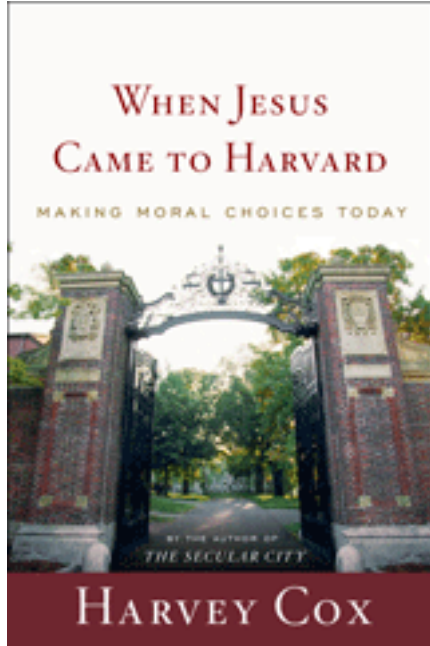


Press Release



When Jesus Came to Harvard

by Harvey Cox

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About the Book

Over the fifteen years that Harvey Cox taught "Jesus and the Moral Life" to undergraduates at Harvard, the course grew so popular that the lectures had to be given in a theater usually reserved for rock concerts. Cox's students came from a wide variety of backgrounds (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist) and from all different programs at Harvard. Eventually the classroom included visiting fellows, postdoctoral scientific researchers, midcareer diplomats, city planners, and journalists. The overwhelming response was a clear signal of the hunger for guidance in a confusing world, where moral guidelines seem to shift daily. In *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today* (Houghton Mifflin, publication date: December 3, 2004) Cox translates the method and message of Jesus into today's idiom.

Cox reminds readers that Jesus was a rabbi and a storyteller, and that the most profound lesson we can take from his stories is the value of imagination. Jesus taught and applied Torah, the Jewish law, and in good rabbinical fashion he never delivered an easy answer to a hard question; instead, he told stories, forcing the seekers to come to their own decisions. "What motivates people are stories," Cox writes, "narratives, accounts of situations in which choices must be made and stands taken." Jesus invited others — especially through his parables — to sharpen their moral insight and then to make their own choices. He encouraged people to draw on the imagination to solve moral dilemmas, something Cox believes we need to practice more. "Of course we need reasoning to lead a moral life, but we need — even more — the capacity to intuit what is important and to see a way through what sometimes appears to be an impasse. We need to appreciate not just how other people see things but how they feel about them, and to do this our most potent resource is still the human imagination, awakened by compelling narratives."

With this in mind, Cox considers the stories in the New Testament, both those Jesus told and those that were told about him, and shows how each can still inform moral choices today. In the Gospel of Matthew, for example, the Sermon on the Mount provides rich insights into our yearning for safety, comfort, and wealth. "[Jesus] was asking people, then and now," Cox writes, "to try to seek an alternative to the kind of security — itself often very shaky — the world of money and accumulation seems to offer." And as for those parables he and his students found confusing, Cox suggests that "perplexity and confusion are not always obstacles to learning," and that perhaps what we need to take from these stories is that "growing up means learning to live with unsatisfying and incomplete endings. The parables remain vivid because they refuse to cater to our craving for tidy completion."

Teaching a class of hundreds of students of various cultures and beliefs how to make moral choices in today's world may seem a tall order, and to focus the lively discussions that he knew would fill each class, Cox encouraged his students to consider a special approach to moral reasoning. During heated discussions of modern dilemmas, he would first tell his students to check the facts of a given situation: "What, exactly, is partial birth abortion?" "Who, precisely, is cutting down the trees in the Amazon?" Next the class had to decide if the argument a student was making was consistent, coherent, and logical. Counter-arguments were considered, as well as possible responses. Then the class would focus on loyalties. "What, I asked them to consider, are your fundamental life commitments — to family, nation, faith, community, ethnic group, gender? How do these loyalties, even if you hold them in varying and changing degrees, influence your thinking about moral questions?" Finally, and perhaps most important, Cox asked students to think about "grand narratives," or worldviews, formative narratives that all of us carry around and that influence our every decision. This way of dealing with each issue as it came up sparked a lot of discussion, and required that people tell their own stories and listen to those of others. It proved to be one of the reasons the course became so popular.

Another was undoubtedly the professor leading the group. Cox's distinct voice carries the reader through the book, as it must have during the semesters of "Jesus and the Moral Life." His style is playful, conversational, and his remarkable talent to stimulate discussion about the life of Jesus even among nonreligious students and readers comes through on every page. In a chapter on biblical genealogies, he writes that he instructed his students not to read them but to sing them. After considering some of the racy plot lines about Rahab and Tamar found in accounts of Jesus' ancestry, he adds, "With this kind of scandalous stuff inside the covers of the Good Book, who needs to waste money on true-romance magazines?"

