

How is the Bible an Instrument of Peace and Conflict and What Are the Prospects for the Future? Reflections on the Work of John Dominic Crossan

Ernest G. Barr

Introduction

I am an unapologetic, Christian pacifist. I developed this position as the middle son growing up in the home of a Church of the Brethren pastor and a Mother who was equally devoted to the Church. Both of them were first generation Brethren. It was not that my Father lectured us on the peace position of the Church or on supporting passages from the Bible. I developed the belief from his preaching at church and occasional discussions at home.

As early as high school, I began to wonder about chemistry as a profession. However, by the time I began my studies in Manchester College, I was fairly sure that was the direction I wanted to pursue. As I was completing my Master's degree in Organic Chemistry at Purdue University and considering employers, I heard from several sources of a highly respected pharmaceutical manufacturing firm in Indianapolis. At the same time I was considering a rubber producing company in Detroit, Michigan. Without a great deal of deliberation, it occurred to me that in time of armed conflict, the rubber manufacturer might easily become a "war industry" whereas a pharmaceutical manufacturer would be committed to research and manufacture of medicinals for the treatment of all people. Having declared my position by serving 20 months in Civilian Public Service (CPS), it was important to me that my profession not conflict with my basic beliefs. And so it was that I joined the pharmaceutical firm where I worked my entire career of thirty-seven years.

Early Years

The bombing of Pearl Harbor occurred in December 1941 when I was a sophomore in Myrtle Point, OR High School. Our town was near the ocean and there was concern that Japanese planes might be able to reach the Pacific coast. Therefore, a lookout station was built on the roof of the high school from which students, on a schedule, would watch and listen for airplanes. My older brother and I were permitted by our parents to take turns at the lookout station, which in retrospect is a bit surprising.

At the end of the school year, we moved to Nampa, ID. The school administration required boys in the upper classes to take "military training" consisting of a rigorous gym class and marching practice. Both my brother and I, independently, agreed to the gym class, but refused to participate in marching. Alternatively, we were required to outline the Red Cross First Aid Handbook. As far as I knew, we were the only ones given that assignment.

I must confess I was acutely aware of how my beliefs differed from those of my friends and I fully expected some negative reaction. However, I can report there was absolutely none whatsoever, a pattern that has held throughout my life, with a singular exception.

CPS Experience

I graduated from high school in June of 1944 and was drafted soon after my September birthday. I left home on December 20 for CPS Camp 56 at Waldport, OR. My brother, who had preceded me, as well as another chap from our church, greeted me upon my arrival.

After a few days of “orientation”, I was assigned to a crew who cut wood for heating the dorms and firing the cook stoves. I had anticipated that all men in CPS shared my reasons for being a conscientious objector (CO). I could not have been more wrong. I found about as many reasons for pacifism as there were persons who held that position. In addition to “religious objectors” there were “political objectors”, “humanitarian objectors” and variations within each group. There were religious objectors from denominations other than Church of the Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers. Some came from “Jehovah’s Witnesses”. They would fight in the battle of Armageddon, but not in WWII. This war was not the ultimate struggle between “Good” and “Evil”. There was a group from “Church of the First Born”, who insisted in “going the second mile”, which meant to them, working a sixteen-hour day. Still another religion was the “Temple of the Jeweled Cross”. The single representative of this group distinguished himself by revering *all* life. He claimed to have never intentionally stepped on a bug or killed a fly. Accordingly, he wore no clothing made of leather. He wore cloth fiber belts and tennis shoes. The worship center by his bunk was a cross that was decorated with colored glass beads. These were just a few of the variations I encountered and against which I privately compared my own views.

It wasn’t long before the US Forest Service invited me to become part of the “Timber Cruisers”. This crew of four men resurveyed government owned timberland to assure that the lumber intended for sale was indeed the property of the US Government. As my friends learned of my decision, some referred to me as a “war worker”. Again, I rethought my position.

It was becoming evident to me that there was no unquestionable, absolute line of demarcation that would separate a CO from those supporting the war effort. For example, some COs continued to pay income taxes, while others refused. From those who refused to pay, the US Government confiscated personal property to cover the tax liability. One way or the other, the tax was paid! The CO who refused could only say he did not *willingly* pay.

A major purpose of Camp 56 was fighting forest fires in fire season and planting trees in the off-season. I became restless. The object of CPS, as publicized was “...to do work of national importance under civilian direction.” I questioned if the work I had been assigned was indeed “work of national importance”. Since that question weighed heavily on my mind, I began to watch the bulletin board for other opportunities and found a “guinea pig experiment”, so called because COs doubled as guinea pigs. The study was to investigate the “Relationship of Atypical Pneumonia and the Common Cold”. I was attracted to that effort and signed up.

