

An Interview with John Dominic Crossan “Paul & Empire”

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JPS: In order to frame our discussion of your new book *In Search of Paul*,¹ co-authored with Jonathan L. Reed, I'd like to begin by asking a few general questions about the nature of your research as a whole. Traditionally, Christian thought has been shaped by a tension between Athens and Jerusalem or philosophy and scripture. While there are a number of different ways in which this tension may be interpreted, one possible reading of this tension is as the difference between reason and authority or science and revelation. Has this tension shaped your work as well? And if so, in what ways?

JDC: The immediate answer is yes, without a doubt. Because, as I understand Christianity, to speak to that for the moment, it is always a dialectic—that is the precise term, rather than tension—a dialectic between faith and history or any other way you'd like to formulate it. And by a dialectic I mean two items or phenomena that can be distinguished but not separated. The two sides of a coin would be an analogy. Heads or tails, left or right, top or bottom—you can distinguish them but you cannot separate them. So for me there is always a tension between reason and revelation, science and religion, faith and history, a tension that within Christianity has always been there. And actually, without in any way imposing Christianity on anyone else, this has broader application. I don't see how there could possibly be any kind of thought that was totally reason because that would be an act of faith itself. I do not understand how

you could have a vision of life that was totally scientific since that would involve an act of faith that you could get a vision that is totally scientific. So I do not for a moment think that the concept of faith has to be Christian, not at all. But I *do* think that you cannot get along in life without what we call by various names reason and revelation, and certainly, like my model of the coin or any dialectic, it's extremely hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. It may be clear on the extremes that one thing is an act of faith and another is an act of historical judgment, but in the middle I do not think that we can distinguish them whether we like it or not.

JPS: If we're talking about a dialectic between scripture and philosophy or faith and history, are you aligning history with philosophy and faith with scripture?

JDC: Well, I presume so, but that is up to philosophy to define for itself. Within scripture there is no talk of philosophy. Scripture talks only about wisdom. This word is about as close as we can get to what the Greeks might call philosophy. The Bible would call it wisdom. And biblical authors think that wisdom is a gift of God to everyone. But the Bible is also quite clear that its wisdom is superior because it is revelation. But in general it assumed that wisdom is something that everyone can have, a gift of God to everyone. It's not secular, not in our sense. It's not reason in our sense either, that would presume a distinction that the Bible does not make. The Bible presumes that both reason and revelation, to use those categories, are gifts from God.

JPS: Do you think that this Biblical conception of wisdom is still accessible to us today? Or do we find ourselves in an entirely different situation insofar as we experience a break between science and revelation?

JDC: Well, in one sense, yes; in another, no. Here's the problem. First of all, the Bible, the New Testament, they are all operating in a pre-enlightenment world. In a pre-enlightenment world it is taken for granted by everyone (except maybe some very erudite philosophers

who don't believe in it, but the general culture takes it for granted) that, for example, divine babies can be conceived, that gods can come to earth and have intercourse with mortals and that this intercourse can produce divine babies. They take it for granted. It's simply part of the baggage of their culture. Therefore in their culture, in a pre-enlightenment culture, to announce that your Jesus is a divine child is *not* going to get the general post-enlightenment reaction that this can't happen, couldn't happen, doesn't happen, we don't believe that stuff. It might get the reaction that we don't believe your claim, but they cannot and would not argue that it *could* not happen. What they would like to know is: what has your baby done for anyone? If your Jesus is divine, what has he done for the world? That is a pre-enlightenment question. The post-enlightenment argument that it can't happen is never used in the first century. The most you'll ever get is that we don't believe your claim. So in a pre-enlightenment world, whether we live in a post-enlightenment world or not, we have to respect that. For example, if Paul goes around the Mediterranean saying that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, the immediate answer from a polite, pious pagan is not that we don't believe in that stuff. The proper answer is: good for you, good for Jesus, but so what? We've heard these kinds of stories before, what's he done for us? That is a pre-enlightenment question.

