Christianity: An Instrument of Peace?

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I was raised in a Presbyterian church and went through all of the steps that churches provide for young people in order for them to become members. At the age of twelve, I, like all of my youthful peers in that church, became a member. Ridiculous. I most certainly did not know what I was doing. Confessing a faith is an important decision, not one that a twelve-year-old ought to be making.

Although I am no longer a Christian, having dropped my membership at the age of nineteen or twenty, I have spent considerable time thinking about Christianity, and I continue asking questions that I think are important: Is it possible to be a Christian if I can’t believe the stories that reveal it? If I can’t be sure that God even exists? Do the positives that come from being part of a Christian community outweigh the horrors that Christianity has imposed on the world throughout history? How historical are the accounts given in the four Gospels that Christians accept as the canon? How is that history determined? And how is it evaluated? Was Jesus the wisest and best of men? More so than the Buddha? More so than Gandhi? John Dominic Crossan, an historian of Christianity and a former Catholic priest, deals with many of these questions and more in his brief book, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. He, along with others, particularly Bertrand Russell, has helped me clarify my thinking on these important issues.

Let’s think first beyond Christianity itself to the existence of God, which is, in my mind, the ultimate question. If you don’t believe in God, you can hardly believe that Jesus was the Christ and divine, the Son of God. And yet, I, and all Americans who have experienced public education, am a product of the Enlightenment, and the foundation of the Enlightenment is the understanding that reason is necessary for learning and for discovering truth. And reason demands evidence. All of the scientific benefits that have come to man are derived from this principle, often as a result of defying church dictum, as with both Copernicus and Galileo. Evidence is always necessary before a particular principle can be accepted, and even then the established paradigm is subject to change when a better answer comes along, as with Einstein. A problem with Christianity for people socialized into Enlightenment values is that there is no way you can prove the existence of God with reason. Belief is in the positive mode; you are either all in or you can’t say you believe. And if you don’t actively believe, you should at least admit it to yourself, which is what I have done.

Bertrand Russell’s essay, Why I Am Not a Christian, speaks directly to this issue. He addresses five common arguments for the existence of God and challenges each of them. The five include First Cause arguments, Natural Law arguments, arguments for Design, Moral arguments for a Deity, and a tangential argument that God is necessary to bring justice into the world. At least since the scientific revolution of the 16th century, Christians have, as a result of the inability to prove the existence of God with reason, had to split their lives into two parts: those segments of their lives that depend on belief and

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1 In this essay, I let “faith” carry the typical definitions it is associated with, including faith in a deity and the doctrines of a particular religion or doctrine.

those that depend on reason. This duality has caused lots of problems and led to several political and spiritual disasters. There are, of course, those Christians who reject reason altogether and rely only on their faith, but they are a small minority in the modern world.

Much of what we think we know about Christianity comes from our understanding of history, but history is written by the victors, and historians who record the victories seldom write an objective account, in spite of the fact that they almost always claim to be doing so. In short, history is always biased and never completely objective. Why, for example, is Christopher Columbus considered a hero, the discoverer of America, when he didn’t discover America? There were already people living there in stable communities, and he led the genocide against them in his Christian expedition for God, glory, and gold – mostly for gold, in the name of God. Why honor any of the conquistadors in our histories when they destroyed thriving communities? And doesn’t the same problem exist throughout Christianity’s history? Haven’t political powers used Christianity as a rationale for imposing their authority on a wide variety of cultures? And why is it that the faithful long for a “reason to be” even if it comes at a cost?

In a recent New Yorker article, Philip Roth mentions the mytho-historical conception of America that he grew up believing. This is the idea that the history he learned was only partly history; it was also largely myth, and that American history (like all history) was built largely around stories intended to elevate it morally. Wouldn’t that same mytho-historical concept apply to our understanding of Christianity? How do we know the reality of Jesus’s life when we have conflicting accounts in the gospels, and when the gospel writers wrote years after his death, not to mention the different biases of the period’s historians? We should also note that Tradition was inherited and pruned, but rarely questioned. The gospels are products of ingenuity and careful intentional editing of Tradition. John Crossan’s historical analysis attempts to get at the reality of that life of Jesus behind the gospels. His historical method requires at least three attestations of the same event, story, or saying in order to consider it historical, and he then uses three independent vectors that he triangulates in order to come as close to historical reality as possible. The vectors that he uses are cross-cultural anthropology, genuine historical accounts, particularly those accounts found in Roman and Jewish histories, and literary stories, often taken from the gospels themselves. This approach has helped me gain a much better understanding of the history that may have been Jesus’s life. The result of Crossan’s historical investigation is described as follows: “The details of our gospels are… prophecy historicized, not history prophesied.” Much like the American history that Philip Roth was speaking about, Christian history was constructed largely around myths and as a founding myth. Crossan gets as close to the history as he can, and he puts prophecy in its proper place, as both a part of the history and yet outside of history. Prophecies are often not historically native to the time they refer to, but penned long after.

