

**Dueling Truth Claims:
Comparing the Moral Worldviews of American Evangelical and Liberal Protestant
Christians
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Introduction

The recent presidential election has focused our attention on American religion, particularly American evangelical religion. This paper will not address those events directly but analyze the dueling truth claims that lie below the surface of American Protestant Christianity. Evangelical and liberal Protestant Christians may appear to share a common core but, when looked at in depth, the differences are striking. This paper will dissect these differences using an analysis of two volumes that are exemplars in the liberal and evangelical Protestant traditions. One is Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*.¹ Borg is a New Testament scholar, author and speaker to what is called the progressive or liberal side of the American Protestant church. Borg summarizes his book as a compendium of his efforts to make sense of Christianity in light of his work with liberal churches. The other volume is Rick Warren's best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?*² This book has sold 2-million copies since its publication in 2002. It exemplifies the contemporary American evangelical tradition. Warren pastors a 15,000-member church in California and is a

¹ Borg, Marcus J. 2003. *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.

² Warren, Rick. 2002. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here for?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

widely sought-after speaker.³ Borg's relative national obscurity compared with Warren's celebrity reflects the growth of the American evangelical movement.⁴

I suggest that liberal and evangelical Protestantism are distinctive types of Christian religion. Evangelicals claim the Bible is a religious revelation without error; they demand a personal conversion to Jesus Christ and interpret Christ's death on the cross as atonement for human sin. They are congregationally centered, active in national and global missions, and expect the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Liberal Protestants, on the other hand, interpret the Christian scriptures as classic literature and of "sacred" importance. They often say, "We take the Bible seriously but not literally." They discount the need for personal conversion, deemphasize the necessity of congregational fellowship, and view Jesus as a moral and spiritual exemplar. They do not expect or believe in supernatural intervention and emphasize missions of social justice rather than evangelical faith sharing. For many liberal Protestants salvation is a this-worldly affair with no expectation of a world to come.⁵

This paper will focus on the volumes of Borg and Warren. It will analyze the moral worldviews that they construct and the truth claims they make about the self and its relation to God. It will examine how each tradition approaches Christian theological assertions concerning Jesus, sin, evil, and salvation and the social claims that each author makes relative to church, mission, and the world. Finally, the paper will examine the core epistemological claims that mold each author's moral worldviews.

³ Warren is a Southern Baptist and, like many evangelicals, downplays his denominational affiliation. He is not a fundamentalist in that he has no interest in separating from culture; indeed, like many evangelicals, he uses popular culture through worship and teaching to evangelize and engage the wider culture. Borg is a professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University and a noted scholar of the New Testament.

⁴ See Mark A. Noll's book, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) on the growth and size of American evangelicalism.

⁵ See Mark A. Noll's examination of early American evangelicalism and his comparisons with early liberal Protestantism, *America's God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Theoretically, I argue that religious communities create moral worlds in which they nest their truth claims. Humans are “moral, believing animals” that need guidance for their personal and communal actions, which are validated by superempirical metaphysical claims.⁶ Within these worlds humans also seek rewards: emotional, social and eschatological-based payoffs. I argue that evangelical worldview is more successful numerically because it offers a worldview that is communally focused, emotionally charged and morally certain. Moreover, rewards are paramount for evangelicals; they include the expectation of supernatural intervention in this life and the promise of eternal life with God in heaven.

Liberal Protestantism provides a moral worldview as well. I argue it is as morally demanding as its evangelical counterpart, yet with little expectation of communal solidarity and no prospect for metaphysical or eschatological payoffs. Thus, my thesis: liberal Christianity is less successful because it makes tough moral demands while offering little in return, while evangelicalism succeeds by offering a definitive moral worldview with a communal vision and a system of robust rewards.⁷

Truth Claims and Personhood

Claims about the self are central to Warren and Borg’s texts. Warren is writing against a self-help type, claiming that the book is not a “self-help” manual but is about how Christians sacrifice the self in order to find God’s purpose. This purpose is proclaimed in the opening dedication, telling readers that the very act of picking up the book was “intended by God.” Reading the text is “no accident.” For Warren, the self-help

⁶ See Christian Smith’s *Moral, Believing Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), which examines the origins of religion as the human need for moral guidance and belief.