Secondly, I find myself less and less convinced that we are living in post-enlightenment world. The more I see of current pop culture, at least in this culture, the more I am inclined to think that fantasy has entirely taken over and I don't think that *that* is post-enlightenment. I no longer know whether or not people coming out of *The Matrix* think, gee that was fun, what a fantastic story, or if they come out thinking that it's real. I can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality anymore even in our foreign policy. I no longer know what our president believes. I don't see the evidence that we're living in a post-enlightenment world. So, for me, the contemporary debates between science and philosophy get lost in a mess of fantasy. I recall a line from William Butler Yeats that when you grow up on fantasy, you grow old in brutality. Fantasy is fine as a vacation, but

when it becomes the bulk of our daily diet I fear that we no longer know the difference between fantasy and reality—and that breeds brutality.

JPS: This line of thought brings me directly to my next question. In a paper that you delivered in September 1997 at Villanova University you express concern about what you call the “long slow victory of Gnostic [Christianity] over Catholic Christianity.”² Could you address the nature of your reservations about the contemporary dominance of “Gnostic” readings of scripture? And do these concerns connect with the reservations you just expressed about fantasy?

JDC: Yes, absolutely. Let me put it in a larger framework. One thing that I noticed in researching for this book is that way back in the beginning of the last century, 1907, two different scholars, a British scholar named William Mitchell Ramsay and a German scholar named Gustav Adolph Deissmann, got on a train and a boat and a horse and went around the Pauline sites and saw the inscriptions that say that Caesar Augustus was divine, was the son of god, was god, was lord, was redeemer, was savior of the world. They saw all that and they said, as it were: Oh, my God! That is what it's all about! They saw that when Jesus was called by those same titles it was not simply the result of picking up the cultural debris of his contemporary world. It was saying, in effect: these are the titles of Caesar, but we refuse them to Caesar and assign them instead to Jesus. They were not simply applying to Jesus ordinary words in everyday language. So in 1907 these scholars saw the implications. But instead of the twentieth century building a theology on this realization—which of course would have been one-hundred percent political *and* one-hundred percent religious, something capable of pointing to that deep basis where religion and politics coincide—we went off into existential demythologization and it was the last thing the twentieth century needed. We went into a kind of personalized, existentialized individualism when what we needed was the kind of powerful political/religious understanding of Christianity authentic to the first century. I'm

not even talking about an application of it. I'm just talking about seeing what was there, seeing why Jesus was crucified, seeing that the Romans got it right. That's part of what I see happening right now. On the one hand we have—though they are only straws in the wind at the moment, they are big straws in a big wind—a growing insistence on the political and religious implications of Christianity. I'm extremely excited. This is not just talking politics but talking about what Jesus called the kingdom of God, what Paul called the Lordship of Christ, which is simply a way of saying who is in charge of the world. And counterpointed with this I find a Gnosticism that coalesces magnificently with American individualism—inside not outside, religion not politics, spirituality not religion—everything that makes the whole thing Gnostic and safe.

The present enthusiasm for the Gospel of Thomas, which I also use as a historical document for early Christianity without any hesitation, is a good example of this. It's very often an enthusiastic acceptance by people who do not have the slightest interest in living its theology, an ascetic theology where the goal is to get back to the Garden of Eden—not working toward the future of eschatology, but working back to the Garden of Eden by means of a life of celibate asceticism. Quite frankly, if I preferred that theology, I would have stayed in the monastery. People get excited about the Gospel of Thomas simply because it is outside the canon. They think that because it doesn't belong to the canon that it must be better than anything inside the canon. I find that extremely silly. If they say: here's the theology of the Gospel of Thomas, I prefer it and therefore I'm going to live it, I can respect the integrity of that. But here they are with the Gospel of Thomas and they don't genuinely endorse its theology. It would be like me being enthusiastic about Marx while rejecting his view of liberation.

JPS: The opposite of this kind of “spiritualizing” Gnosticism appears to be literalism. Perhaps the pertinent question would amount to: what kind of literalism? The first alternative would be that of Christian fundamentalism in which everything in scripture is simply affirmed as literally, historically accurate. The second

alternative might be a kind of critical historicism that attempts to preserve the possibility, through a process of historical purification, of reading scripture literally. The result would be that the alternatives to Gnostic Christianity would be either a kind naïve literalism or a kind of critical literalism—but in either case a kind of literalism. Would you be willing to describe your work as a kind of critical literalism?