My own particular confusion about Christianity started with the miracles Jesus allegedly performed. Are the miracles mythical or are they literal history? My church

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taught me that those miracles happened in exactly the way the gospels report them, and I wondered how that could be, and then later, did they actually happen? Did Jesus actually heal the sick? Did he raise the dead back to life? Did he walk on water? Did he give his famous Sermon on the Mount? Were these stories false memories? Pious creations? Or, were those stories simply created to make a point? If so, what was that point? And most significantly, was he really taken from the cross, placed in a tomb, and resurrected from the dead? John Crossan deals with each of these questions, but I want to think about only the last one in this paper. What is the history of the death and resurrection of Jesus? How much can we trust the gospels to be a literal, historical account? The answer is not much if John Crossan is to be believed, and he is relying on actual evidence discovered by anthropologists and reported within an historical context. He sees the trial and execution of Jesus as an ordinary everyday event in the Roman Empire, and the archeological and historical evidence suggests that Jesus was treated no different from any other alleged criminal.

Such every day, almost mundane, atrocities occur with alarming regularity in today’s world. The daily bombing of Yemen, separation of parents and children by ICE, mass incarceration, and the 65.3 million refugees displaced worldwide due to war (to name but a few), all gain much more meaning and urgency once we reframe the crucifixion as what it truly was: state terrorism. Crossan writes that crucifixion in Rome was clearly a form of state terrorism: “I want to emphasize that Roman crucifixion was state terrorism; that its function was to deter resistance or revolt, especially among the lower classes; and that the body was usually left on the cross to be consumed eventually by the wild beasts.” Martin Hengel, writing in Crucifixion, similarly states that crucifixion “was and is a political and military punishment,” and that the Romans used it primarily against the lower classes, as they had an extremely rigid class system that treated accused people from different social classes differently. Crucifixion was the method used against “the unruly elements in rebellious provinces, not least in Judea,” writes Hengel, and Jesus was clearly an “unruly element.” The purpose behind this horrible punishment that left the body out in the open for birds to devour was humiliation. Rebellious upper-class people, on the other hand, normally received a less humiliating execution. Upper class status then, as now, clearly had its advantages.

But what about Jesus? Were things different for him? Was his corpse the exception to the rule? Was it entombed so that he could be resurrected, according to an ancient prophecy? It’s unlikely. We know that Jesus ministry was primarily a ministry among rural people. Crossan suggests that he probably made it into the cities only once or twice. We also know that Jesus did not come from an upper-class family. He was among the poor ministering to the poor, and in class-conscious Rome that meant that he would have been looked at warily from the beginning of his ministry. And the record in Mark (copied by Matthew and Luke, but unknown to Paul) claims that the judges of the Sanhedrin had asked Pontius Pilate to handle the “Jesus situation.” If this can be trusted, they were trying to solidify their own power and get rid of a person who appeared to threaten their authority. If Mark is right, Rome’s concern was not a religious concern. Jesus was

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6 John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, 143.
8 Martin Hengel. Crucifixion, 22.
considered a political rebel, and as he gained influence he became more of a threat to both the Jewish aristocracy and the Roman leadership in Judea. This collaboration between the Roman and Jewish aristocracy is easy for the modern reader to understand, as all oppressive governments to this day depend on the collaboration of at least a significant part of the oppressed population. As Gene Sharp, author of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* writes, “If political power is not intrinsic to the power-holder, it follows that it must have outside sources.” Since Roman power in Judea was clearly not intrinsic, in order to govern it needed consent from the population in one form or another. And the Jewish aristocracy had its status to protect. The decision that protected that status and the power that went with it was to turn Jesus over to Rome.