I arrived at the Holly Inn, Pinehurst, NC, the location of Unit 140, and after a period of orientation and instruction about the experiment, each man was assigned to a room. Shortly thereafter, each subject was inoculated as a medical staff-person sprayed

odorless, tasteless sputum from infected persons into his throat and lungs as he inhaled deeply. No man knew if he had been inoculated with atypical pneumonia or common cold virus. He was then led back to his room to remain in isolation until the end of the study several weeks in the future. While each man was isolated, there was no prohibition to sitting in the window, legs hanging outside and exchanging current banter. Each day a nurse would come by to check vital signs and assess each man's progress.

I occupied my time in the morning studying chemistry from a book I had brought and the afternoon doing physical exercises and using recreational materials provided. One man had brought a phonograph and records of thoroughly enjoyable classical music and broadcasted music throughout the building.

At this point, I no longer recall the final outcome of the study, but I did agree to stay on for another round of experimentation. The second experiment went much the same as the first. However, with an end to that study, there came a need to find still a new assignment. Since nothing was attractive to me, I returned to Camp 56.

It was not long before my daily search of the bulletin board revealed still another experiment, an extension of Unit 140 to be held at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. The experiment sought to discover how hepatitis was spread. By the time of my arrival, it had been determined that mosquitos were not responsible, as had been considered. Researchers were suspecting poor sewage disposal might be a factor. We were divided into four groups and inoculated by drinking water that had been polluted with undisguised human feces. A citrus "chaser" followed the polluted water. The inoculum had been treated by one of three methods, (1) chlorination, (2) flocculation, (3) both chlorination and flocculation and finally, (4) no treatment, serving as a control. I am no longer sure what group I was in but most likely (1) or (2). All men in the control group became severely ill as did one man in my group. I do not recall the reported outcome of the experiment.

My reassignment at the end of this experiment occurred without my input. I was assigned to Unit 24-5 at New Windsor, MD. This unit was under the direction of the US Soil Conservation Service, who assigned us to dig post-holes for fences to encourage farmers living in the rolling hills of eastern Maryland, to farm on the contour.

Eventually, it was discovered that I knew how to type—the only one in the Unit so gifted. Therefore, I was reassigned to the office, eventually becoming Director of Unit 140, Subunit 5.

At this point during the summer of 1946, men were gradually being discharged. My discharge came in late August after 20 months of service. It was just in time to enroll at Manchester College (now University). I chose Manchester on the advice of a friend I met at Pinehurst, who had said to me. "If you're interested in chemistry, you need to go to Manchester." As a Manchester graduate and high school chemistry teacher, he was a source of good advice.

Development of Beliefs

Even as a youngster, I can remember my Father using Matthew's Sermon on the Mount as the text for his sermon. I learned later that Luke's Sermon on the Plain is very similar

to the Sermon on the Mount. Walter Wink¹ provides an interesting analysis of the techniques mentioned in these sermons. In addition to being nonviolent, they turn out to be embarrassing to the offender.

Virtually all of the New Testament, including the four Gospels and the writings of Paul, but excluding Revelation and parts of the Synoptic Gospels², describe the historical Jesus as a kind and gracious person motivated by love, and seeking the wellbeing of all he met. He is characterized as an itinerant preacher/teacher, a healer and the leader of a band of nonviolent resisters against the Roman authorities. While some understand Jesus acted violently when he cleansed the temple, Crossan notes that only in John³ is there a mention of a “whip of cords” and it was used only on the animals, not against the people.

There are other examples in which Jesus appears to be violent to the Pharisees. For example, Luke⁴ relates an example of Jesus being invited by a Pharisee to dinner. When Jesus failed to do the ceremonial washing, the host was offended, shocked and highly critical. Jesus responded with a tirade calling Pharisees hopeless frauds who tithe the equivalent of every nickel and dime and keep account of every penny, but ignore basic matters of justice and God’s love. Jesus’ recriminating language seems nearly excessive and uncharacteristic of the person we have described. However, genuine love does not mean that one never reproves the offender.

When it comes to deciding how we are to know which is the true God, I agree with Crossan⁵ when he says the norm and criterion of the Christian Bible is the biblical Christ. Christ is the standard by which we measure everything else in the Bible.

Jesus’ rejection of violence, even in self-defense seems consistent with the way he lived and taught. Walter Wink states, “Jesus did not forbid self-defense. He did not teach nonresistance, but nonviolence.”

