

One Bible. Two Gods.

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Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotion they pay to violence is a form religious piety. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it not does not seem to be mythic in the least. *Violence simply appears to be the nature of things* (emphasis mine). It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives. The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. ... It misappropriates the language, symbols, and scriptures of Christianity. It does not seek God in order to change; it claims God in order to prevent change. Its God is not the impartial ruler of all nations but a biased and partial tribal god worshiped as an idol. Its metaphor is not the journey but a fortress. its symbol is not the cross but a rod of iron. *Its offer is not forgiveness [justice] but victory* (emphasis mine). Its good news is not the unconditional love of enemies but their final liquidation. ... It usurps the revelation of God's purposes for humanity in Jesus. It is blasphemous. It is idolatrous. And it is immensely popular.

- Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers. Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, 1992

Democracy don't rule the world
You'd better get that in your head.
This world is ruled by violence
But I guess that's better left unsaid.

- Bob Dylan, "Union Sundown," 1983

A Biblical Choice

Violence. The true religion of the human race. Walter Wink's work on the "myth of redemptive violence" made me aware years ago the extent to which our worship of violence has led to countless acts of atrocities committed by tyrants as well as "well-meaning" world leaders seeking to bring peace and an end to war as a way to settle conflicts. Using violence to defeat the violent. Of course these well-meaning "leaders" believe their actions are right actions. After all, they say, a violent response is the only language "they" understand. Of course we tout diplomacy and open communication as ways to understand our perceived adversaries but it seems that while we are talking we are preparing for war. Our leaders stoke the flames of xenophobia by keeping us in a near constant state of fear, mistrust of the other, and nationalistic in nature. We don't want a "smoking gun to turn into a mushroom cloud." We have no choice but to use violence. Wink asks this question: "Is it okay to become evil in order to defeat evil?" Of course when we do "reluctantly" resort to violence we know—at least we are assured in our arrogance—that we are

on the side of righteousness. We know our god is on our side. Our values and way of life must be preserved. But are we willfully deluded? Are we as a people and nation blind to our own aggressive nature? Are we not able to consider an alternative to striking out in violent actions? Why do we feel justified in taking violent actions against our adversaries?

Pacifism or Nonviolence?

At first glance pacifism and nonviolence appear to be synonymous terms. Of course, nonviolent people are pacifists right? Well maybe. But the term “pacifism” sounds too much like “passive” to me and if we are talking about the historical Jesus we should realize that he was anything but passive in his program of nonviolent resistance to Rome. For me, these terms can be mutually exclusive because practicing nonviolence calls for active participation in resisting injustice through nonviolent means. I know this might seem to be a stretch to some but it is how we must understand these terms. Before I proceed allow me to go a bit further in defining the term “nonviolence.” It does not mean one should look the other way if we see a young child being abused, or not defend ourselves or loved ones if attacked in some manner. It does not mean a country does not have the right to defend itself against outside aggression. Practicing nonviolence is to be on the side of justice for all. We can understand three forms—three definitions of “justice.” Possibly the first definition that comes to mind is “criminal justice.” This, of course, means that the perpetrator of a crime is duly punished in the court system—the criminal justice system. Another form or definition of justice is to make sure we all play on a level playing surface. This form of justice, Equality Before the Law, is seen, for example, in the policy of affirmative action and rules in sporting events that make sure everyone plays by the same rules. But the form of justice Crossan is interested in is the only form of justice the Bible knows — “economic justice” or, as Crossan terms it, “distributive justice.” A justice where the world’s resources are equally distributed. This is the opposite of, also a term used by Crossan, “retributive justice.” Distributive justice leads to peace through non-violence while retributive justice leads to a peace through victory or violence. When a certain peace is reached through war and violence that peace is only a “lull” according to Crossan. Nations use “lulls” to prepare for the next round of war and violence. Violence and the response to violent actions of individuals and of nations escalates with every subsequent event and therein lies the most basic question according to Crossan: “What are we going to do about escalating violence?” Our very survival depends on the answer to that question.

Our use of violence as a nation against other nations and groups is justified because the god worshipped in popular Christianity is an advocate of violence. Indeed, a biblical god seems to sanction genocide¹ which is “commanded” to subdue enemies. Many Americans love the Bible even if it is sporadically read, little understood and used to find ways to justify violent action against others. It's true that the Bible is filled with violence. But that's not the whole story. The Bible is also filled with instruction about showing compassion, forgiveness, mercy and love toward those who hate us.

Two Gods

This brings me to a book that, for me, very clearly explains this conundrum and reveals two very different, very distinct gods in the books of the Bible. One a violent god of retributive justice.