Cox is also quite open about his own experiences, and offers some of his own story over the course of the book. He writes of stumbling blocks he faced while teaching the class, and points at which — sparked by something that came up in a class or that he was preparing for his students — his approach to moral reasoning changed. After he had been teaching the course for a few years, he began to study the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and after some hesitation, Cox found and worked with a spiritual director on these exercises. Ignatius thought that to truly follow Jesus, one should imagine carrying on a conversation with him. Cox writes, "Now, years later, I still carry on imaginary conversations with the rabbi from Nazareth. It has become my principal form of meditation." This, in turn, led him to talk to students about self-examination, about solving moral dilemmas by joining the questions "Who am I?" with "What must I do?"

When he published his international bestseller, *The Secular City*, in 1965, Harvey Cox argued that even though the institutional power of religions might well decline, the questions religions have grappled with would remain. Religion, he believed, was changing, but it was certainly not dead. This remains true today, and makes *When Jesus Came to Harvard* all the more relevant. In his new book, Cox shows how we can extrapolate insights from Jesus' parables and bridge the gap between the ancient and modern worlds.

About the Author

In 1965, Harvey Cox published *The Secular City*, which became an international bestseller (nearly a million copies sold) and was translated into fourteen languages. That same year Cox (who had studied with the theologians James Luther Adams and Paul Tillich while earning his Ph.D.) joined the faculty of Harvard University, where he is now Hollis Professor of Divinity and chair of the Committee on Academic Programs. Along with courses he's taught on his own, Cox has paired up in the classroom with Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School and the late Stephen Jay Gould of the Department of Paleontology.

In addition to *When Jesus Came to Harvard* and *The Secular City*, Cox has published several other books, including *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*, *The Feast of Fools*, *The Seduction of the Spirit* (a runner-up for the National Book Award), *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths*, *Religion in the Secular City*, *Fire from Heaven*, and, most recently, *Common Prayers*. His articles have appeared in numerous publications, both scholarly and popular, including the *Yale Review*, the *Journal of Oriental Philosophy*, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the op-ed page of the *New York Times*.

Before Cox entered academic life, he worked briefly in the merchant marine, on relief ships carrying horses and cattle to Europe. After receiving his doctorate, Cox left immediately for Berlin (then divided by the Wall) and served for a year as an "ecumenical fraternal worker," traveling almost daily through Checkpoint Charlie in an effort to maintain contact between the two sides of the divided city. Upon his return he worked actively with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and was one of the founders of the Boston chapter of the SCLC. In the fall of 1963 he was arrested for participating in a civil rights demonstration and spent a few days in jail in Williamston and Washington, North Carolina.

These days, Cox plays tenor saxophone with a Boston jazz and swing ensemble called Soft Touch, and in November 1999 he was guest saxophone soloist with Mark Harvey's jazz orchestra, Aardvark, at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Cox is married to Professor Nina Tumarkin, who teaches Russian history and is codirector of the Russian Area Studies Program at Wellesley College. He has four children and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

A Conversation with Harvey Cox

Why do you think it's important for students who receive an education grounded in scientific reasoning to take a course in moral reasoning? How did you hope your students would change after taking your course?

Science and technology (and gigantic economic and political institutions) play such a powerful role in all our lives that we really need to be prepared to live with them, and to manage them, with deepened moral awareness. At least students need to be able to recognize a moral issue when one confronts them. I hope the course helped with this.

Did students of different backgrounds interpret moral issues (and how to apply Jesus' teachings to those issues) in characteristically different ways?

Jewish students tended to put more emphasis on acts, while the Christian students looked more at the inner motivation. Buddhist students tended toward nonviolence in all situations, the Muslims toward the just use of power. The nonreligious students were often surprised by how much of Jesus' ideas and life they could accept.

Are certain stories of Jesus easier to relate to in the twenty-first century? Did people in previous centuries turn for guidance to different stories than we do today?

I think all the stories of Jesus still retain a sharp relevance, although we do of course read different things into them. The question of how Jesus treated "outsiders" looms with greater importance today.

Over the more than fifteen years that you taught "Jesus and the Moral Life" at Harvard, can you name one change you made to keep the class fresh and relevant?

I started with a focus mainly on the ethical and moral issues, but over the years I noticed that the students had an intense interest in the philosophical and spiritual issues that lurk everywhere, both in the Bible and in life around us. So I included more of those, and the students responded positively.

Was there a particular lecture in the syllabus that seemed to generate the most debate?

Yes. When we discussed Jesus' warnings against the spiritual danger of wealth and his obvious preference for the poor, this raised serious questions in the students' minds about their own career plans and goals. The exchanges were always lively, sometimes sharp.

What are some of the challenges you encountered when preparing "Jesus and the Moral Life"? How did the university support you? Now that the course is "retired," has anything been created to replace it?