All four gospels⁶ tell the story of how Jesus was apprehended in the Garden of Gethsemane by a group of Roman soldiers, whose purpose was to take him for trial. One of those with Jesus drew his sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, whereupon Jesus rebuked the defender and said “Don’t you know that I could appeal to my Father and He would send more than twelve legions of angels?” Jesus then healed the servant’s ear. Jesus did not forbid self-defense, but he rejected violence even in self-defense. While this event in the Garden may not be a proven, historical event, it seems consistent with other actions of Jesus and is for me a guiding example, nonetheless.

There are verses in New Testament that seem to give reason for questioning pacifistic belief. For example, Romans 12:19 says “Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord”. This verse implies a vengeful, violent God who will meet out punishment to the wrongdoer. A more helpful and I believe a more accurate interpretation is found in *The Message*,⁷ “ Don’t insist on getting even: that’s not for you to do I’ll do the judging, says God. I’ll take care of it.” The closing verses to that chapter say, “Our Scriptures tell

¹ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 98-111.

² Lk 12:49-53 and Mt. 10:21-39 are examples of violence in the Synoptic tradition.

³ Jn 2:15-16

⁴ Lk 11:37-42

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989) 35.

⁶ Mt. 26:47-56, Mk 14:46-50, Lk 22:49-53, Jn 19:10-11

⁷ Rom 12:19. Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002) 245.

us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good."

Another puzzling reference is Romans 13, which states that every person needs to be subject to the governing authorities. It further states that all governments are under God. Borg and Crossan⁸ analyze this passage by recognizing three responses. (1) It could be taken as a general, unqualified principle. In so doing, it would be one of the most imprudent passages in all of Paul's letters. (2) Written, as it was in the mid -50s after the death of Claudius and the ascendancy of the teenaged Nero, it had to do with taxes and revenues and to avoid martyrdom for wrong or inadequate reasons. (3) Borg and Crossan feel that the admonition to obey the authorities has to be taken to mean one should not resist violently as becomes clear when one understands the Greek meaning of the word for "resistance". Nevertheless, if the government orders one to engage in warfare or other violent pursuits, the Christian is beholden to follow the example of Jesus and suffer the consequences rather than cave in to the demands of his government.

The book of Revelation, was written by John of Patmos, a pastor and poet, fond of metaphor, symbol and fantastic image and illusion. Elaine Pagels⁹ notes that Revelation was written during wartime, about the year 90, some 60 years after the death of Jesus and not far from the time of the eruption of Vesuvius in the year 79. Revelation was written in the course of a vision. She conjectures that the eruption might have prompted images of bright red beasts with seven heads and dragons, monsters and other such creatures. Pagels says John was convinced that the destruction of Jerusalem had been foretold. The subject matter and imagery used in Revelation precludes its use as source of words to live by.

One might look the choice of scriptures I use to support my position on nonviolence and say that I "pick and choose" to establish my position. My reply is, "I certainly do." The Bible is not a free flowing presentation of Christian concepts and values from beginning to end, with the possible exception of the four Gospels.¹⁰ It is well to remember that the Hebrew Bible was written as the Near East moved from an oral to written culture. Karel van der Toorn¹¹ has made the case that the Hebrew Bible is the product of the scribal culture of ancient Israel and Judaism. Typically, scribes wrote without a break between words and sentences, without punctuation or paragraphs. They certainly were not historians in any sense. Consequently, the Bible is not reliable history! Nor was it ever intended to be such.¹² So yes, I pick and choose to find the passages where the voice and values of Jesus are expressed. In answer to the question of a scribe, Jesus said, "The Lord our God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."¹³ This is the ultimate commandment for Jesus, we can do no better.

⁸ Marcus J Borg. and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009) 116-118.

⁹ Elaine H. Pagels. *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics*. (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

¹⁰ Burton L. Mack. *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 237-243.

¹¹ Karl van der Toorn. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹² See Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).

¹³ Mk 12:29-31

Reflections on the Work of John Dominic Crossan

Early in his book *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*, Crossan¹⁴ coins the terms and makes the distinction between *distributive justice* and *retributive justice*. Crossan claims that these two terms didn't come from any imagined or abstract theory of civil rights or related rights, but concept originated with the reality of peasant household rights. He goes on to say that in such a household, each person had their individual duties and responsibilities. In such a proper home one might find a degree of poverty, but never inequality with some children bloated while others were starving. Such a proper home is a metaphor for a well-run World at large and is an example of distributive justice--God's justice.

