

# Saving Paradise

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Quick: what is the first symbol that comes to your mind when you hear the word “Christianity?” Now, I’m sure there are a few folks here with different ideas, but odds are that most of you thought of the symbol of the cross.

Even as a child, it struck me as odd that an entire religion would revere as their most sacred symbol an instrument of torture, punishment and death.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, theologians and scholars, had some problems with this symbol as well (or, more precisely, with the interpretation of it in modern-day religion). Having grown up in Christian churches and having pursued graduate theological training in a Christian setting, they were troubled by mainstream Christianity’s interpretation of the cross as a symbol, and its embrace of Jesus’ suffering on the cross as a spiritual virtue.

In their first book together, *Proverbs of Ashes*, they challenged this theology in an exploration based on deeply-personal stories of abuse and assault, of self-loathing and hatred, of murder and guilt. They are stories of the most isolated and terrifying moments of their lives and the lives of those to whom they have ministered over the years.

When one stops to absorb the stories, to really listen to them, it becomes apparent that something is wrong with the dominant Christian teachings about suffering. People are regularly taught that if they choose not to endure suffering, they are weak and faithless.

This worldview is so rampant that as a hospital chaplain, I participated in seminars on how to provide pastoral care to patients who believed that their pain and suffering was a part of God’s plan—that enduring pain was somehow what they needed to do in order to prove their faith to God.

And time and again, I encountered patients who looked to me to help them figure out where they had strayed from the path of righteousness in order to deserve their fate. I could not in good conscience even pretend to believe in a God who would do such a thing; sometimes, that was comforting to my patients, but at other times, it led them to reject me as a spiritual leader.

This view of redemptive suffering is based in current interpretations of the Christian Scriptures, and is exacerbated in a culture in which biblical literalism is on the rise. In the book of 1Peter, it is written:

“For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and

suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." (1Pet 2:19-21, NRSV)

This is one text among many used to exhort people to endure suffering. Others are found throughout our modern translations of the Bible. Again and again, they point to a faith in which pain and suffering is prized as a spiritual virtue.

Brock and Parker were right to call our attention to stories in which this dogma leads directly to the perpetuation of evil in our world, rather than to salvation or saintliness.

If religious dogma leads women to endure abuse, gay and lesbian people to endure being ostracized from churches, people of color to endure racism, and people of all kinds to endure the pain of depression and emotional isolation, there is a problem with the doctrine, and not with the people, they argue.

If a woman is taught to believe that the pain inflicted by her abusive husband is a test of her faith and her willingness to keep her family together no matter what the personal cost, there is a problem with what she is being taught—and not with her.

In the end, the most powerful message of *Proverbs of Ashes* is precisely this: that there is something wrong with traditional Christian messages about suffering and redemption, and that what is wrong with them can be fixed in a way that is authentic to Christianity, even if it requires a radical re-thinking of what Christianity is. "To know that the presence of God endures through violence is to know [that] life holds more than its destruction," Brock and Parker write. (PA, 250)

In *Proverbs of Ashes*, they envision a world in which the focus of Christian religious teaching is on the love and healing power of God, and not on the destructive power of violence in our world. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God," they conclude. (PA, 251)

In their most recent book, *Saving Paradise*, Brock and Parker take their exploration of suffering in Christian theology back two thousand years, to the earliest Christian societies.

Brock and Parker journeyed to the Mediterranean basin to learn about early Christian societies, hoping to understand where modern-day Christianity's views of suffering and redemption came from.

They were shocked to find out that, in their words, "it took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century." (SP, ix) They consulted with art historians, archaeologists and other experts. They traveled to churches and catacombs, ruins and monasteries. Nowhere was a depiction of Jesus on a cross to be found. Fascinated by this learning, they set out to understand why it was so.

They traced the emergence of Christianity's focus on the crucifixion of Jesus to the tenth and eleventh centuries. The earliest known crucifix survives in Cologne, Germany. It was carved from wood in the year 965 by Saxons, "baptized against their will by the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne during a three-decade campaign of terror." (TPP)

As Brock and Parker write, "Charlemagne's armies slaughtered all who resisted, destroyed shrines representing the Saxons' tree of life, and deported 10,000 Saxons from their land. Pressed by violence into Christian obedience, the Saxons produced art that bore the marks of their baptism in blood." (TPP)

As Christianity became tied to the brutality of the Holy Roman Empire, the image of the crucified Christ took a central place in the religion.

Again, from an article written by Brock and Parker:

"The ninth century's new focus on the crucified Christ coincided with a shift in the Christian prohibition against the shedding of human blood. For centuries, the church had taught that participation in warfare was evil, that killing broke the fifth commandment, and that soldiers were to perform penance to cleanse their souls from the stain of blood. At the dawn of the Holy Roman Empire, Christianity began to lose its grip on the sinfulness of killing. A new age began—one in which the execution of Jesus would become a sacrifice to be repeated, first on the Eucharistic altar and then in the ravages of a full-blown holy war.

"The decisive turning point came in 1095 when Pope Urban II called the First Crusade. Urban summoned nobles, bishops, monks, and laity from across Europe to Clermont, France, where he urged them to take up arms and journey to Jerusalem to attack the 'bastard Turks.' Urban told them, 'Your own blood-brothers, your companions... are flogged and exiled as slaves for sale in their own land. Christian blood, redeemed by the blood of Christ, has been shed, and Christian flesh, akin to the flesh of Christ, has been subjected to unspeakable degradation and servitude.'