⁷ See Rodney Stark and Roger Finke’s *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000), which uses rational choice theory to examine religious capital and reward maximization.

genre so popular to many both in and outside the American Christian community is the problem and not the solution. To turn inward to find one's destiny is a cul-de-sac rather than a thoroughfare. In the classic Christian tradition, the "true" self is found by giving up the self for the sake of serving God's purpose. But for Warren, this action of sacrifice has real consequences and promises. The validation of personhood is not established by a worldly legacy but only as one is acknowledged in God's eyes: "Yet, what ultimately matters most will not be what others say about your life but what God says...You weren't put on earth to be remembered. You were put here to prepare for eternity" (pp. 34-5). The touchstone of personhood is not about one's achievements but about how one lives in the light of the world to come. This claim focuses the attention of the self on how it can best fulfill the wishes and desires of God. Of course, as Warren assaults the self-help genre with the hammer of self-sacrifice, it turns out that this sacrifice is for the sake of an ultimate reward for the self, eternal life in heaven with God. The cost of not following one's own desires is more than worth the reward of eternal happiness with God in heaven.

Throughout Warren's text the reader is reminded that dissatisfaction here on earth is normal and that this world was never meant to fulfill one's fundamental needs. In a sense, without referencing the remark, we are reminded of St. Augustine, the 5th century Christian Father, who said to God, "Our heart is restless until it rests in you."⁸ One's home is with God and, as Warren says, we are living on "enemy territory." Indeed, the true Christian is surrounded by temptation and tested by Satan; conflict is normal in this world.

⁸ See *Saint Augustine's Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

The trajectory of the self in Borg's writing is remarkably different. Whereas Warren never mentions that there are other forms of Christianity, Borg distinguishes his form of liberal Christianity from what he calls an "earlier paradigm" of traditional Christianity. Borg calls this earlier paradigm a type of "supernatural theism" (p. 65) that focuses on a literal reading of scripture, endorses an other-worldly reward-based faith and offers a fact-based epistemology. Borg's rhetoric of "earlier," versus what he calls the liberal Protestant "emerging paradigm," portrays his own bias that liberal religion is somehow an evolutionary step up the religious ladder. Borg claims that in time a more differentiated religious view will replace this old-fashioned notion of the Christian faith.

The trajectory of personhood within Borg's perspective posits that the self is not sacrificed for the sake of a life to come, but is "transformed" for the life in the present world. In Borg's worldview, when St. Paul writes about Christ's "way," or Jesus says, "Take up the cross and follow me," that does not mean a literal crucifixion but connotes a process of dying and rising within the self—a transformative enterprise. One dies to the destructive tendencies in the self and rises to the parts of the self that are merciful and compassionate. As Borg says, "When Paul resolved to 'preach nothing but Christ and Christ crucified,' this is most centrally what he meant: the cross as symbol of the process of personal transformation at the heart of the Christian life" (p. 111).

A crucial aspect for Borg is the movement away from believing in specific dogmatic propositions of the faith that he describes as "reward-bound" and based on the promise of an after-life, to a position of trust: "To be a Christian does not mean believing in Christianity, but a relationship with God lived within the Christian tradition as a metaphor and sacrament of the sacred" (p. 14). Borg's asserts that the self lives by means

of the Christian narrative as it relates to what he calls the “sacred.” Borg never defines the term sacred. A vagueness permeates his explanation of the self’s relation to the object of its devotion. This is intentional since he wants to allow for a broader interpretation of the divine. Nonetheless, the sacred becomes a type of placeholder for something or someone who may or may not exist beyond one’s imaginative grasp, or more broadly, humankind’s construction of this ultimate point of reference. Borg himself says that he does not believe in divine intervention, so one might ponder what lies below, above or beyond these metaphors. Moreover, Borg intentionally avoids talk of external rewards for the self and its transformation. He later defines salvation as a form of “enlightenment, liberation for captives, being born again, healing and being made right with God” (p. 175). But in essence, he assumes that these terms are metaphors and it is not clear how and whether they point to an empirical referent. Thus, the promise of salvation remains ambiguous at worst and subjective at best. One is left with the idea that Christianity is one way to personal transformation with no promise of a life to come, or supernatural intervention in life on earth. The reward for the self, as the cliché goes, is the journey itself—a promise less practical and robust than the evangelical goal of eternal life in God’s presence.