Ultimately, of course, the conviction and execution of Jesus depended on Rome, not on the Jewish aristocracy. In the Markan story Pilate was an almost unwilling participant. He seemed to sympathize with Jesus in the Johannine version. All four gospels state that he tried to wash his hands of this crucifixion. He wanted to show that he was not responsible. On its face, this story lacks credibility. Pilate’s sympathy would not have been a very politically astute move, and he was, if nothing else, politically astute. Nobody became a Roman prefect without being a pretty smart politician. Again, it should be noted the Apostle Paul never mentions this situation when he proclaims “Christ crucified.”

But what do we know about Pilate from the evidence? Was he an exception to the norm for Roman politicians? Hardly. We know that he ruled in Judea for around ten years, an exceptionally long time for a prefect to rule. We also know that even by ancient standards he was known as a brutal leader. Crossan tells the story of a sit-down strike held by ordinary people in Jerusalem, the purpose of which was to get Pilate to remove some offensive medallions. (Does this sound similar to the current secular issue over removing confederate statues and other oppressive symbols in today’s United States?) Pilate’s response was to threaten these peaceful protestors with immediate death unless they quit their strike. Crossan writes, “Pilate . . . was an ordinary second-rank Roman governor with no regard for Jewish religious sensitivities and with brute force as his normal solution to even unarmed protesting of resisting crowds.”

Hardly the meek Pilate we see in the gospels. Crossan claims that the resurrection story is largely myth, not history, and yet it is the foundation story for Christians all over the world. It is also important to acknowledge proto-Christian efforts to move the blame from the Romans to the Judeans (unfortunately rendered “Jews” in most translations). The author of the Gospel of Mark was likely the first to make a connection between Jesus’ death and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. The Apostle Paul knew nothing of such a connection, nor did the Q Gospel tradents. Like Josephus, the author of the Gospel of Mark blamed the destruction of the Temple on the wrong Judean leaders – both of which termed them “bandits.” We should read this *rhetorically*, not *historically*.

The claim that Jesus was placed in a tomb after his death likely ignores the historical context and stretches the imagination. Crossan writes that when lower class criminals were crucified, they were usually left on the cross for the birds and wild beasts to devour.

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10 1 Cor. 1:23, NRSV
11 Crossan, ibid, 64
Why? Because this ultimate humiliation was perceived as a deterrent to crime, a warning. Martin Hengel writes that

In this way his humiliation was made complete. What it means for man in antiquity to be refused burial, and the dishonor which went with it, can hardly be appreciated by modern man. Further, crucified people who were taken down off the cross and buried were placed in shallow graves by soldiers who most probably just wanted to get the job done. It is, after all, an extremely nasty job. Shallow graves made the graves susceptible to dogs and other feral animals, once again both a bodily and a spiritual humiliation.  

So, did Jesus escape the fate of other political criminals? It stretches the imagination to believe he did, but if he did not, his fate was most likely the same as other lower class crucified people; and if his body was left to either the birds or the dogs, why was I taught he was taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb? Once a person knows the historical context for the execution and burial of Jesus, the more romanticized story becomes difficult to accept. It is also important to note that the Q tradition refers to Jesus’ death as a pattern to be followed, not as some salvific event. If anything, like the Pre-Pauline tradition in Philippians 2:6-11, we have an assumption and exaltation “Christology” in Q because Jesus is cast in the role of a coming/returning Son of Man from Daniel 7.

Even if the first part of the death and resurrection story is clearly fictional, what about the second part. Did Jesus actually rise from the dead? Was the Christian story of resurrection a fiction, a metaphor, or an historical reality? I was taught that it happened, that it was real event that could be witnessed by those physically present, and that it was central to the faith. Even as a child I was skeptical of this story, but many Christians, perhaps most, especially those connected to the Catholic and the evangelical branches of Protestantism believe in the resurrection as an absolute historical truth. As Crossan says, it is prophecy historicized. Many take for granted that Christianity grew after the death of Jesus, even as a result of his death, and particularly because of the story of his resurrection. (However, there are those that challenge this “originary event” and see rather different streams of social and mythical experimentation – which is why, for example, Q and the Gospel of Thomas only mention Jesus’ death as a paradigm for others experiencing persecution.) Crossan understands that the resurrection story can be true, but not literally so. It is metaphor, not history.