Distributive justice is exemplified by the custom of Year of Jubilee. Every fiftieth year all rural property that had been sold of necessity was returned to its ancestral owners. Distributive justice is further illustrated by Archbishop Oscar Romaro, who said, in effect, that if we had more (distributive) justice in the world, we would need less charity. That is to say, if more people had their just entitlements, we would need fewer relief agencies. Crossan points out that the Garden of Eden was initially an example of distributive justice, but before long degraded to disobedience, exile, murder and unequal distribution to the extent that the Bible tells how God flooded the earth with the intent of starting over.

One other example of retributive justice might be a Christian owning a slave. The inequality here is egregious and according to Paul, not permissible. In the chapter on prayer, Crossan¹⁵ suggests that if one imagines God as a person, prayer takes on the imagery of speaking with an earthly friend. I quite agree and none other than Marcus Borg¹⁶ claims to actually use that imagery in his daily devotions.

Crossan¹⁷ asks if we are Christ-ians or Bible-ians and answers in favor of the former. That observation is again reminiscent of Marcus J. Borg¹⁸, who said, "Jesus is more central than the Bible, Jesus trumps the Bible; when they disagree, Jesus wins." Crossan agrees, stating that our very name, "Christian" asserts the ascendancy of Christ over the Bible. I am in full agreement with both scholars.

I find Crossan¹⁹ very helpful and supportive when he emphasizes that it was not just the tree of knowledge, but the tree of the knowledge *of good and evil*, from which Adam and Eve ate. Crossan identifies this as the *tree of conscience*. We, humans are alone in having not just instinct to control us but also conscience to guide us.

Crossan²⁰ mentions a period between 4 BCE and CE 66 when there were seventy years of large-scale, organized, nonviolent protests! People of that period were exercising nonviolence, and yet today, virtually 2000 years later we continue to struggle! Either Crossan forgot or chose not to mention that although humanity's struggle is still largely

¹⁴ John Dominic Crossan. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2015) 17-18.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 114

¹⁶ Marcus, J. Borg. *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989) 71-72.

¹⁷ Crossan. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*. 35.

¹⁸ Marcus, J. Borg. *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989) 81.

¹⁹ Crossan. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 155

violent, we have the examples of M. Gandhi and M. L. King, and others who have demonstrated the power of nonviolence on both international as well as cultural stages. In no instance did bloodshed begin to approach that which it surely would have had any of those leaders chosen violence as a means of resolving their conflict. God grant that we in the twenty-first century will not become discouraged, but build on those positive examples and develop nonviolent attitudes and methods that will be universally successful. Crossan is not encouraging, but I feel as Christians we must, with God's help, continue the effort.

I have been acquainted for some time with Archbishop Desmond Tutu's quote of St. Augustine: "God without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot."²¹ I had not fully understood this clever sounding aphorism, but I believe now that if the Prayer we so glibly pray, asking, "Thy will be done; Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven," goes unanswered, guess who will have been responsible?

If the reader was looking for an objective assessment of Dr. Crossan's book, I fear they will not find it here. I admit to being highly prejudiced in favor of pacifism, because I try to follow the example of Jesus and am convinced in my own mind that Jesus' nature was the very embodiment of God, who is the definition of love.

I agree with Crossan that the God of the Hebrew Bible *appears* to be violent, while the God of the Christian Bible seems to be one of love and mercy. The violence of the Hebrew Bible represents, in my view, a gross misunderstanding by those early people, who in their search for God (even while God was searching for them) often erred in attributing certain violent actions to God. This God was often a reflection of the emperors the Israelites so faithfully resisted. Theology cannot blame the victim of imperial violence here. The task of many of the later scribes was to revise and redact this material out of the text. It was also accomplished with counter-narratives. Yes, Ezra and Nehemiah prohibit marriage to foreigners, but then we have two late post-Exilic texts, Ruth and Esther, which celebrate just that!

Crossan has written a book, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation* that is not an easy read, but required demanding study on my part! He likely intended this book for interested laity, but wrote it with theological words, phrases and concepts that challenge the rank and file reader. Nevertheless, for his work and the work he required from me, I am grateful.

Bibliography

Borg, Marcus J. *The Heart of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989.

Borg, Marcus J. and John Dominic Crossan. *The First Paul*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009.

Crossan, John Dominic. *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989.

Friedman, Richard Elliot. *Who Wrote the Bible?* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997.

²¹ Ibid. p. 165-166

- Mack, Burton L. *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993
- Pagels, Elaine H. *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.
- Toorn, Karl van der Toorn. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Wink, Walter. *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.