Theological Claims

In part, what makes Warren’s book powerful and persuasive is the clarity that it offers. For Warren, life is preparation for a final exam given by God. The exam could not be more consequential for Warren. Each of us will come to this time and experience what Warren calls an “audit” of our lives. There will be two core questions to answer: “What did you do with my Son, Jesus Christ?” and “What did you do with what I gave you?” (p.

34). All people are obligated to use their gifts for the purposes of serving God's interests in the world. This is all that matters. Moreover, and this claim is made implicitly, if you have not accepted Jesus Christ then you will not pass the test. Warren quotes scripture as Jesus asserts, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (p. 34). This could not be clearer: one's eternal destiny is on the line and the choice must be made. There is no room to equivocate. Warren addresses none of the natural questions that follow from this theological claim. What about people who do not know Jesus? What about people in other religions who faithfully follow their faith? What about people of great moral character who do not ascent to the Christian claims about Jesus? Warren simply ignores these questions. He bluntly tells the reader that, "By the end of this book you will be ready to answer both questions" (p. 34). Warren offers a theological diagnosis of the human situation, gives the prescription and offers the promise of a reward to come.

The diagnosis is, of course, sin. Sin is a matter of giving allegiance to things and people in the world who will fail to give what one needs, and are not the source of one's creation. Life is a "test." The test is a question: to whom and to what one will "surrender" one's love and loyalty. As Warren says, "You were designed to worship God—and if you fail to worship him, you will create other things (idols) to give your life to" (p. 82). This is each person's choice; one will be as close to God as one chooses. Warren, following the Arminian theological tradition, puts the power to choose or reject God into the hands of the individual.⁹ Individuals have the ability to choose God and make God their friend. This friendship, however, comes at a price. "One thing worship costs us is our self-

⁹ This tradition is named after the Dutch Calvinist, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), who opposed the hyper-Calvinism of the sixteenth century and emphasized the human role in the nature of salvation.

centeredness. You cannot exalt God and yourself at the same time. You don't worship to be seen by others or to please yourself. You deliberately shift the focus off yourself" (p. 105).

Warren again and again claims that following Jesus involves sacrifice, a sacrifice that de-centers the self. At the very same time, this cost comes as a down-payment for the reward of eternal life. Thus, the theological claim of a cost is covered by the hope of a reward. This contradiction is never explicitly addressed. At the same time, Warren refuses to support the kind of popular "prosperity gospel" that is sometimes a part of evangelical Christian circles. He asserts that Jesus' promise of "abundant life" is not for this world but for the world to come. As Warren asks rhetorically, "Why should God provide *heaven on earth* when he's planned the real thing for you in eternity? God gives us our time on earth to build and strengthen our character for heaven" (p. 173).

For Warren, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ create a specific formula for salvation: humans, trapped in sin, now have a savior who has redeemed them from their sin and saved them for eternity. Life on earth is preparation for this ultimate good. Borg's vision of Jesus, salvation and the rewards of faith differ dramatically. Borg argues that the "literalism and exclusivity" of Warren's traditional vision of Christianity is "not only unpersuasive, but a barrier to being Christian" for "millions" of people (p. 82). Borg, in line with many liberal interpreters of Christianity, wants to make the faith more palatable to people living with what he calls a "modern" epistemological perspective. Borg paints a picture of Jesus and his character that accommodates a liberal vision in which eschatology, supernatural acts and metaphysical claims are all downplayed. It is precisely this type of modern accommodation that evangelicals find problematic.