Two early scribes writing on Jesus’s death were Josephus and the Roman writer Tacitus. Crossan writes, “They do not speak of resurrection but of unbroken and abiding presence.” There is a big difference between presence and resurrection, so if the first writers were using the term “presence,” how did that term’s meaning change and become resurrection? The answer, according to Crossan, is found in the writings of Paul, and Crossan states that it was an entirely political move on his part. Paul stated, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose on the third

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12 Hengel, ibid, 16.
14 The work of Burton L. Mack is especially instructive here.
15 Ibid, 18.
day in accordance with the scriptures...” And again, “how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised... and your faith has been in vain.” There we have it: the first proclamation of a resurrection. Yes, indeed, resurrection is a long way from the “presence” of Jesus suggested by Josephus and Tacitus. Burton Mack’s work on the “Christ Cult” in his A Myth of Innocence claims that the pre-Pauline tradition likely imagined Jesus as a martyr dying for and true to his teachings, for the Kingdom of God, which was the locus around which these different Christ groups had formed. Mack claims that it was Paul who substituted “for our sins” in place of “for the Kingdom.”

I wonder what Paul was really like. He was clearly a convert, pejorative of all things Christian, and then suddenly he experienced a vision, and he became evangelical in his promotion of what emerged later as Christianity. Today, he would probably be a successful televangelist; hopefully a sincere one, and not one of those who have ended up in jail. After all, he claimed that Christ’s divinity came to him from a vision. Why would anybody believe him? Visions are real for some people, though, and I have no trouble accepting that. Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux is a perfect example. His hoop vision foresaw the destruction of his people, and it was prophetic. The Sioux were destroyed in almost exactly the way Black Elk foresaw. But when a person who has been badmouthing something turns on a dime and becomes its leading advocate, I’m skeptical. Perhaps it is better to follow much of critical scholarship and reject the Acts of the Apostles portrayal of Paul. Paul in Galatians 1-2 describes years of working out his mission to the Gentiles. Perhaps this was a developing revelation, not a moment on the road to Damascus. Indeed, Paul makes this clear in:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

It is unfortunate that so many translations miss the Greek here for theological reasons and for alignment with the Acts narrative. Verse 16 should read: “Reveal his son in me [or by means of me.]” Yes, Paul had some experience(s) of this Christ, but the main use was his being the means of Christ’s revelation to the Gentile world in accordance with the blessing to Abraham. His claim to see visions might also be rhetorical rather than historical. He uses the claim of having “seen the Lord” to argue that he isn’t a client of the patrons (the “Pillars”) in Jerusalem. As in many things with Paul, perhaps it is best to listen to him in his letters rather than the metanarrative presented in Luke-Acts and Eusebius.

What did Paul have to gain personally through his conversion to a relatively minor social movement that hardly threatened the Roman Empire? I don’t doubt his belief. I’m even willing to grant the reality of his vision. But it is also clear that he used that vision politically to gain authority within a movement that would become politically significant.
largely as a result of his efforts. Crossan shows how and why Paul needed to be considered an apostle of Jesus in spite of the fact that he was not one of the Twelve Apostles, a number that needed to remain twelve in order to be consistent with the Twelve Patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible, and in order for Jesus life to fulfill the ancient prophecy. Since Paul was a Jew, he needed authority in order to spread the word to the gentile world. To gain that authority, he had to be an apostle, and by spreading the word to gentiles, he becomes, some say, the actual founder of Christianity – at least in Luke’s metanarrative. Paul writes, “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain . . . Whether it was they or I, so we proclaim, and so you have come to believe.”

So, Paul becomes an apostle by declaring himself one. And “so you have come to believe.” Isn’t that story exactly the story of all charismatic leaders?

Would we remember Paul if he had not declared himself an apostle, if he had not become the authoritative spokesman for a new social movement? I doubt it. And would we remember Jesus if Paul had been lost to history? Again, I doubt it. Peter Berger, the great sociologist of religion, wrote that great charismatic leaders like both Jesus and Paul come along once in a great while, but they are followed by lesser men, administrators who form organizations, like churches, which preach the messages of the charismatic leader, but over time the messages are diminished; not lost, but significantly reduced. And yet, perhaps Jesus was a marginal character elaborated by later communities to make sense of the changes in Roman Palestine in the first century. Take, for example, the message of commensality taught and lived by Jesus. Crossan tells the story of Jesus inviting important people to dinner and getting made-up excuses as to why the invited guests could not come, so he tells his helper to go out and invite the first people he sees to come to dinner, regardless of social class. It’s an important story, and it separates Jesus from so-called Christians that would come later.

