

# Convictions



# Convictions

A manifesto for progressive Christians

**Marcus J. Borg**



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*To Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon,  
where my wife, Marianne, was a priest and I a  
member for eighteen years, and where the sermon  
that gave birth to this book was preached; and to  
Trinity Episcopal Church in Bend, Oregon,  
our new church home in our retirement. To both  
of these communities of Christians and seekers:  
gratitude, thanksgiving, and blessing.*

*And to Henry and Abbey, our slate and blonde  
Glen of Imaal terriers. Described as “a very  
spiritual breed,” they have kept me company in  
my study as I wrote this book.*



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## PREFACE

**T**HIS BOOK IS PERSONAL and more than personal. Personal: it is the product of turning seventy and reflecting about my life at that milestone—my memories, conversions, and convictions. More than personal: the convictions that have emerged in my life seem to me to be important for Christians more generally, especially for American Christians.

“Christian” and “American” name the cultural context in which I was born and in which I have lived most of my life. I continue to be both, and I am grateful for both parts of my inheritance. But being both raises a crucial question: What does it mean to be Christian and American today? To be Christian and to live in the richest and most powerful country in the world, often called “the American Empire,” and not just by critics but also by champions? And to be both in a time of a deeply divided American Christianity? If what I have to say is relevant to Christians who live in other parts of the world, so be it. I hope it may be so.

My academic study of Christianity began about fifty years ago because of a passionate intellectual interest. For the past three decades, maybe more, even as I may not have been conscious of it, my intense intellectual interest has been combined with a passion for communicating what

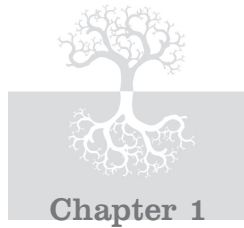
## Preface

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Because this passion has informed most of my writing for thirty years or more, some of what is in this book will be familiar to people who have read some of my other books. But I trust that it is freshly expressed. And some of what is in this book treats themes I haven't written about before, or at least not at length.

I had planned to write this book without notes, in part because of its personal and sometimes conversational nature. But as I worked on the manuscript, I realized that there were places where I wanted to use notes. Some add explanation or detail that might be distracting in the body of the manuscript. Some refer to parts of my other books where I have developed a claim more fully. Some recommend further reading. But I have not used notes to “document” my ideas, as if piling up sources and showing how much I have read gives greater authority to the convictions expressed in this book.

I thank the folks at my publisher, HarperOne, a relationship now almost thirty years old, even as the individuals involved in that relationship have changed. To Mickey Maudlin, my extraordinarily busy and yet ever helpful editor, and to all those at HarperOne who work hard to produce, market, and sell my books: Mark Tauber, Claudia Boutote, Terri Leonard, Katy Renz, Jennifer Jensen, Cindy Lu, Lisa Zuniga, Jessie Dolch, and Kimberly McCutcheon.



## Context Matters

**T**HE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK emerged in a particular context. It was born as I prepared a sermon for the Sunday of my seventieth birthday in what was then my home church, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon.

My birthday was (as always) in Lent. One of that season's central themes is mortality. It begins on Ash Wednesday with a *memento mori*—a vivid reminder that we are all mortal and marked for death. Ashes are put on our foreheads in the shape of a cross as we hear the words, "Dust thou art, and to dust thou wilt return." None of us gets out of here alive.

Seventy may be the "new sixty," but it is not young. Mortality looms large. In one of John Updike's last novels, the main character reflects as he turns seventy that half of American men who live to age seventy do not live to eighty.

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Soldiers in combat have a better chance of survival, even in the trenches of World War I or in the killing fields of the German-Russian front during World War II.

I have lived the three score and ten years that the Bible speaks of as a good span of life: “The days of our life are seventy years / or perhaps eighty, if we are strong” (Ps. 90.10). Then, like Ash Wednesday, the passage continues with a memento mori: “They are soon gone, and we fly away. . . . So teach us to count our days / that we may gain a wise heart” (90.12).

But despite the unmistakable onset of serious aging, turning seventy has not been grim. Turning sixty was much more difficult. It felt old. Nothing in my childhood had prepared me to think of sixty as anything other than that. Sixty felt like the end of potential and the beginning of inevitable and inexorable decline.