Evangelicals accuse liberals of taking away the offensive and radical nature of God's supernatural intervention in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For evangelicals, this accommodation "guts" the core of what they claim is the gospel. When liberals say that evangelicals are accommodating to the consumerist and market-centered trends of contemporary culture, evangelicals respond that it is liberals who have "sold out" to contemporary culture.¹⁰

For Borg the traditions of the historical and metaphorical approach to the New Testament relativizes the text and thus enables the interpreter to understand it as it applies to a modern context. This method undercuts the tendency to take the text literally and expands the possible meanings of the text for the reader. For example, Jesus' miracle at the Cana wedding, where it is said that he turned the water into wine, should not be taken literally. For Borg, this is a "mystical imagery" connoting the marriage of heaven and earth and the celebration of Jesus as he feasts with all people in a banquet setting, reminiscent of God's kingdom where all are accepted and loved (p. 85). Borg ignores the question of whether the story has historical validity. For him, the imagery is powerful; it doesn't matter whether or not Jesus actually performed the miracle. But the logical question is: If he didn't do it, where did the story come from? Moreover, if Jesus didn't do it, why should anyone take the imagery as powerful and lasting?

For Borg the evangelical obsession with literalistic theological claims is problematic and distorts the authentic message of the gospels, "Jesus is, for us as Christians, the decisive revelation of what a life full of God looks like." Again, this vague statement is followed by the assertion that Jesus' purpose was to make present the "fullness" of God

¹⁰ This point is based on my research on 25 of the fastest growing evangelical congregations in the Pacific Northwest. Again and again we found evangelicals claiming that it was liberals who accommodated contemporary culture.

on earth and to paint him as one who, by his teaching, pointed to this God (p. 88). Jesus was a prophetic leader who called the rich to serve the poor and to upend the social structures of inequality and oppression. And finally, Jesus created a social movement for a more egalitarian and communal way of life. Borg argues that the historical-metaphorical approach shows us that Jesus was a this-worldly teacher who did not interpret his own death as a redemptive act, “We do not think that Jesus thought that the purpose of his life, his vocation, was his death. His purpose was what he was doing as a healer, wisdom teacher, social prophet, and movement initiator. His death was the consequence of what he was doing, but not his purpose” (p. 92).

Borg and Warren’s dueling set of purposes is in plain view. For Borg, Jesus’ ministry of justice and compassion serves as a model of a human life “full of God” and a way of life that leads to justice for all. For Warren, Jesus’ life does not stand alone but must be seen in light of his death and resurrection. Jesus’ purpose was his redemptive action that redeems all who believe in him. Jesus vouchsafes the sinner’s salvation for the world to come. For Borg, the Christian mission is to let go of a reward-based theology and give of oneself in service to those who are the least among us. The point is to serve this world in ministries of justice that lead to social transformation and the “dream” of the kingdom of God on earth (p. 135). Borg’s dream is the hard-fought battle to create a political world of justice and equality with no promise of success or a final reward. For Warren, the sacrifice of the self is to focus on glorifying God for giving Jesus to redeem sinners. This sacrifice is for the sake of a less immediate, though ultimately more powerful, reward of eternal life with God in heaven.

Social Truth Claims

While claims about the self and its theological purposes differ dramatically in these two visions, claims about the church, the community and mission are distinct as well. For Warren, the church is pivotal to the Christian life; in Borg's book there is no mention of the word church. For Warren, communalism is about accountability to a small group; for Borg, spiritual practice is more abstract and individualistic. For Warren, mission to the world is the task of global evangelism; for Borg, personal transformation leads one to make demands for the transformation of unjust systems and social structures. Warren could not be more practical, concrete and personal; Borg could not be more abstract, utopian and intellectual. Warren demands personal commitments with global impact; Borg demands global thinking, social critique and political transformation.

Warren details a full-blown ecclesiology. The Christian participation in the church is necessary. Jesus Christ came to institute the church for his world mission. The church is not simply a practical embodiment of this mission, but a metaphysical element in God's mission in the world, "*I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it*" (p. 132). Church membership is not a superficial engagement but a metaphysical commitment to the body of Christ and a personal call into small groups of moral and religious accountability. Jesus' group of twelve disciples is the model of Christian fellowship, whereby individual believers are disciplined and trained as missionaries of the Christian movement. The pedagogy of these small groups is practical and concrete: Warren describes nine characteristics of biblical fellowship: "We will share our true feelings (authenticity), encourage each other (mutuality), support each other (sympathy), forgive each other (mercy), speak the truth in love (honesty), admit our weaknesses

(humility), respect our differences (courtesy), not gossip (confidentiality), and make group a priority (frequency)” (p. 153). This commitment to the church is not a casual element of one’s life but a deep commitment to intimacy, moral accountability and the nurture of Christian life.

