

Saving Paradise
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
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February 8, 2009

My sister Mary has a passion for travel. She pores over guidebooks for months in advance of a trip. She favors quirky places to visit – an umbrella museum, rings of standing stones, the headquarters of a music company in rural Wales, “Otzi” the Iceman, Europe’s oldest natural mummy, who died 5,300 years ago and was frozen in a glacier until his discovery in 1991.¹ Mary has eclectic taste in travel, to say the least.

Mary planned the itinerary for our trip to Italy several years ago, and she insisted that we see the mosaics in Ravenna. I knew nothing about them, but I trusted her judgment. The restored mosaics on Christian church ceilings and walls date from the 6th and 7th centuries.² The mosaics are breathtakingly beautiful. Images of crucified Jesus are nowhere to be found, a detail that escaped my notice as I stood awestruck beneath the mosaics.

That detail did not escape the notice of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. “We found no Crucifixions in any of Ravenna’s early churches. The death of Jesus, it seemed, was not a key to meaning, not an image of devotion, not a ritual symbol of faith for the Christians who worshipped among the churches’ glittering mosaics . . . Like most Western Christians, we were accustomed to images of a Christ who died in agony. We had learned in church and in graduate school that Christians believed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ saved the world and that this idea was the core of Christian faith . . . We were unprepared for the possibility that Christians did not focus on the death of Jesus for a thousand years.”³

Rita Nakashima Brock is a theologian and an active member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Rebecca Ann Parker is an ordained United Methodist minister who has dual fellowship with the United Methodist Church and with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96tzi_the_Iceman

² See http://www.hp.uab.edu/image_archive/ulj/uljc.html

³ *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Beacon Press, Boston, 2008, p. xi. See <http://savingparadise.net/>

She served as a parish minister for 10 years before being named the president of Starr King School for the Ministry in 1990. Brock and Parker spent the better part of five years researching the changing images of Jesus in Christian art and examining the theological implications of the changing images.

Their conclusion? It took Jesus a thousand years to die. For roughly the first thousand years after the death of Jesus, his followers did not portray him as dead or dying on the cross. Instead, early Christian images portrayed a beautiful and bountiful earth with flowing rivers, green pastures, bright colors, animals, plants – images of abundance, joy, and peace. For a thousand years, paradise for Christians was life here, on this earth. Paradise was not a place called heaven to encounter after death. Paradise was available in every moment for those inspired by the life of Jesus.

This is not the Christianity with which most of us are familiar. What in the world happened? As Brock and Parker put it in their book *Saving Paradise*, “Why did Christians turn from a vision of paradise in this life to a focus on the Crucifixion and final judgment? How did images of terror, torture, and the desolation of the earth come to permeate the religious imagination of Western Christianity?”⁴

History is messy and complicated. We human beings interpret history through our own messy and complicated lives. It is hard to see the historical forest on account of all the trees, and yet it is hard to see the individual trees of history on account of the expanse of the forest. The so-called “great man” theory of history has largely fallen by the wayside, yet there is a place for continuing to study the lives of the powerful. For one thing, the powerful may leave artifacts of their lives for later generations to find. The artifacts of the poor typically end up in history’s dustbin. More importantly, like it or not, powerful people do have a disproportionate influence on history.

⁴ *Saving Paradise*, page 224.

The pivotal figure in the Christian paradigm shift from redemption by beauty to redemption by violence was this kind of “great man.” He was King Charles the Great, better known as Charlemagne. He lived from 742 to 814 of the Common Era. Brock and Parker note that “For three decades he waged a campaign of terror to subdue the Saxons on his northern border and force them at sword point to be baptized into his Latin version of Christianity . . . To understand the emergence of the dead Christ in Christian imagery, we must recall the Saxon story and the devastations and tragedies that followed. It is also a story of resistance, a story of people who held onto paradise in this world in the face of an imperial campaign that tried to destroy it.”⁵

As it happens, the earliest surviving crucifix is in a cathedral in Cologne, Germany. It is a life-sized figure of an agonized Jesus hanging on a cross. It was carved from an oak tree in Saxony around the year 1,000.⁶ It is called the Gero Cross. As background, the Christianity of the Saxons was a hybrid of Pagan practices and a Christianity focused on this world.

“Before Charlemagne’s reign, missionary efforts to convert the Saxons to more ‘correct’ forms of Christianity met with little success.”⁷ Brock and Parker say that in building their new, “holy” empire, Charlemagne and his army jettisoned the Christian experience of this earth as being infused with divine presence and power . . . Charlemagne demanded loyalty oaths and required Saxons at baptism to vow, ‘I forsake all the Devil’s works and words: Thunor, Woden and Saxnote and all the uncanny beings who are their companions.’ Charlemagne drew the boundary separating pagan and Christian.”⁸

The Saxons were forced at the point of a sword to be baptized into the ‘correct’ form of Christianity. Descendants of these Saxons produced the Gero Cross and other early images of the crucified Christ. We might wonder whose pain and suffering was being portrayed. We might wonder whether placing life-sized sculptures of the crucified Christ front and center in worship space was an act of resistance by an oppressed people, making good use of their limited options.

⁵ *Saving Paradise*, page 224.

⁶ *Saving Paradise*, page 223.

⁷ *Saving Paradise*, page 225.

⁸ *Saving Paradise*, page 230.

We might wonder whether the times and places and cultures that focus upon images of a dead and dying Jesus might also be places where imperialism and colonialism have taken a heavy toll.

I was raised Lutheran, and during adolescence, I picked up the message that Catholics focused on the death of Jesus by having a crucifix at the front of the sanctuary. Lutherans focused on the living Jesus by having an “empty” cross at the front of the sanctuary. Brock and Parker suggest that this dichotomy of my adolescence is, well . . . adolescent. Three things surprised me in this book. The first was their powerful critique of Protestantism . . . and their tradition is Protestant Christianity! They write, “In rejecting everything between a pure past and the hoped-for future, Protestants tend to identify themselves with an original goodness and to disassociate from the messy history and ambiguous institutions that their forebears created and that ground present existence.”⁹

The second thing that surprised me was their conviction that *another Christianity is possible*. Christianity not set in stone? Christianity not set in Gothic cathedrals and neglected cemeteries? At this late date, it is theological audacity to suggest that *another Christianity is possible*. “It begins,” they say, “when we understand that paradise is already present. We have neither to retrieve it nor construct it. We have to perceive it and to bring our lives and our cultures into accord.”¹⁰

In a short time on Sunday morning, I cannot hope to convey the breadth and depth of their scholarship and the brilliance of their theological work. I will be satisfied if you might visit their website: www.savingparadise.net.

I said that three things surprised me in *Saving Paradise*. The first was a powerful critique of Protestantism by theologians whose tradition is Protestant Christianity. The second was their

⁹ *Saving Paradise*, page 415.

¹⁰ *Saving Paradise*, page 417.

conviction that *another Christianity is possible*. The third is something they say about the dead: “To know paradise in this life is to enter a multidimensional spiritual-material reality, an interstitial place. Paradise is simultaneously this earth, a beautiful, luminous creation, and the realm of the dead, which is connected to the living but is separated by a thin veil through which the dead can pass to accompany, bless, or guide the living.”¹¹

My Catholicism detector started beeping. Red alert! And yet, perhaps another Christianity is possible, a Christianity that transcends and includes Catholicism and Protestantism. May we know, honor, and critique our history and ourselves. May we be open to *another Christianity*. May we be accompanied, blessed, and guided by the dead. May it be so!

¹¹ Saving Paradise, page 409.