At seventy I primarily feel gratitude. Each extra day feels like *lagniappe*, a Cajun French word that means “something extra”—like the cherry on top of the whipped cream on top of the hot fudge on top of the ice cream. I enjoy my days more than I ever have. At seventy, life is too short to spend even an hour feeling preoccupied or grumpy or out of sorts.

I have also experienced a second and unexpected effect of turning seventy: it has been interestingly empowering. In a sentence: If we aren’t going to talk about our convictions—what we have learned about life that matters most—at seventy, then when? Some care needs to be exercised. Seventy isn’t a guarantee of wisdom or a license to be dogmatic. It’s quite easy to be an opinionated old fool.

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The process of preparing that sermon led me to the triad that shapes this book: memories, conversions, and convictions. Memories: especially of childhood but also of the decades since. Conversions: major changes in my orientations toward life, including how I understand what it means to be Christian. Convictions: how I see things now—foundational ways of seeing things that are not easily shaken. Whether we are conscious of it or not, I think the triad of memories, conversions, and convictions shapes all of our lives.

When I mentioned to a friend that I was working on this book, he asked, “So you’re writing a memoir?” His question caused me to think about whether I was. “No,” I said, “not a memoir in the sense of an autobiography.”

As autobiography, my life in many ways has been unremarkable, except in the general sense that all of our lives are remarkable. Most of it has been spent in educational settings, from kindergarten through graduate school and then more than four decades as a teacher in colleges, universities, seminaries, and churches, and continuing in my life “on the road” as a guest lecturer. In the past few years before retiring from university teaching, I sometimes remarked to my students, “I’ve been in school since I was five.”

So, there’s nothing remarkable about my life, nothing heroic. And yet this book is a bit of a memoir. Most chapters include memories, conversions, and convictions. In that sense, this book is personal.

It is also more than personal, more than my story. Many people in my generation (and some in younger generations)

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have similar stories. Most Americans over a certain age share the experience of growing up Christian. Many of us have experienced a loss of our childhood faith because of conflict between what we learned as children and what we learned later, not just in school and college, but from life. Adult consciousness is quite different from childhood consciousness.

### **My Cultural Context: American Christianity**

For another reason this book is more than personal. It is also about being Christian and American. I have been both all of my life, even while living overseas for about six years. Together, being Christian and American provides the culture and ethos that have shaped me and that I know most intimately. It is also the cultural context of most people who will read this book.

American Christianity today is deeply divided, and its divisions have shaped my life and vocation and convictions. I have changed through a series of conversions from being a conventional and conservative Christian to the kind of Christian I am today.

Of course, divisions within Christianity are nothing new. They go back to the first century and the New Testament. Christianity began as a movement within Judaism, and soon after Jesus's historical life, it expanded to include Gentiles (non-Jews) as well. Thus a major issue arose: Did

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Gentiles who became followers of Jesus need to follow the Jewish law, including circumcision and Jewish food laws?

Some of the Jewish followers of Jesus said, “Of course.” Other Jewish followers of Jesus, including especially Paul, passionately opposed them and proclaimed that requiring circumcision and kosher food practice for Gentile converts was a betrayal and abandonment of the gospel.

By the beginning of the second century, there were Christians who maintained the radical vision of Jesus and the seven genuine letters of Paul, and Christians who accommodated that vision to the conventions of dominant culture, including especially patriarchy and slavery.

Also in the second century, there were gnostic Christians who denied the importance of this world. For them, Christianity was primarily spiritual. It was not about the transformation of this world, but primarily about rising above it into a different world, the world of spirit.

Their Christian opponents strongly affirmed that the world is the creation of God and matters to God. The latter won and became orthodox Christianity—though the conflict between these positions is still with us. Does the world matter to God or not? The history of Christianity ever since is pervasively ambiguous.

Divisions continued as Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Roman emperor Constantine (born in 272 and died in 337) and most of his imperial successors wanted a unified Christianity for the sake of a unified empire, so they

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sponsored councils of bishops to resolve disputes among Christians. The most important were in 325 at Nicea and in 451 at Chalcedon, both in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The result was “official,” or “orthodox,” Christianity.