While Warren says that the Christian life is not about the self, there are several moments in the book that I describe as a “how to” manual, in which he appeals to the self and its development. Of course, Warren would counter, his plea for the self is for sake of others and for God’s glory. That is, personal gifts are given for the sake of sharing them with the community of the faithful, the church. Nonetheless, Warren’s section on “Unwrapping Your Spiritual Gifts” could be a part of any Christian self-help manual. The reader is counseled to “listen to your heart” and to know that you are activating your personal gifts when you feel “enthusiasm” and are personally enlivened by these activities. Even as Warren asserts that personal gifts are not given to make money, some activities produce enormous monetary rewards. Certain individuals have the gift of wealth creation. These “wealth builders” in the church should be encouraged to make money, but in doing so they must recognize that this ability is a gift from God. This gift is to be used to share the faith with others, and “10 percent” of their wealth must be given to the church as a part of their worship to God (p. 243). In fact, Warren develops a ministry of wealth builders who form an important part of his church’s expansion and growth. Once again, Warren does not approach the ethical questions of how the wealth is created, its sources and its effects on others. He simply wants this capital to be used for building the church and its mission.

Warren ends his book by counseling Christians to become “*world-class* Christians” and not “*worldly* Christians” (p. 297). The difference is that the former live their lives and exercise their gifts for the sake of others, to convince the world that the Lord of life is Jesus Christ. Worldly Christians, on the other hand, exercise their faith for their own sake, thinking only about their own comfort and security. Nonetheless, an outsider might ask, “With your fundamental focus on eternal life, isn’t the Christian life the most selfish of all acts?” Warren would hypothetically respond, “No, precisely because the Christian is doing what he is made to do, worship God, and for that the Christian is simply obedient to his highest good; and yes, this obedience leads each Christian into heaven to enjoy and worship God eternally.”

Borg’s perspectives on the social claims of the Christian life are much more abstract and opaque. He sums up the two social claims for the Christian by delineating Jesus’ ministry as “social prophet” and “movement initiator.” At no point does this mean for Borg that Jesus initiated a church or a community of believers per se. The church is conspicuous by its absence. Regardless, Borg claims that Jesus is in a long line of social prophets that stand against “domination systems” (p. 137). These systems undercut social justice and exploit vulnerable groups, insuring wealth for a few and poverty for everyone else. Jesus came to uproot these systems of inequality. Jesus mobilized a “deeply Jewish movement” that was at the same time, “remarkably inclusive” (p. 91). Borg asserts that Jesus’ inclusive meal practice--sitting with tax collectors, women and other “sinners”--symbolizes the heart of the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate. Borg simply ignores the inherent tension in Jesus’ core Jewish ethnocentrism, claiming that all the while Jesus was radically inclusive. Does this mean that Jesus intended to create a

globally inclusive community, regardless of gender or ethnicity? Borg assumes so, but his position is never defended or explained.

What is most remarkable about Borg's social claims is that he never addresses a community of followers, the group that Jesus supposedly initiates. Where and what is this movement in practical terms? Should the church exist? Was it initiated by Jesus? Without an answer, Borg argues that the kingdom of God is fundamentally a "religious-political" or "theo-political" metaphor (132). But the social group behind this movement is opaque at best, even as Borg claims that the kingdom of God is for the "*earth*." Considering Borg's this-worldly focus, one cannot help but ask, "Where is the kingdom of God?" Borg says, "Thus the Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were king. It is God's dream as dreamed by the great figures of the Jewish tradition: Moses, the prophets, and for those of us who are Christians, Jesus. It is a dream for the earth" (p. 135). Nonetheless, this sort of abstraction about God as king, and a place on earth where the poor are fed and the stranger is welcomed, sounds rather hollow if there is no social group to help implement this aptly labeled "dream."