JDC: I would not. That puts my work into the bind of options that I simply don't accept. What I will ask very clearly is, when Christians in the first century said Jesus is Lord, what did they mean? What they meant was that Caesar was *not* lord. Now there is usually a way back to a literal referent, even in the most metaphorical statement. If in the middle of the last election I said that as far as I am concerned President Bush is an eagle, I think that most American's would understand that that should be taken metaphorically, that we weren't talking about talons and claws and beaks and feathers. But they would also take it for granted that it is an affirmative statement, that I like him, that I agree with his program and that that I'm probably going to vote for him. So there is a literal content: I am with his program. It might even mean that I'm going door to door campaigning for him. So metaphor is always a metaphor for something. If I were to say that President Bush is a vulture, that would be equally a metaphor, but you would probably presume that it's negative and that I'm against him. So I think that the question has to go beyond literalism and fundamentalism, or whatever the alternative is. I suppose that contextualism is the term I would use, where contextualism means that you read any text against, first of all, the genre in which it is written, and secondly against the world in which it was first said or written. So that when I see “Jesus is divine,” I read that immediately in the world of Roman imperial theology in which Caesar was divine. If you say Jesus is divine you're either saying that Caesar is divine and our guy is just one more divinity or you're saying that Jesus is truly divine and Caesar is not. You are making a claim for a person. So the description of critical literalism, I wouldn't find that helpful. I would put the problem this way: if you are

taking it literally, even in the sense of a fundamentalist literalism, so what? What does the phrase in question *mean*? What are its implications? Or if I take it contextually, what still has to be decided is: what does it mean for me? And maybe, maybe, you might be able to agree on meaning. Or at least we might be able to debate the right question.

JPS: So you would oppose a Gnosticizing influence not with a literalism but with a refusal of the dichotomy between the metaphorical and the literal?

JDC: Well, apart from the game of how the terms are defined I have no idea what they mean. Every metaphor has a literal content. It cannot be a metaphor for a metaphor for a metaphor. I think that my example is very clear: Bush is an eagle. That is a metaphor. Bush is vulture. That is a metaphor. They are opposing metaphors. We know that in our culture because in our culture an eagle is good and a vulture is bad. In another culture, of course, a vulture could be the one who cleans up the mess of the world. So what I want to know is, what does it mean behind a literal sense or a metaphorical sense. For that, I don't find the term critical literalism helpful.

JPS: I'd like, now, to explicitly turn our attention to your new book, *In Search of Paul*, and ask some more pointed questions about the ways in which these issues get played out in specific instances. First, the issue of resurrection. In the book you address on a number of occasions and at some length the importance to Paul of the notion of resurrection. You argue that Christianity's unique claim with respect to the nature of resurrection is that it is a process begun in *this* life and in *this* world, a process inaugurated by Jesus' own resurrection. You then describe resurrection for Paul as being "the normal human body transformed by the Spirit of God" and you refer to the necessity for him of accepting "the materiality of Christ's bodily resurrection."³ In your opinion, how literal is Christ's resurrection for Paul? Does Paul ultimately conceive of resurrection as a kind of transformative

resuscitation of the human body or is resuscitation too strong a word?

JDC: Alright, back to the first century and a pre-enlightenment world. First of all, the continuity from Jesus to Paul is that each of them, in different theological language, make their claims within the general constraints of a first century eschatological expectation of the great clean-up of the world—that's what eschatology means, it does not mean the end of the world, it means the eradication of injustice and violence and evil in this present world. It means, God's will be done on this earth. Both of them make the claim that this process has begun, not that it's merely imminent, not that it's simply coming. They claim in different theological language that it has begun and that human beings, as believers, are called to participate in it. Both of these are radically new claims. Paul does it in different language than Jesus. Jesus' language is: the kingdom of God has already begun. Paul's language is that the resurrection has already begun. In other words, Paul is thinking within Judaism where the first element in God's great clean-up, the first thing that has to be done is that those who have suffered injustice and died, especially the martyrs, must be raised in their bodies. Because they have suffered in their bodies, they must be publicly justified in their bodies before the world. That is the claim of Pharisaic resurrection and that's the background to Paul's claim that the resurrection has already begun. Now, I do not know (and neither does anyone else—and if they tell you they do, they're wrong) what percentage of people in the first century took that literally in our sense or metaphorically in our sense. But we have a pretty good idea what percentage took it programmatically. The illustration is this: if we collected all the coins in the first century that said that Caesar was the son of god, we do not have the faintest idea what percentage took it literally and what percentage took it metaphorically, but we have a pretty good idea what percentage took it programmatically—that is, Caesar is divine, get with the program, Caesar is running the world. By believing it they didn't think of it as an abstract debate over propositions, but as a program for life. So once again in our post-enlightenment world we cannot understand a