The idea is that everybody is welcome at Jesus’s table, not just including, but especially including, lower class people, the rejects in Rome’s rigidly defined class society. Commensality reflects the Greek stories where the moral is that you must welcome the stranger because she may be a god. It seems like a foundational idea to me, but I don’t see many (perhaps most) Christians welcoming strangers into their homes. Instead, I see books telling children not to talk to strangers. I don’t see many rich Christians willing to sacrifice some of their wealth to help out people in need. Instead, in the United States, conservative Evangelical Christians often argue for lower taxes for the rich. There may be food banks in towns, cities, and church basements, but that’s a poor substitute for Jesus’s notion of commensality. That’s not to say that the idea of commensality is completely gone. Some institutions do make it a part of their mission, as with the sanctuary movements that are currently taking place in some cities and churches. And many Christian churches have social programs that try to help the poor or the disabled within their particular communities. But it is to say that Jesus’s message of commensality is not taken literally; it is not pragmatic, but if any message should be taken literally, that is the one because it contains the possibility of universal application.

We see poor, homeless people, strangers to us all, yet we do not invite them into our homes. Welcome the stranger. Feed the poor. Don’t worry about how much you have.

21 1 Cor. 15:9,11. NRSV
Think instead of how little others have. Impractical? Of course. But think how different the world would be if the money spent building those beautiful cathedrals and churches went to actually making the idea of commensality a priority. This too is the message of Jesus in the Q tradition.

When I weigh the good that Christianity has done against the bad behavior that it has both condoned and exhibited, I unfortunately find that the bad outweighs the good at the institutional level. Take the 11th century crusades as an example. This two hundred year set of wars was first rationalized as an attempt to take back the holy land from the infidel Muslims. After taking Jerusalem during the first crusade, the “Christians” slaughtered all of its non-Christian residents. Rape, pillage and murder were common during the wars of this period, but the massacre in Jerusalem exceeded even the violence expected during that time, all in the name of the Christian God. Or take the Inquisition as another example. The inquisitors put people on the rack, they water boarded the accused, and they starved people, all to get accused heretics to confess to violations of church dogma. And then, since the church was not allowed to execute people, they turned those who would not confess over to the government for execution, which included burning at the stake and drawing and quartering people before they were hanged, once again all in the name of the Christian God.

America has not escaped this institutional religious violence. The Puritans in 17th century Massachusetts hanged four Quaker women, most famously Mary Dyer, for violating the law banning Quakers from the colony. Christian tolerance? Hardly. This violence took place in a Puritan colony, the very colony that was, according to the Puritan leader John Winthrop, supposed to be a “City on a Hill” and represent all that was good about America and Christianity. What an incredible irony that statement turned out to be. Later, in the 19th century, Andrew Jackson initiated a genocide against the American tribes from the southeastern United States, and he did so in the name of God, claiming that God would not want people who refused to develop the land to “own” it. Even today, violence in the name of Christianity continues to exist. Almost immediately after 9/11 and the beginning of the second Iraq war, George W. Bush claimed, “God is on our Side,” which made his gruesome, unsavory war sound like it had the support of his Christian God. What we see in all of these examples is Jesus’s attitude toward violence rejected and replaced by institutional violence used for political purposes, primarily for power itself. Admittedly, these historical examples do not reflect on all Christians, but it is hard to support an institution with this kind of track record.

Not only has institutional Christianity been prone to accept and participate in the violence of the world, but it has also been unkind to free thinking, and freedom of thought is essential to the exercise of reason. Witness the problems that both Copernicus and Galileo experienced because of their scientific revelations. Both men were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church for heresy, and Galileo was placed under house arrest once he went public with his scientific “proof” that Copernicus’s was right; the earth was not the center of the universe; it did revolve around the sun. That kind of rigid dogma was not just medieval and not just an indictment of the Catholic Church. In colonial America, Anne Hutchinson was banished from her community because her strong religious beliefs differed from the church leaders. She was an advocate of the Free Grace (or Antinomian) movement that, if accepted, would clearly infringe on the power and authority of the Puritan leaders. Even today, many churches stick to doctrine that is
old and outdated, but remains church dogma. Some Christian churches still reject allowing women to hold key positions in the hierarchy, while others (sometimes the same ones) refuse to update their position on homosexuality, even though the Doctrine of Commensality (if we may call it a doctrine) would require treating everyone the same, especially those who are considered outcasts by their societies.