Later in Borg's volume he does mention the importance of Christian fellowship, where spiritual practices are upheld in acts of "hospitality, learning, singing, testimony, simple economics and Sabbath-keeping" (p. 200). He follows by suggesting that Christian friendship is not just about having friends who are Christians, but also about sharing the faith with one another. Borg then alludes to a story about Frederick Buechner, a well-known Christian author who while visiting an evangelical college overheard someone describe, "What God had been doing in his life lately" (p. 200). Borg seems to imply that this is what Christian fellowship might involve, but we get no explanation.

Borg does say that Christians are to be “political activists.” This can come in several forms including philanthropy, social reform and social transformation. Specifically, he notes the importance of health care for the uninsured; environmental practices that advocate ecological sustainability; economic justice that provides the essentials for all; and the recognition of the “imperial power” of the United States and the temptations to misuse this power (pp. 143-4). At minimum it means voting on issues in a way that are sensitive to matters of justice for the poor and the downtrodden. Borg’s agenda is not revolutionary by any means; he suggests no fundamental structural changes in the economy or politics. Once again, these suggestions without a political base become abstract and hollow. The thinness of the liberal Christian community undercuts its economic or political vision.

Dueling Truth Claims

Each of these authors makes fundamental truth claims about their Christian visions. This is not unusual. All religious discourse, no matter the social or cultural position, makes explicit or implicit claims about what is true. Humans need and want to know that their beliefs are true. This is the heart of any moral worldview—a set of truth claims that guide the community. Within each of these moral worldviews are individual and social rewards. Warren has a clearer set of rewards, while Borg explicitly rejects rewards as beneath the morals of Christians. Borg hearkens back to the Kantian moral imperative that one should do one’s duty not for the sake of a payoff but because it is right and just. While some might see this as a noble cause, Borg’s moral vision and the vitality of the liberal Christian church has declined.

The fundamental source of these authors's epistemological truth claims centers on their interpretations of scripture. For Warren, the Bible is his absolute: "The Bible must always have the first and last word in my life" (p. 187). Believers must assimilate its authority by consenting to its power even when, like Billy Graham, one doesn't fully understand its passages. The believer must assimilate the truth of the Bible. This means studying it, listening to it, meditating and memorizing it. Finally, believers are to apply the Bible to everyday life, holding one another accountable to its demands by participating in small group Bible studies. For Warren, the scriptures are "flawless" (p. 187). In this way, the moral world of scripture becomes or should become the moral world of the believer. The integration between the two is every believer's ideal. Warren seems to imply that any recognition of contradictions within scripture, or historical critical analysis of scripture, forms resistance to its authority and an unacknowledged denial of its truth. The Bible is "alive" because it is God's word and from God's word the answers will come if one submits to its ultimate authority and truth.

For Borg, "Christianity is not absolute, but points to and mediates the absolute" (p. 215). In this way, the Bible is not absolute but is an instrument that guides the believer toward what is ultimate. How does it do this? Christian scriptures are metaphorical, to be approached in a "nonliteral" fashion, whereby the Christian assimilates the "more than literal meaning of language" (p. 49). Regardless of whether the stories in scripture are factually true, they can become "revelatory" and create opportunities for "epiphanies" (p. 51). Borg wants to loosen the believer's grip on the need to prove a one-to-one correspondence between biblical stories and empirical events. This serves the purpose of allowing believers to "trust" in the truth of the gospel revealed in Jesus' teachings and

actions. More importantly, Borg wants to overcome the “exclusivist” claims made by Christian traditionalists. Borg employs a sacramental understanding of all religions. Religions operate as instruments that point to the sacred. In this way, the sacred is a transcultural and transhistorical “more” mediated by each of the traditions (p. 61). Each religion is a human creation that responds to the sacred as that tradition experiences it. Each of the “enduring religions” communicates wisdom that inspires forms of compassion and justice. Finally, religions are communities of practice and instruments of personal transformation (pp. 213-215).