¹ 1 Sam. 15:3 NRSV

One a nonviolent god of distributive justice. How do we make sense of these two gods residing in the pages of the Bible? During a 2007 Crossan lecture a questioner, in the process of asking her question, casually mentioned the violent parts of the Bible she assumed Crossan wanted to “throw out.” He began answering her question by stating emphatically that he wanted to throw nothing out of the Bible. By tossing out the violent parts, to paraphrase Crossan in this lecture, the Bible becomes nothing but a “Disney Land type of story that no one would take seriously ... we would have to treat in like...utopian fantasy.” The two gods revealed within its pages in both the Old and New Testaments—Revelation being the most relentlessly violent book in the Bible—are legitimate choices and he desired to throw nothing out. “The struggle is not between divine good and human evil,” Crossan writes

but between, on one hand, God’s radical dream for an Earth distributed fairly and nonviolently among all its peoples and, on the other hand, civilization’s normal dream of ‘me keeping mine, getting yours, and having more and more, forever. The tension is not between the Good Book and the bad world that is outside the book. It is between the Good Book and the bad world that are both *within* the book.²

How to Read the Bible and Still Be A Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation by John Dominic Crossan explores this subject of the two gods revealed in the Bible, one violent and one nonviolent, and, for me, makes plain this legitimate question: “How is real peace achieved?” Crossan explains in his book how the Bible can be an instrument of peace (sans violent conflict) and gives a promising vision of the future.

A Second Coming and Two Feasts

Crossan also brings to the fore the perplexing question mentioned above: “What are we going to do about escalating violence?” Crossan speaks of “the normalcy of civilization” indicating that our penchant for violence is accepted because it is the norm for our society as it was for Roman society: “beneath that seismic conflict of Christian Judaism and Roman imperialism was the grinding collision of history’s two great tectonic plates: the normalcy of civilization’s program of peace through victory against the radically of God’s program of peace through justice.”³ Peace through victory is the norm for empire. Of course we must achieve peace through victory/violence. This is the violent god’s utterances in the pages of the books of the Bible. This is the language of empire. This is the religion of empire. Empires have always achieved “peace” through victory/violence and if questioned that there might be another way to peace empire wouldn’t have the slightest idea what you are talking about. The popularity of violence in our world is for the first time threatening the continuation of life on this planet. Empires of the past—Babylon, Persian, Macedonian, Roman. etc.—could not, on their worst day, threaten the existence of all life on Earth. We cannot make that claim in our modern times. We have learned to destroy our world many times over atomically, biologically, chemically, ecologically. There is nothing “normal” about the times in which we live but we have come to accept these threats as “the normalcy of civilization.” It’s just the way things are. It’s human nature to be violent. We accept this normalcy. But there’s another way, another message, another nature, another god, revealed in the pages of the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—that Crossan very ably and clearly points out. This is a god of love, peace, compassion. An egalitarian god of equality,

² Jean Dominic Crossan. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation*. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016.)

³ Crossan. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*.

acceptance, justice. This god dreams of a world where everyone has enough.

Picture yourself entering a household where some members are over-fed while other members are starving. It's really just that simple. How would we react and what would we think of such a person and his god if we were to visit his (the householder, which in the first century was male) home and find half the household well-fed and the other half starving? Crossan believes we should see the God of the bible as a householder who takes care of his entire household, not only the chosen few.

Crossan has written and spoken extensively of a theology that brings peace. One way he terms "Roman Imperial Theology" whose main tenants are:

- 1) Religion
- 2) War
- 3) Victory
- 4) Peace

Or: Peace through victory/violence/war.

Then there is Crossan's second way or "Theology of Justice" (my terminology) whose main tenants are:

- 1) Religion
- 2) Nonviolence
- 3) Justice
- 4) Peace

Or: Peace through justice/nonviolence.

This is not a choice between "the Jesus of History" and "The Christ of Faith." The choice is whether the Jesus of History and/or the Christ of Faith was/is violent or nonviolent. What Crossan proposes in his book is found on page 36: "The norm and criterion of the Christian Bible (meaning both Old and New Testaments) is the biblical Christ but the norm and criterion of the biblical Christ is the historical Jesus." So the question becomes: "Is the historical Jesus violent or nonviolent?" If the historical Jesus can be shown to be nonviolent then he would trump anything else found anywhere in the book. It's a choice, first, between the Jesus on the warhorse as depicted in the Book of Revelation⁴, returning to smite and slaughter so as to cause the blood to run in the streets "as high as a horse's bridle" describing a gory feast of dead bodies struck down by the rider on the white horse with the sword in his mouth—the returning Christ—and, second, the Jesus of the gospels which depicts Jesus as riding on a "peace donkey".⁵ The birds of the air are told to prepare for a great feast on the dead who were victims of the Jesus on the warhorse. He comes back as a killing machine. A vengeful and bloodthirsty god who will take no nonsense from anyone, a Rambo-like god whose cause is "just". Why has this so-called "second coming" been invented, made up? "What was wrong with the first coming?" Crossan asks. His conclusion is frightening: "It is because we cannot stand a nonviolent god." So which is it? How can we know Jesus was nonviolent? According to Crossan, Pontius Pilate made the call. He crucified