The biggest challenge was the unexpectedly large enrollment, which neither the university officials nor I had anticipated. This required moving the lectures to a much larger hall than I had been used to. I also had to find additional section leaders, since the discussion sections played such a key role in the course. Harvard helped me find them and provided good

training opportunities for them. Unfortunately, no course quite like mine has been introduced, and now the whole "core curriculum" idea is being reexamined and may be eliminated.

Can you describe how the course was organized? Were topics presented in a special order?

The trajectory was quite simple. We followed the life of Jesus as it is told in the Gospels, from the Nativity stories to the Easter accounts. Along the way, we turned to whatever moral and/or philosophical/religious issues these stories raised, especially the ones the students themselves were facing. I used this approach because even relatively uninformed students were familiar with the general outline of Jesus' life, and I also believe the Gospel writers had good reasons for presenting the narrative in this order.

You write that as our communities become less homogeneous, it seems to become more difficult to find common moral ground. How can Jesus, who is so firmly linked to only the Christian tradition, be an accessible moral example to people of other faiths?

Actually, Jesus is linked to more than one tradition, though in different ways. Nowadays some Jews see him as in the line of the prophets and rabbis. (Notice that some of the blurbs on the book's jacket and in the publicity materials were written by rabbis.) Muslims also see Jesus as one of the prophets, with several prominent mentions in the Qu'ran and the Hadith. Buddhists respect him as a bodhisattva, and he is an important figure in popular Hindu devotion. What is perhaps most important about the course and this book is that the students address precisely the question of the moral relevance of Jesus in a religiously pluralistic society.

How do you personally deal with moral relativism?

I start by admitting that my own perspective is necessarily relative, but that the moral basis of life, which we all grasp from our own perspectives, is ultimately not relative. But the fact that we live with different perspectives today necessitates a continuing and intense dialogue about the choices we face.

Who are some of the theologians you turned to for inspiration and guidance when creating the course?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh.

Which parable or story about the life of Jesus means the most to you?

The Good Samaritan. It's not a morality tale but the unlikely casting of an improbable character as "the one who showed mercy." But I also like the King's Banquet, when none of the invitees show up, so unsuspecting passersby are pulled in. That's life!

Praise for *When Jesus Came to Harvard*

"Sparkling prose . . . Ever since his groundbreaking study of religion and society (*The Secular City*) more than forty years ago, Cox has devoted his work to a fascinating array of topics: Pentecostalism, interreligious dialogue, liberation theology, and Eastern religions. Now, after more than twenty years of teaching a course on Jesus and the moral life to Harvard undergraduates, he shares his experiences." — *Publishers Weekly*

"For the last four decades, Harvey Cox has been the leading trend spotter in American religion. Here he weighs in on the contemporary Jesus boom with his usual sagacity and wit, finding America's latest and greatest obsession alive and well among Christians and Buddhists, believers and unbelievers, and even in the secular citadel of Harvard. A timely rebuke to those who would do with Jesus whatever they will." — Stephen Prothero, chair, Department of Religion, Boston University, and author of *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*

"From an exciting amalgam of his students' inquiries and his own imaginative interpretation of Scripture, Harvey Cox has woven a wondrous, contemporary understanding of Christianity. Here Jesus, the rabbi-storyteller, and Jesus, Cox's mentor and friend, complement one another in a way that will stimulate thought in people across the spectrum of doubt and faith. Harvey Cox continues to be a fine teacher to us all." — Rabbi Balfour Brickner, Stephen Wise Free Synagogue

"Among the many virtues of this book is its theological exploration of the 'Armageddon syndrome,' the all too prevalent insistence that the world must be brought to an end in order to be properly purified. Cox contrasts the violence of Armageddonists with Jesus' gentle but powerful 'good news.' In so doing, he makes a valuable critique from within of the kinds of religious totalism — and secular forms too — that so endanger our world." — Robert Jay Lifton, author of *Superpower Syndrome: America's Apocalyptic Confrontation with the World*

"Harvey Cox's knowledge of the Bible is matched by a daring moral imagination rarely found in most Bible readers. For years he reintroduced to thousands of his students facing twenty-first-century moral dilemmas a first-century rabbi named Jesus. The students, believers and nonbelievers alike, found that Jesus didn't give easy answers but posed hard questions. Their story has now become this remarkable book, so beautifully written that I read it with the same pleasure and profit I'm sure will be shared by a host of thoughtful readers of all religious and nonreligious persuasions. Heartfelt thanks, Professor Cox." — Reverend William Sloane Coffin

"A timely word from Harvey Cox is always welcome, and this book, drawn from his extraordinarily popular course at Harvard, speaks to needs and opportunities far beyond Harvard Yard. I don't know which is more compelling, the bright students or their wise teacher, but both give us much-needed insight into a world where life is still difficult and Jesus still counts." — Peter Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University

"As one who enjoys rabbinic Midrash, I appreciated Professor Cox's Midrashic interpretations of the teachings of the rabbi from Nazareth." — Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*