pre-enlightenment world by asking whether it is literal or metaphorical. We want to know, inquiring minds want to know, but the proper answer is that there is no way of knowing in our post-enlightenment world. Even today I don't have the faintest idea when people come out of a movie like *The Sixth Sense* what percentage take it literally, what percentage take it metaphorically. I don't know how you know that kind of stuff, how anyone knows, and I don't trust people who ask me. I know a lot of people came out of Gibson's movie thinking that they'd seen history, a documentary.

And so my original question is, once again, in that first century world where people could come out of tombs—and of course they could—and appear to people (though it may be a little surprising to say that their bodies came out of the tombs, it's very un-Platonic, but weird stuff happens), if Paul went around the Mediterranean saying that Jesus bodily came out of the tomb, the proper first century reaction is not, if you are a polite pagan, we don't believe that stuff. Rather you say: okay, so what? I've heard that type of story before. What does it matter to me? Why should I care? And that's when Paul would answer: yes, Jesus has been raised from the dead and God is concerned with bodies. God is concerned with justice. God is concerned with cleaning-up the mess of the world. Here is what we are doing, do you want to join us? *That* is a pre-enlightenment response. What we prefer to do in a post-enlightenment world is to spend our time arguing about the distinction between literal and metaphorical, which of course they knew in the first century as well as we do, but they were quite capable of hearing the meaning of a story without asking that question. I have no idea if anyone had gone up to Augustus at the start of the first century and said, you must understand, your imperial highness, that you are just a metaphor. All this stuff about being divine, being the son of god, the savior of the world, that's just metaphor. If he managed to say alive, Augustus would have simply said in response: but I *am* running the world and that's what being divine means.

JPS: Perhaps we could say then that the way to oppose Gnostic readings of scripture

is not with literal readings but with programmatic readings?

JDC: I would think that if people like Jesus or Paul had lived long lives and died in their beds, then I would be very uncertain that the kingdom of God had anything to do with this world. I'd be much more inclined to say that it must be about the next life, or heaven, or spirituality. But what I'm really doing is trusting the Romans. I trust empires to know their enemies. I think that this is as true in Washington at the moment as anyplace else. So I trust that the Romans took a look at early Christianity and Jesus first of all and recognized that they were not a violent threat or they would have rounded up all the Christian followers and crucified the bunch of them all together. They recognized however that Jesus was a threat to Roman law and order, an ideological threat, not a violent threat. Instead, Jesus was crucified without his followers. That tells us that Pilate got it right. This was a nonviolent threat to the system. So I am trusting that the Romans got it right.

JPS: In the epilogue to *In Search of Paul* you write that “Christianity is, therefore, and only at its theoretical and practical best, but one manifestation of that far more fundamental grounding of the world in that which we ignore at our peril.”⁴ Could you say more about this “fundamental ground” and about its universality?

JDC: You understand that this is more or less a direct quote from Vaclav Havel. I'm really responding to him. I'm taking his term and what I'm talking about is how Christianity can be presented totally within Christian language or totally within public discourse and that the reason it can be done validly is that in the first century Christian language *was* public discourse. If you call Jesus “messiah” (of course that is only public discourse in Judaism, you'd probably have to explain to a pagan what a messiah was)—but if you said Jesus was lord, a pagan would get it immediately. So you're dealing with public discourse. Some might be less open, like son of man, and need explanation but in general it was public discourse. It was making a claim on the world. Rome always talked about the

world, not about the Mediterranean or Italy. Caesar was savior of the world. So from the start it is a public, global thing and it never occurs to me that it could only be had by a Christian. Christianity, like most of the world's great traditions, is a particular way of expressing an ideal of what the world should be.