"Urban then pronounced the ultimate incentive: 'Whoever goes on the journey to free the church of God in Jerusalem... can substitute the journey for all penance for sin.' With these words, he reversed nearly a thousand years of Christian teaching about the sin of shedding human blood. War ceased being a sin and became a way to atone for sin. Killing became a mode of penance, a pathway to paradise. " (TPP)

It was the mixture of religion and empire—and the resulting need to justify the violence of war in the name of religion—that led Christians to embrace a theology that said that Jesus' suffering on the cross was meant to atone for the sins of humanity, which led to the theology that our suffering as humans

only brought us closer to the suffering Christ. With the rise of an imperial Christianity, the crucifix became a central symbol for the religion.

Before this, how did Christians understand their religion? What were the symbols in their churches?

As Brock and Parker found out, the main symbol in the first millennium of Christianity was that of paradise: a lush, abundant garden of goodness and delight.

This was not a paradise relegated to a time after death, either. According to Brock and Parker, in the world of early Christianity, “paradise had both a ‘here’ and ‘not here’ quality. Christians taught that paradise had always been here on earth,” that sin closed off the possibility of its manifestation.

They continue: “While Christians could taste, see, and feel the traces of it in ordinary life, they arrived most fully in paradise in community worship. With its art and buildings, the church created a space that united the living on earth with the heavenly beings and departed saints who surrounded and blessed the living.”

As we heard in the reading earlier, to Christians in the first millennium, the rite of the Eucharist—what many of us know as the Christian ritual of communion—had a very different meaning than it does today.

To early Christians, this ritual was the summoning of paradise here on Earth, a ritual that connected worshippers with all of creation, and with the possibility of an existence permeated with the love of God.

To Christians in the first millennium, the goal of their religion was not proving one’s worth to God through right action and suffering. It was not a matter of shedding blood in the name of Jesus, or the attainment of salvation in the afterlife.

The goal of their religion was to create a world in which everyone could have access to paradise. Right here, right now, on this Earth as it is in heaven. Their goal was to create God’s paradise in their midst, and to express gratitude for every piece of paradise that they experienced while they were alive.

And yet we are much more familiar today with a later version of Christianity, one borne of violence and suffering and bloodshed in the name of the Empire. This version—the one that centers on the suffering of Jesus as the key to salvation—has been challenged by both Unitarians and Universalists (not to mention Unitarian Universalists) for hundreds of years.

Our Unitarian ancestors rejected the divinity of Jesus, taking redemptive meaning away from his death. Instead, they focused on his teachings and life, which pointed the way towards justice and right relationship with all of creation.

Our Universalist ancestors envisioned a religion in which humanity saw itself as part and parcel of a universe in which perfect love existed and touched all beings. They preached a gospel of universal salvation, eliminating the need for the suffering of Christ to be repeated in the lives of humans.

A Christian religion focused on death, suffering and salvation in the afterlife has also been challenged by any number of liberal Christians who were neither Unitarian nor Universalist.

These Christians have rejected the notion that “personal salvation for individual souls” is the center of Christianity. Among others, Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, writing in the second decade of the twentieth century, roundly criticized an imperial Christianity that sanctioned violence in this world in the name of achieving salvation in the next. (SP, 399)

Many African-American theologians, civil rights leaders and activists against slavery and racism have also seen the ease with which violence could be justified in the name of a God who sent his son to suffer on Earth. From W.E.B. Du Bois to Ida Wells-Barnett to Martin Luther King, Jr., many have stood up and rejected the notions that progress in this world was an unworthy religious goal; they rejected the notions that the work of creating justice for the living was theologically inferior to seeking salvation for the dead. (SP 404-408)

Brock and Parker write that “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, North American Christians are engaged in deep conflicts generated by the struggle for paradise.... Reiterating Christian perspectives that echo imperial Christianity, [popular forms of Christianity]... bless conquest and colonization, privilege those with wealth and status, sanction war against ‘evildoers,’ and exploit the environment. The paradise they offer is on the other side at the end of the world.” (SP, 378)

They challenge all of us to claim a more positive theology, and offer the early Christian theology of paradise as an alternative to one that embraces violence and suffering.

They challenge us to understand that we can create paradise here. They write:

“Paradise is human life restored to its divinely infused dignity and capacity, and it is a place of struggle with evil and injustice, requiring the development of wisdom, love, nonviolence, and responsible uses of power. Power can be experienced as spiritual illumination of the heart, mind, and senses felt in moments of religious ecstasy, and it can be known in ordinary life lived with reverence and responsibility. Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict, but it is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible.” (TPP)

They continue:

“Entering paradise in this life is not an individual achievement but is the gift of communities that train perception and teach ethical grace. Paradise provides deep

reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth." (TPP)

In this complex society, in which violence in the name of theology is frighteningly commonplace, Unitarian Universalists come together without dogma or creed, bound by principles that guide our institutions' actions in the present.

When I am asked whether Unitarian Universalists believe in life after death, I usually stop to explain that it depends on the person. What we do believe, I often say, is that we have the power to create a better world while we are alive, so we tend to focus on that, and leave the matter of what happens after we die something to be discovered when we're there.

We celebrate together the milestones of our lives—the moments of joy and of sorrow. We teach one another, and feed one another, and share our thoughts and opinions with one another. We act together for justice, for peace, for good.

This, my friends, is our religion's modern-day embrace of a theology of paradise. Whatever you and I believe (or don't believe) about God, about Jesus, about death or salvation, we can agree that together, we can create a better world right here in the present.

Some would call this making manifest the love of God on Earth.

Some would call this recognizing the sacred in the world around us.

Some would call this the creative power of humanity.

Today, I might call it seeking paradise, and it's a worthy goal for all of us.

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