Jesus as social visionary

by Rebecca Denova in the January 6, 1999 issue

By John Dominic Crossan, The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus. *(HarperSanFrancisco, 653 pp.)*

If we are to believe that God deliberately sent his only son into the world to be brutally tortured and crucified, then I take that to be transcendental child abuse, and I will not have it," John Dominic Crossan stated at a recent Duke University conference on "Jesus in Context."

Crossan cannot reconcile the crucifixion with a God who stands for justice and righteousness. Hence, his second major book growing out of the quest for the historical Jesus is a study of texts that do not contain, or at least do not emphasize, the crucifixion and resurrection narratives. These include the Q source (and its multiple phases), the Gospel of Thomas and the Didache, all of which Crossan dissects to produce his version of the "Common Sayings Tradition," the closest he can bring us to the historical Jesus. He also reconstructs the framework by which this tradition was altered through the polemics of dissent among Christian "householders," "healers" and "itinerants."

Three interpretations of "the final days" formed the core of this dissent: apocalyptic eschatology (the traditional world-negating doomsday view), ascetic eschatology (world-negating through denial of the physical elements of life), and ethical eschatology (God's original plan for utopian justice). The basic teachings of the Jesus tradition concerned ethical eschatology. But Christian movements became skewed toward the apocalyptic or ascetic. Crossan believes that early Christian communities added the apocalyptic interpretation as an aid in establishing group discipline. The ascetic interpretation was formulated either by those who misunderstood what Jesus meant by the "kingdom" or by people who found asceticism congenial. In short, Crossan's Jesus is neither a world-negating cynic, an apocalyptic warrior nor a nationalistic rebel. Jesus is an ethical teacher, seeking to implement God's justice on earth.

Crossan argues adamantly that the original teachings were nonaggressive and nonviolent; Jesus condemned both offensive and defensive behavior. Anything that could be construed as "violent" in the Gospels creeps in first through insider dissenters, and eventually through tension between insiders and outsiders. Crossan's Jesus teaches against oppression--political, economic, religious--and demonstrates his teaching through healing and commensality, or the unbrokered egalitarianism of an inclusive dinner table. But he neither takes nor advocates taking action against the sources of injustice and inequality. Indeed, Jesus dissociated himself from John the Baptist's message because of the violence in John's "kingdom" language. In this sense, Crossan's Jesus demonstrates a "*radical ethical eschatology*" by not taking aggressive action of any kind.

The (later) canonical Gospels, drawing upon traditional prophetic material, understood that God's intervention is both sudden and, at times, quite violent (e.g., "the little apocalypse" in Mark and parallels). Crossan's claim that this apocalyptic material was inserted as a check on dissenters is convincing only if we assume that Jesus himself either disbelieved the prophets of his own religion, or at the very least believed that everyone else had misread them. Crossan assumes the latter. Jesus is the only one who understood that God is just (nonviolent); the prophets, the writers of apocalyptic texts, the disciples, Paul and the canonical Gospel writers were all wrong.

In Crossan's "realized eschatology" Paul, with his emphasis on atonement through the cross, is displaced as the founder of Christianity by a Jesus who taught the true faith of social equality. Jesus becomes a first-century Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. and, of course, the prototype of what happens to those who promote such a radical vision of social justice. Jesus' revelation of the true nature of God was so radical, so stunning, so powerfully paradigm-shattering that he had to die for daring to promote it. This just God who requires only that we live justly is the "real" God of Jewish scripture, revealed if we cut away the "God of wrath and vengeance" material. As Crossan's final chapter, "The Character of Your God," makes clear, he rejects any view of the world that would require a God and his son to stand for anything other than this.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that others besides Jesus died for their visions during this period, but all the others advocated taking some kind of action. Was the system that combined the power of the Temple and of the Roman Empire so threatened by words alone? Crossan answers yes. He views the teachings of Jesus as

the most powerful words ever spoken, revealing God's will for all creation.

Crossan's theology is breathtaking, stunning and compelling. The emotional appeal of his call to social ministry is so strong that one wants to agree with him. He is at his best as a social and cultural critic, weaving together anecdotes about his life in Ireland with inspirational homilies meant to shake us out of our apathy toward suffering and our toleration of injustice. But is his depiction of Jesus either historical or credible?

The reader familiar with Crossan's work will recognize his references to various social-scientific and anthropological studies of peasant societies. This volume adds little that is new on that subject. Crossan's method of applying case studies from every culture and era to the villages and hamlets of the Galilee is considered questionable by many New Testament scholars and historians. But this book does provide more detail on the physical archaeology of the Galilee--also a subject of controversy among scholars. Crossan tracks pottery distribution between the Lower Galilee's villages and its cities, Sepphoris and Tiberias. The goal of this archaeological exploration is to help us understand daily life under both Roman and Herodian rule. But Crossan's leap from archaeological remains to text leaves one's head spinning. To evaluate his claims fairly one must read the reports of the archaeologists themselves and await the results of many current excavations.

Crossan paints a picture of oppression in the Lower Galilee, both by Herod Antipas, whose building programs abused local labor and trade, and the Temple authorities. Through association with the ruling Herodians, the Jerusalem leadership attempted to impose its power on the Galilee's villages and hamlets. In trying to help us understand what this meant for the region's peasants, Crossan distinguishes between the generic poor and the destitute. He claims that most of Jesus' teachings were aimed at those who had been displaced by the system. Understood in this way, Jesus' "hard" sayings--the admonitions to leave family, home and possessions--are not so hard after all. They are an after-the-fact theological validation of the status of the displaced, who had nothing left to give away; those so dispossessed are now qualified to enter the "kingdom." And this kingdom is the symbol for everything that opposes systemic evil (the conglomerate of political and economic power structures).