I don't say: well, we're all on the same path to the same place, because that denies particularity, which I find to be a necessary part of human nature. It is like saying that all languages are saying the same thing. Yes, they are all communicating, if you want to put it that way, but they're very different. So when I say that Christianity has a global claim, I'm not saying that this claim can only be expressed in Christian terms. I think that we can talk about the world being a just place without presuming that America or Christianity or anything else has a monopoly on justice. But they *are* making global, cosmic claims. Sometimes this claim is put crudely when it is said that everyone should be Christian—which is about as crude as saying that everyone should be American—but I find it much more serious to say that if the world does not become just, it will destroy itself. If this is granted, then we can talk about how to address it.

JPS: Are you saying that the kind of language early Christians used, they used precisely because it was accessible to public discourse? And if so, might contemporary Christians need to revisit the kind of language they use publicly in order to make their claims about justice more globally accessible?

JDC: Yes, but I want to characterize it more as a necessity than as a strategy. I wouldn't want to say, well, they used Greek because that's what everyone else was using. That's true, but mostly they used Greek because they were part of everyone else. In one sense, this is the only language they had—though their tradition gives them different and more powerful avenues into the media of that language. When a title like "son of god" is used by Caesar—which is on every one of his coins—it is interpreted to mean: first establish victory, then establish peace. That's what a

divine being must do in running the world. Now Christians are using exactly the same language to say: no, first you establish justice and doing that will establish peace. So within the same language the phrase has very different meanings. I don't want to think of it simply as saying, well, let's use their language. What other language did you have in the first century if you ask the question: what type of world should we be living in? What is the world about? Or, more theologically, what is God like? What kind of a God runs the world? You can flip it either way and emphasize God or emphasize the world, but either way that's the only language they have for it.

JPS: Do you think that Christianity risks losing contemporary relevance if we stick too closely to a first century vocabulary? Do you think that Christians need to move toward a different kind of vocabulary in order to be heard in the contemporary world?

JDC: What actually has been happening in my own research—which probably agrees with my definition of history in *The Birth of Christianity*—is that the past is interactively communicated by the present. Here, once again, we're back in a dialectic where it is very hard to tell where the past ends and the present begins. But I do see fairly clearly, and I don't think that I'm just imposing my own categories on it, that consistently across Roman texts, inscriptions, structures, and images the program is first victory, then peace. And part of the insistence of the book is that this program is not something the Romans invented, but that it has simply been the norm of civilization for at least the last 5000 years, and well before the Romans for at least 2000 years. But there is an alternative possibility coming out of the Jewish tradition that argues: first justice, then peace. These two opposing programs are like giant tectonic plates beneath history which are constantly grinding against one another. And I can't think that reality is much different now than it was in the first century. Except of course that our capacity for violence, our toys, our weapons, have increased dramatically. When Virgil began the *Aeneid* with the first word *arma*, weapons, he

meant swords or shields, and spears, but we have weapons that can destroy the world and make it uninhabitable. There is an exponential increase in violence from the first to the twenty-first century. But apart from that it seems to be exactly the same challenge: are we going to control the world by violence, that is, our violence putting down other people's violence? Or are we going to try to control the world by justice? How will we know when something is just? We'll know it is just when most people say that it is just. I don't find at all that the language of the first century, if we know what it means, is obsolete. But if we get into an argument about whether or not Jesus is literally the Son of God, that type of argument is profoundly absurd because nobody can be literally divine except God. The temple in Jerusalem is divine simply because it is the house of God. So the real question would be, first century: do you think that Jesus is divine or Caesar is divine? Which programmatically means: do you think violence or justice should be running the world? I can translate it into that. In the first century Paul spends his letter to the Romans talking about how God is making the world just. It's called justification. This is our problem.

JPS: So you think that a first century Christian vocabulary remains strangely appropriate to our own situation because of the way in which Roman empire is mirrored by contemporary empire?