On one level, Borg is trying to overcome the inherent conflicts that arise from traditions that make mutually exclusive truth claims. However, most of the world’s major religious traditions do make these claims. Thus, Borg’s project glosses over the differences between world religions and, in a sense, ignores their real differences. To take the most obvious example, Judaism and Islam in particular have developed traditions that explicitly deny the truth claims within Christianity. Internally, of course, Roman Catholicism and forms of Protestantism often have denied the truth of the other.¹¹

It appears that Borg is appealing to Western liberal elites who desire tolerance and inclusiveness and want to avoid conflict as much as possible. Certainly, as history shows, those who have power, particularly economic and political power, seek to avoid social and cultural unrest at whatever cost.¹² The recent history of Islamic conflict in the world exemplifies this process. Many Westerners want to know who are the “good” Muslims.

¹¹ See Paul F. Knitter’s summary of the various models between religions in *Theologies of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002). These include the replacement model (only one true religion), fulfillment model (one fulfills the many), mutuality model (many true religions called to dialogue) and the acceptance model (many true religions: so be it).

¹² See Rodney Stark’s *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Stark reflects on the history of conflict in the monotheistic traditions, explicating the inherent tensions within and around these religious traditions.

They want to know how the West can either kill the “bad” Muslims, or somehow mitigate their hatred of the West by “marketing” ourselves more appropriately. I am not suggesting that Borg makes these errors in judgment, nonetheless, his perspective portrays a vague homogeneity between the great world religions, doing none of them justice, including Christianity. He makes the rather weak claim that, at their core, all religions point to a similar reality and express the same truth, thus there need be no conflict. This kind of intellectual colonialism undercuts the very moral worldview that Borg affirms, the need to recognize and affirm the other for its own sake.

Conclusion

Each of these authors offers moral worldviews that present truth claims for their visions of the Christian faith. For Warren, the authentic Christian worldview is centered on the truth and authority of scripture practiced within a disciplined and communal organization that supports and disciplines each participant as they live out the message of the gospel. This gospel claims that all have sinned and are subject to the temptations of Satan, thus by Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave grace is offered to each individual. Life is a test and an examination that each must pass. The goal of life is to recognize one’s sinful nature, give oneself to Christ and to worship God. In the end, if the test is passed, one receives eternal life with God, which is far better than life on earth. It is a worldview with clear moral demands and rewards. Warren says that life is not about us but about God. Of course, as one submits to God one receives the ultimate reward. Warren is offering a form of self-interested self-transcendence.

Borg’s moral world has clear truth claims as well, but the truth in Borg’s worldview is more complex. It is not simply a matter of turning to scripture to find one’s way. The

sacred, as the transcultural and transhistorical more, discloses itself through all of the religious traditions, not literally but figuratively. Every individual's task is to spiritually discern these signs and symbols and use them for self-transformation. Borg never suggests that a community is necessary for this transformation. It is a personal journey that is more intellectual than affective, more abstract than practical. The transformation leads to compassion and an egalitarian perspective culturally and politically, as well as a greater sense of tolerance and appreciation for other religious and cultural traditions. Borg offers nothing by way of a payoff; one should not expect the divine to intervene or give one eternal life following death. One should seek transformation neither for the sake of the life to come nor for a community here on earth, but simply because it is good and just to do so. In this sense the moral stakes for Borg's liberal Christianity are at once more demanding than the evangelical worldview and less rewarding.

These are two dramatically different moral universes and distinctly different sets of truth claims. Despite Borg's claim to the contrary, the evangelical moral world finds more resonance in the American marketplace of religion. It is not difficult to see why. People want clear moral worlds in communities where they can raise their families; they want to know what is expected of them and do what they think is right. They also want rewards. Evangelicals offer a Bible with answers, a community that nurtures them in faith and a final promise of life with God. Liberals offer a complex journey that can lead to personal transformation and a more compassionate sense for others. But it offers a thin community life and no metaphysical or eschatological rewards. In a sense, the truth of liberal religion may turn out to be more demanding precisely because it offers so little. Evangelicals are morally demanding and epistemologically clear, and offer a payoff that

many find appealing. Truth claims count in the moral worlds that religions create, but not all are equally appealing. Evangelicals have created a system that produces results. It remains to be seen whether liberals are interested in adjusting, or if they will continue to demand so much and offer so little.