Crossan insists that these texts are not attacks on individuals. Judaism as an institution, symbolized by and centered in the Temple and its rigorous purity codes,

was the problem. And if we accept Crossan's assumption that the Temple system was being imposed on the Galilee, such purity codes were being enforced in all districts. He cites no evidence to support this conviction. Nevertheless, Jesus' teachings, from which Christianity emerged, opposed the imposition of this evil institution. By placing blame on the structure rather than the people, Crossan tries to avoid the classic pitfall inherent in discussions of the emergence of Christianity in the first-century Jewish world.

The traditional claim for Jerusalem's interference in the Galilee has always been based on the story of the Pharisees catching Jesus and the disciples picking grain in the field on the Sabbath. Yet even a casual examination of this story reveals just how artificial it is, and how well it suits the Gospel of Mark's general theme. Mark always shows that Jesus did not violate the Torah in his conflicts with the Pharisees. Indeed, Jesus usually cites the Pharisees' own teachings against them, as in the interpretation that permits life to be saved on the Sabbath. Structurally, the thrust of the Gospels is to show that Jesus died for religious, not political, reasons, and the many stories of the Pharisees' harassment and persecution of him serve that purpose. The idea that Pharisees hid in a grain field in the Galilee, hoping to catch offenders, is ludicrous; there were no Torah police assigned to monitor people's daily lives.

Crossan denounces institutions in all times and places; the power they wield fosters systemic evil. But one wonders whether he really understands Second Temple Judaism. Crossan assumes that the purity codes were directly related to sin--that they were responsible for class (read "economic") distinctions and the oppression that arose from such distinctions. But purity codes are related to sacred space; unless people were approaching the Temple, only very simple rituals were required.

And there is no evidence that class distinctions were inherent in these codes. The Jerusalem aristocrat and the Galilean beggar were equally contaminated by contact with corpses, for example. Far from fostering economic oppression, the codes provided a range of options for worshipers. Those who could not afford to sacrifice an animal could give a handful of flour. And most of the things that made one impure were not sin. The birth of a child was a joyous event, which nevertheless rendered the mother impure for a specific period of time. In Luke's Gospel, the purity codes do not seem to present any problems. Mary dutifully brings her offering of two turtle-doves to the temple at the requisite time after the birth of Jesus.

Crossan repeats a claim found in the work of many other New Testament scholars--that Second Temple Judaism associated physical illness with sin. Yet he cites no scriptural or other evidence to support this claim. The idea may be implied in stories where leprosy is the punishment for sin, although merely contracting leprosy does not make the victim a sinner (see the stories of Miriam, Gehazi and Uzziah, in Numbers 12:10 and 2 Kings 5:27; 14:4-5, respectively). Crossan's understanding of the concept actually derives from 17th-century Puritanism.

The movie *Philadelphia* provides Crossan with an illustration of the difference between "*curing disease and healing illness*." One can be cured (or not) of disease, but still suffer the illness inflicted by an unjust society. In Crossan's reconstruction of first-century Judaism, the physically and mentally infirm have no recourse. According to Crossan, Jesus has to seek them out and call them to himself because "social forces, political situations, and economic conditions cause the unhealth, be it disease and/or illness."

But what did Crossan's Jesus actually do for sick people? Don't healing and exorcisms, the "driving out" of demons, entail some kind of aggressive behavior? Crossan defines a miracle as "a marvel that someone interprets as a transcendental action or manifestation," and admits that the historicity of Jesus' miracles can never be established. His Jesus chose the more important "healing" of preaching against injustice, rather than of actually curing physical disease.

In his earlier work, Crossan treats the cleansing of the Temple as an expression of Jesus' frustration with the evil system it represented. In this book, there is almost no discussion of this incident (it makes Jesus too active). Why, then, was Jesus executed? Did everyone around Jesus know that proclaiming God's kingdom entailed action of some kind, while Jesus alone understood it as metaphor? Crossan's Jesus died because, though he had no intention of doing so, everyone thought he meant to take action.

Crossan's earlier works treat the resurrection stories as the community's construction of narrative metaphors to express their sense of Jesus' continuing presence among them. In this book, the idea of narrative metaphor gives way to the concept of narrative detail. Case studies of "lament" by grieving women in Greek villages demonstrate that narrative structure and biographic details are inherent to the mourning process, and these laments were created only by women. The scriptural elements of our current canonical Gospels (e.g., the insertion of various

psalms into the scenes) were left to men, since to exegete is as natural to men as to lament is to women--a conclusion sure to generate controversy.

The massive scope of Crossan's study and his years of research and scholarly detective work have given us many valuable insights into the first-century world of Jesus and his followers. Crossan is one of the best exegetes in his field. His analysis of the shorter ending of Mark, relating it to other themes in that Gospel, is the only one that makes sense to me. The material in this book will be the focus of numerous debates and questions among scholars for some time to come.

However, Crossan does not make it easy for readers to follow his argument. His data and his conclusions from that data are often separated by many digression-filled chapters. In addition, the book's first half is a review of his earlier work, a summary of what his critics have said, and a refutation of those critics.

The book's strength is its construction of a Christian model of social healing that holds us responsible for the continuing existence of injustice. Its weakness lies in the author's construction of a Jesus to fit our needs, a Jesus whom he then discovers in the evidence. This is perfectly acceptable as a theological "quest," but not as an historical one. And Crossan's explanation of Judaism can only result in the inevitable conclusion: Jesus' teachings and Christianity are what God had intended for Jews and Judaism all along. People of all faiths must confront and combat social injustice, but equating our failures with those of the misguided Jews of Jesus' day will not help us to deal better with our world.