JDC: If you know what it means, yes. If I were to go out and say, we have to establish righteousness, that would strike most people as a very Christian word. But if you translate it properly as "doing right," well, okay, but what are talking about? Paul explains very clearly what doing right means for the world: it means making the world just. He doesn't tell us exactly how to do it. He just tells us, our small little groups are trying to do it this way. So I find that if you understand the meaning of it, yes, it is extremely pertinent. Let me throw in an analogy. If you read *Ulysses* by James Joyce, a classic of world literature, the fact that it is a classic of world literature means that it is both absolutely Irish *and* absolutely universal at the same time. If you look at

Dostoevsky, it is both absolutely Russian and absolutely universal. There is no way you are going to confuse them. One's Irish and one's Russian. But they are both universal, people can understand them across languages. Whenever a religion or a work of literature gets down to the foundation of its own particularity it achieves universality. You don't get universality by being universal. You get it by being so deeply particular that people can recognize the foundation. I see that analogy holding for languages, for literature, for religion, for anything that's profoundly important. You have to be radically particular in order to be radically universal.

JPS: If we were to turn back for a moment to the kind of vocabulary that we were using earlier, would you characterize Gnosticism as a kind of false universality? False because it doesn't stick with the particular to the point where the particular becomes capable of revealing its own universality?

JDC: My criticism of Gnosticism would be this: one of the most fundamental decisions we have to make, going back to dear old Plato, is whether the human being is a dialectic, in the same sense as before, of body and spirit, or if somehow that spirit or soul is only temporarily, possibly even unfortunately, joined to what is either a flea bag hotel or a magnificent palace called the body. But in either case the soul is only temporarily embodied until it goes home to its true spiritual abode. I think that this is the most radical question in Western philosophy. Whichever way you come down on this question, everything else will follow. If you think that human beings are actually incarcerated, entombed spirits, that we're simply renting bodies out, then everything else will follow. But if you think along with the Bible that somehow or other the body/soul amalgam is a dialectic, that you can distinguish but not separate them, then everything else will follow differently. So Gnosticism seems to be a perfectly good, linear descendent of Platonism (I'm not certain though what Plato himself would have said), but at the heart of it is the presumption that the material world is at best irrelevant and at worst

evil. Those seem to be the fundamental options. You have to pick your position from there.

JPS: A final question. If we, wherever we are at in the world, are interested in opposing empire, does that interest translate into turning our attention to whatever our own particular traditions are in order to look for their fundamental ground? Is the practical formula for challenging empire: stick with your own particularity until it reveals its radical universality?

JDC: Well, yes, basically. Although we are not just opposing, we are replacing. That is how our book understands Paul as Jesus's apostle. You have to have an alternative, otherwise local thugs just take over for imperial thugs. What you need is an absolute replacement and one thing we were trying to do in the book is to make the alternative clear: not just victory, then peace, but justice, then peace, so that people can understand. It must be an alternative program rather than simply an opposition. It's not that we don't like the Roman empire because we want a Jewish empire or an Irish empire or an American empire, or a slightly improved empire. The problem is that every kind of empire is basically violent and now after five thousand years of civilization the violence spirals. It always works for a while, but what is being offered now, as it was then, is an alternative. That is why I insist that we are not making a philosophical statement about human nature. We are not saying that human beings are inherently violent and we must get used to it. We are making historical statements about human civilization and suggesting, with Jesus and Paul, that we had better change it fundamentally if we are going to survive on this planet. The problem is that we have taken it for granted that violence is normal. The question is: where within Christianity and within every other religion and every other imagination can we find an alternative?

I have to admit to you that I don't think that there is any other question except violence worth talking about at the moment. It is the only question worth talking about. In the same way that anyone in the first century who

wasn't talking about violence and what to do about it was a fool because within that first century the whole land was going to be absolutely devastated. And if Jesus was simply talking about the hereafter, he was a fool. If you are a scholar or a philosopher or a theologian your primary responsibility is to speak to your situation. That does not mean that you cannot speak about basic issues. It doesn't mean that you have to spend your time writing op-ed pieces. But it does mean that you should be able to see in what way the universal is present in the particularity of your own time and place.

Notes

1. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).
2. John Dominic Crossan, "Our Own Faces in Deep Wells: A Future for Historical Jesus Research," *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, Ed. John D. Caputo, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 308.
3. *In Search of Paul*, 343, 296.
4. *In Search of Paul*, 412.