None of this is an indictment of individual Christians. There have been outstanding examples of Christian free thinkers who have added their knowledge and wisdom to the world. But free thinking is seldom an institutional requirement, especially religious free thinking. There is a pastor in my community who is clearly a free thinker, far more interested in the questions he asks and the stories he probes than in what his more ideologically oriented national church leaders preach, and consequently he is often in trouble with those very same church leaders. His thinking is rooted in his understanding of Jesus’s life and work, but it is not the result of an institutional imperative. I admire people like that, people who live their beliefs, people who are not interested in wealth and power. But rather, people who work to end both the direct violence of war and the structural violence that keeps people oppressed and in situations that religious institutions often seem willing to accept. Two well-known examples of people living their faith in this way are Mother Teresa and Jimmy Carter, two leaders who come from very diverse worlds but understand their faith in the same way. Mother Teresa’s church was ready for her to retire. Her work was done, and she was essentially headed out to pasture.

Fortunately, she chose instead to work with the poor in Calcutta. Jimmy Carter was a lifelong member of a Southern Baptist Church, but he quit that church because of that church’s negative position on the equality of women. The lives of these two people are excellent examples of living the message, of understanding the need to help “the least of these.” But they did it in spite of their respective institutions, not because of them, and they are the exception, not the rule.

Bertrand Russell points out in his essay Why I Am Not a Christian that Jesus was a wise man, but some of the important things he said—like turn the other cheek—had been said long before by religious thinkers like Lao-Tse and the Buddha. He also suggests that turning the other cheek is not always the wise thing to do. I wonder whether the international struggle against ISIS might be a time when turning the other cheek would be a bad idea. Of course, turning the other cheek also had different implications in the earliest Q form. It meant one should not be disrespected by the wealthy: the forehead represents a similar honor/class status, whereas the back of the hand was reserved for the shamed and humiliated classes. At any rate, there is no doubt that Jesus was a wise man who brought a powerful message to all men and women. He understood that the way both Rome and the Jewish leaders in Judea ordered the world was fundamentally unfair, and he did his best to suggest a better way. But that wisdom does not make him divine, unless we say that the spark of divinity that he embodied is no different than the spark that is in each of us, if only we would choose to use it. Was he a greater man than Gandhi? Both of them promoted peace, but Jesus did it with parables to small groups while Gandhi developed the first real strategy for nonviolent direct action. Was he a greater man than Martin Luther King, Jr.? King implemented Gandhi’s nonviolent strategy and helped foster major changes in legal racism within in the U.S. Gandhi’s work led to independence for India, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s work changed the United States forever. I see Jesus as less effective in the short run, but perhaps more effective in the
long run; but then, who knows what the future holds for the work of the other two. After all, it took 300 years before Christianity could even function legally in the Roman Empire.

An essay pamphlet entitled *Terrorism: Theirs and Ours*, written by Eqbal Ahmad, documents five types of terrorism that have existed in the world: state terrorism, religious terrorism, criminal terrorism, pathological terrorism, and the political terror of private groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda. The political terror that Americans focus on is the terror brought by ISIS and AL Qaeda or groups like them, but that type has caused the least deaths of all five types. Religious terrorism, on the other hand, has caused more deaths than any other type except for state terrorism, and much of the religious violence can be directly connected to the Christian leadership in a time frame ranging from the Crusades (and actually quite a bit of time before) all the way up to the second war in Iraq. Institutions either forget or ignore the fact that Jesus’s message was a message of peace and justice. John Crossan said that Rome created peace through victory, but Jesus proclaimed peace through justice. Rome was a great empire. The United States is also a great empire. Both think of establishing a negative peace, defined as the mere absence of violence, not as a positive peace that emphasizes social justice. Sadly, many Christian churches in America too often ignore Jesus’s message of peace and align themselves with the empire.

Many Americans don’t go to church thinking about the violence their religion has perpetrated over the years, but perhaps they should. If they are going to identify with Christianity, or with any ideology, they should know something about its history, about how to separate the myths that distinguish oral memory from demonstrable history, history demonstrated through archeological and primary historical sources. They should also know how to distinguish metaphorical meaning from literal meaning, because if they are going to accept the New Testament stories, they need to be able to grasp metaphor. Otherwise, they will be lost in a fantasy world. And most of all, they should constantly be asking questions, challenging both their own beliefs and the quality of the information they are using. In the end, they may end up wondering, as I do, how Jesus’s message of peace and social justice ended up perpetrating so much violence. Until Christians understand that, nothing will change. It is our task to remind them of their calling.

**Bibliography**


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