

SAVING PARADISE: HOW CHRISTIANITY TRADED LOVE OF THIS WORLD FOR CRUCIFIXION AND EMPIRE
by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker Beacon Press, 2008

reviewed by Rosemary Ganley <http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/rdbook/1562/>

I will never again see a person wearing a crucifix or even contemplate a church tower bearing a cross without thinking of this highly original book.

Rita Nakashima Brock (a Disciple of Christ minister and director of Faith Voices for the Common Good) and her writing partner, Rebecca Ann Parker (president of the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California) have, with passion, scholarship, and clear writing, laid out a fascinating thesis. It is also a stylish and readable book.

“This is,” said Diarmuid O’Murchu, the Irish psychologist-priest-writer, and no slouch himself, “the best book of theology I have read in 20 years.”

After finishing *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us* in 2001, the two writers spent five years sniffing out evidence that the cruciform symbol, the central image of Christianity, arrived very late on the scene. Indeed, it was not important during the first millennium of Christian history.

For evidence they went to the art. The search took them to Rome, Ravenna, and Turkey; then to Germany.

“It took Jesus a long time to die,” Brock says. Not until 965 in northern Germany was the life-sized oak crucifix called the Gero Cross carved. On it, the Christian God was suffering and dying: an image of terror, torture, and desolation. The carving is now in the Cathedral of St. Peter and Maria in Cologne. Could there be a connection that one hundred years later, Pope Urban 11 launched the first crusade promising Christian warriors paradise after death?

“But the death of Jesus was not a key to meaning, not an image of devotion for the Christians of the first millennium,” Parker and Brock write. “He was risen, a healer, baptized, a shepherd, a teacher, and a friend.”

This book is a rock-the-foundations work. Christians have been thoroughly taught that the crucifixion of Jesus saved the world. If the crucifixion is absent in historic Christian art, what is present?

Paradise is present, Brock and Parker assert: this world, with water, sheep, hills of grass and flowers, winged seraphim, doves, deer, sheep, and a small golden city. They found these images in the art of the apse, quite hidden, in the basilica of St. Giovanni in Laterano in Rome. “Paradise, not crucifixion, was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries, and paradise was this world, not the next. What the images said was that God blesses this world with the spirit.”

I am easily persuaded that truth is to be found in art. In 2007, although living in the Northwest Territories of Canada, I went on a ten-day pilgrimage to Rome with feminists of faith led by Christine Schenk, CSJ of Future Church in Cleveland and taught by archeologist Dorothy Irvin. We too, as Brock and Parker, crept through the catacombs of Rome, discovering around every corner “ah-hah” moments. Our detective eye was focused on women in leadership in the early church. And we found them: bishops and celebrants at eucharists and preachers, vivid in the frescoes on walls and ceilings. They were so clear that we decided every Roman Catholic seminarian in Rome should be taught at least one course down there.

Altogether, *Saving Paradise* is a daring challenge to cruciform-centered Christianity. With just a whiff of political savvy and a slight hermeneutic of suspicion, readers can conclude that the crucifix was not in fact a vital symbol for early Christianity, and that its introduction in the second millennium must have served

some purpose. If Jesus' corpse was not featured in the early art and not in many early writings, why then has it become the ultimate symbol today? What political use has been made of exaggerated atonement theology? Of violent death? Of exaggerated induced guilt in believers? Of the extension of control over individual consciences by church authorities, and the creation of an obsession with the afterlife, where happiness may reside.

Ultimately, this book offers potent political theology. Our inherited theology of the cross: violent victimization and devious enemies (à la Mel Gibson) has stoked holy war, the Crusades, colonization, and racism.

Parker has said “Legacies of violence, terror, and trauma continue to bring anguish into the world”. She, with Nakashima Brock, is driven to seek its roots; the roots in religion. Together, these theologians reclaim the value of life in this world and the truth of salvation on Earth. They are reaffirming a sensibility—the affirming forms of Christianity.

The world could do with some of that.

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