control. From 63 BC it formed part of the Roman Empire.

Jesus' social standing was at the lower end of the peasant class (see 4.2). He would have participated in the practices of 'common Judaism' (one of EP Sanders' terms), because he grew up in the Jewish tradition (see Borg 1994a:22-28).

9.3 In conclusion

The Gospels as biographies should not be read as (pure) history; therefore the answer to the question of the enigmatic figure himself lies in a symbiosis between that Jesus of history and the creedal Christ of faith.

Secondly, what about the historical Jesus research against the backdrop of the 'multi-ethnic' mosaic of Christians in South Africa, as was typified by the District Six setting?

Like the Galilee of Jesus, District Six (contemporary South African Christianity) represents a mosaic beset with complexities. District Six is a visual exponent of the broken realities of the South African society. Inhabitants with diverse cultures were given identity and 'space became place' (Kruger 1992:9) for Asian, Black African, Cape Coloured, Chinese, European, Jewish, and Cape Malay people. The community was diverse and committed to non-racialism; equality and justice also blossomed. Another broken reality was realised in 1966 when the inhabitants (subordinate to White people) of this racially mixed, working-class neighbourhood were forced to move (and the area was bulldozed) after the legislation of the policy of separate development, or apartheid, by the Nationalist Party in 1950 (see Kruger 1992:10).

Metaphorically speaking, the totally fragmented and 'blackened' (depressed) District Six (contemporary South African Christianity) looks up at the purple coloured mountains which represent a compassionate God; this District Six is now without the vigour, spontaneity and familiarity which formerly formed part of it. The 'redevelopment' (a new journey with God) has to be launched in South African society. For District Sixers (orthodox Christians), the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus can be of value in the sense that, although it can construct only a fragment of a mosaic, it ensures an experience of being rooted, based on the acknowledgement and acceptance of a vibrant multicoloured-cape-Jesus of history, for whom God and the Spirit was an experiential reality.

South African society shares in the same brokenness of a first century Judaism (Galilee), when a Jewish peasant and mystic promised upliftment. Thus being a Christian in South Africa need not imply to be subjected to a broken reality. Contrariwise I want to suggest, from living in the atmosphere and realism of the Jesus-studies, that something needs

to become clear to the mind of the contemporary South African Christian. One could perhaps facilitate this much-needed process of upliftment in District Six (South African society as a whole), by providing guidance about the historical Jesus which offer practical help to establish and develop a 'rich, vibrant multicoloured' view of this historical Jesus. Historical scholars should aim to support every Christian in their search to enculturate the inherited images, by reading his or her own times in their light (see Vorster 1994:630).

One has to remember that certain human beings, do indeed possess a kind of intuitive sense of colour. Most of us, however, must learn the hard way—through seeing, understanding and experience.

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