But forms of Christianity continued that rejected the conclusions of the councils. They were condemned and often persecuted by orthodox Christians (not meaning today’s “Eastern Orthodox” Christians). Ironically, the quest for Christian unity produced the first officially sanctioned Christian violence against other Christians.

More division: almost a thousand years ago, in 1054, Western and Eastern Christianity divided in what is commonly called “the Great Schism.” It produced the Roman Catholic Church, centered in Rome, and the Eastern Orthodox Church, centered in Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Each excommunicated the other. The division became brutal and murderous: in 1204, Western Christian crusaders conquered and sacked Christian Constantinople in an orgy of violence and pillage that greatly exceeded the Muslim conquest of the city in 1453.

And more: in the 1500s, Western Christianity divided. The Protestant Reformation not only cleaved the Western church into Catholics and Protestants, but over time splintered into a multitude of Protestant groups: Lutherans, Anglicans (Episcopalians), Presbyterians, Mennonites, Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and many more. I have heard that by 1900, there were about thirty thousand Protestant denominations. I



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have not checked this number out, but even if it is hyperbolic, it is true hyperbole.

I grew up in the world of denominational division half a century ago. The great divide was between Catholics and Protestants. In my Lutheran and Protestant context, we were deeply skeptical about whether Catholics were really Christians. When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, a major issue was the fact that he was Catholic. Could a Protestant vote for a Catholic president?

The issue was not only political, but local and personal—and eternal. We Lutherans—at least the Lutherans I knew—were quite sure that Catholics couldn't be saved. We saw their version of Christianity as deeply distorted: they worshipped Mary and saints and statues; they believed in salvation by good works rather than by grace through faith. "Reformation Sunday," one of our festive Sundays of the year, was an anti-Catholic festival: it remembered and celebrated our liberation from the Catholic Church. They were wrong; we were right.

This division affected social relationships. I cannot recall that my parents had any Catholic friends. They (and pretty much everybody we knew) discouraged my dating a Catholic or even having close friends who were Catholic. It was unthinkable to marry one—though my oldest sister did. To a lesser degree, it was best not to date Protestants from other denominations. We knew that being Lutheran was best, and so it was good to confine mate selection to Lutherans.

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## Today's Divisions

The divisions in American Christianity today are very different. They are not primarily denominational. Differences between the old mainline Protestant denominations no longer matter very much. Many have entered into cooperative agreements, including mutual recognition and placement of clergy. And among mainline Protestants, the old anathema toward Catholics is largely gone. It's been decades since I have heard parents from a mainline Protestant denomination worry that one of their children might marry somebody from a different Protestant denomination or, for that matter, a Catholic.

Naming today's divisions involves using labels. I recognize that labels risk becoming stereotypes and caricatures; indeed, the difference between "label" and "libel" is a single letter. Yet they can be useful and even necessary shorthand for naming differences.

Aware of this danger, I suggest five categories for naming the divisions in American Christianity today: conservative, conventional, uncertain, former, and progressive Christians. In somewhat different forms, these kinds of Christians are found among both Protestants and Catholics. And there are good people in all of the categories; none of them has a monopoly on goodness.

The categories are not watertight compartments. It is possible to be a conservative conventional Christian, a conventional uncertain Christian, a conventional former Christian, and so forth. But two categories strike me as

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antithetical and incompatible. The great divide is between conservative and progressive Christianity, which form opposite ends of the spectrum of American Christianity today.

### *Conservative Christians*

The conservative Christian category includes fundamentalist Christians, most conservative-evangelical Christians, and some mainline Protestant and Catholic Christians. Most of us over a certain age, Protestant or Catholic, grew up with a form of what I am calling “conservative Christianity.” Today’s conservative Christians insist upon it. Its foundations are:

- Belief in the absolute authority of divine revelation. For conservative Protestants, divine authority comes from the Bible, which they understand to be the infallible, literal, and absolute Word of God. For conservative Catholics, divine authority is grounded in the teaching of the church hierarchy, with its apex in papal infallibility.
- Emphasis upon an afterlife. How we live now—what we believe and how we behave—matters because where we will spend eternity is at stake. For conservative Protestants, the possibilities are heaven and hell. Conservative Catholics continue to add a third possibility: purgatory—a postmortem state of purification for those neither wicked enough to go to hell nor worthy enough to go to heaven.

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