⁴ Rev. 19: 11-21 NRSV

⁵ Mt. 21.1-9; Mk 11.1-10; Lk 19.28-38 NRSV

Jesus and did not go after his followers. If Jesus had been violent his followers would have been rounded up and also executed. It was the Roman way. It is the way of empire. So for Crossan the fact of Jesus's execution as the leader of a nonviolent "Kingdom Movement" (Crossan is always careful not to call it a "Jesus Movement.") is proof that Jesus was a nonviolent resister to Roman occupation and dominance. A nonviolent resister to "the normalcy of civilization".

A beautiful picture of peace and safety is also painted in the end of the most violent book in all the Bible—The Apocalypse of John.⁶ A more beautiful picture of peace and tranquility is difficult to imagine. But the antithesis of the grotesque picture of the feast of scavenging birds devouring human flesh in Revelation is another feast mentioned in Isaiah. A feast that states God will prepare for *all* nations and *all* peoples is found in Isaiah: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."⁷

So we have a library of books, the Bible, in which we have two gods depicted. Both are there. Both are legitimate. The choice for Christians is to decide which god to follow. In my view, the vast majority of people and nations have chosen the violent god of retributive justice.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the so-called "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem which describes Jesus's entry into the city during the Passover season. There were two riders, two processions, entering Jerusalem at that time of year, one from the west and one from the east. The entry from the west was a procession designed to sow awe and fear with the entry of the representative of the emperor and the Roman empire—in this case Pontius Pilate coming into the city from Caesarea on the coast where he resided. Three times a year, at the high Holy Days of Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall the emperor's representative rode into the city on a warhorse with a large detachment of Roman soldiers with the objective of keeping order through intimidation. Crucifixions as examples were the order of the day. The Holy Days were a time of potential upheaval, especially Passover which depicted and recalled the escape from empire—The Exodus—at a time Judea was occupied by the greatest empire the world has seen, the Roman Empire. The Holy Days brought thousands of people to Jerusalem and it became a powder keg of potential problems for the Roman occupiers. Pilate entered the city with all the panoply of empire, the sound of marching feet and horses hooves, banners flying, sun glinting off spear heads and metal breast plates, leather creaking, most likely trumpets blaring to announce his entrance, people scrambling to get out of the way of the marching soldiers and horses. Now consider the procession from the east. A man sitting astride a donkey—a female nursing donkey with its colt trotting alongside. Picture it: the rider's legs dangling, bouncing along awkwardly, comically on the back of the small donkey, a "crowd" calling to him and laying their cloaks and palm branches in his path calling him "blessed". The entry of Jesus is a clear lampoon, a mockery, of the Roman procession taking place at the same time on the other side of the city. The anti-Roman sentiment is unmistakable. The late English theologian D. B. Caird called it "a planned political demonstration." This to me this is also a sign that Jesus was nonviolent in his approach to resisting Rome and its dominance. This is the great conflict of the Bible. It is both an instrument of violence and an instrument of nonviolence depending on which god is embraced and it is up to Christians as individuals to choose which god is revealed in Jesus.

Are the prospects for the future dim? The idea that nations and governments will adopt a more just approach to solving the seemingly unsurmountable problem of escalating violence is

⁶ Rev. 21:1-4 NRSV

⁷ Isa 25: 6 NRSV

slim at best but it is literally, in my view, our only hope. There is a way to peace and it can be found in first building just societies which leave no one out and benefit all equally but unfortunately most seem to be believers in the worn out tenants that “might makes right” and survival is for the fittest/strongest. If honest, most Americans, and yes, most Christians if offered the choice of which procession they would wish to be a part of would choose the procession of Empire. Empire and the religion of empire has done a thorough job of deluding its citizens into believing that the only way to peace is through victory/violence. This is the dangerous world in which we live. Each person achieving a higher level of awareness knows that violence only begets more and greater violence. “Justice is the body of love, and love is the soul of justice. Separate them and you do not get both—you get neither; you get a moral corpse. Justice is the flesh of love, and love is the spirit of justice. Think about this...”⁸

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⁸ Crossan, 245.