

Entering into Paradise

A Review Essay

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Two thousand years of Christian life and work! How could anyone grasp even the broad outline of this history, let alone the vast detail? Or discern patterns of development and understand the motivations of the people whose life energies are displayed in this panorama of life? Yet this is what Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker venture to do in their book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of the World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008). They have organized the vast body of lived experience, as well as physical artifacts and written documents, around the tension between two motifs in the religious tradition flowing from Jesus of Nazareth. One theme is life in this world, which already is paradise. The other theme is death in this world in order to enter paradise, which exists only in heaven.

The book began as a pilgrimage in which the authors sought to solve a puzzle: Why was the crucifixion largely absent from Christian art, architecture, and iconography for the first thousand years of church history? Their pilgrimage took them to a great many places where the art of the first millennium could be viewed: easily accessed

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places like Rome and Constantinople, but also to some of the remotest locations where Christianity came in early times and flourished enough to build and adorn churches and monasteries, many of them long since abandoned. They visited museums to study Christian art and canvassed the church's literature, especially the theology of Eastern writers and the poetic writings of people in East and West.

At first, these studies only confirmed their supposition; indeed the crucifixion was essentially absent from the church's worship, devotion, art, and theology for the first thousand years of church history. Then came the second phase of their work, which was to discern the organizing motifs that had, in fact, characterized the life of Christians all of those centuries. One day, the realization came to one of the pilgrims and soon thereafter the other agreed. Instead of crucifixion and death, the church for a thousand years focused attention upon paradise.

The image was material and immediate, referring to the world in which people already lived, a world in which beauty, abundance, equality, joy, and other delights were enjoyed—sometimes fleetingly and in hope more than reality—despite the harsher aspects of life. It also referred to a transcendent realm in which the delights of life right now were intensified and fulfilled while the problems and shortcomings of immediate experience were overcome and set aside forever.

Jesus was a central figure in the art but he was presented as re-vivifying presence rather than as crucified savior. He embodied God's intention for creation, practiced the kind of life to which God invites all people, and empowered people with God's Spirit so that they could live as creatures of paradise despite the travails of this life.

Eternal life was understood to be rooted in the goodness of earthly existence combined with human responsibility for sustaining that goodness. The authors use the term "ethical grace" to describe this combination of features and emphasize that Jesus demonstrates this quality in action: "love and generosity in community, care for all who have need, healing of the sick, appreciation for life, confrontation with powers of injustice and exploitation, and advocacy for freedom of the imprisoned" (29). This way of life rooted in paradise overcame patriarchy and restored women to a place of full humanity and full participation in the economy of God.

A central theme in Christian teaching throughout the first thousand years was a positive understanding of human nature. Jesus "incarnated God in human flesh and infused humanity with divinity." As they did the work that Jesus did, and shared his Spirit, "Christians manifested divinity." Jesus' saving work "empowered humanity to dwell in paradise according to its original nature" (177). Deification was the goal of creation, and participation in the church's Eucharist was part of the process by which Jesus accomplished his saving work.

Brock and Parker describe the central role that worship, especially around the Eucharistic table, played in this first millennium understanding of the Christian life. Church buildings were designed to be places where the experience of paradise was visually present in the shape of the space itself and in the iconography, especially in the brilliant murals, mosaics, and paintings that surrounded worshipers and drenched their visual senses.

Worship brought people together around a table that was heaped high with food. The actions, music, and prayers celebrated the goodness of God and the divine intentions that all people experience that goodness in this world and the next. "The beautiful feast of life," Brock and Parker declare, "returned the senses to an open, joyous experience of the world; it was an encounter with divine presence infusing physical life. The Eucharist thus bound humanity to the glory of divine life in 'this present Paradise,' and through its Eucharists, the church cultivated responsiveness to the power of holy presence in the world" (145).

The authors conclude the above paragraph with an especially important sentence: "Its beauty opened the heart." Throughout the first part of this long book, the theme of beauty is frequently brought forward. In their churches, people were surrounded by stunningly beautiful depictions of the world when it is illumined by the divine presence and is magnificently focused in Jesus. The beauty experienced in worship was multi-sensual. In addition to the visual art, which sometimes covered every inch of the upper walls of churches, there was the sensuous reality of the liturgy itself. Brock and Parker refer to "the chanting hundreds, the choreography of ritual, the curtains of sumptuous silk brocade, the robed clergy, the glittering gold chalices and patens,

silver chandeliers, metal-encased altars, and smoky incense" (208). In worship, paradise became real to the people.

Brock and Parker acknowledge that in real life this metaphor was often tarnished, sometimes broken, often challenged in theological literature by competing ideas. They provide examples of compromises between the church and the world. Sometimes the vision of paradise ceased to function as critique of the sinful structures of ordinary life. Yet, they are convinced, the dominant fact of Christian life during its first thousand years was that "spiritual power [is] incarnated in the material life of the world," but that this incarnate power was kept distinct from empire and from sinful entanglements with the structures of the world that contradict God's glory in the world" (212).

The authors dare to believe that Christian worship at the Eucharistic table still has the power to transform human life and bring worshipers to a new experience of ethical grace. They interrupt their pilgrimage narration and historical reconstruction by describing how worship in a small church in Seattle brought the congregation, with one of its lay leaders as the preeminent example, to a new way of understanding the radical implications of the gospel for life in the world today.

It can be asked if church leaders today give enough emphasis to the importance of sensuously beautiful worship as a central mode of communicating a transformative and life-giving vision of life. Ours is a time when auditoriums devoid of symbolism, often crammed with ugliness, are considered to be the venues in which the unchurched—the people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious—can be brought into an understanding distance of the gospel. For a thousand years, Brock and Parker tell us, beautiful, symbol-filled churches converted and sustained the faithful.

There are a few bold souls—musicians, artists, architects, and liturgists among them—who believe that it still is true. If our churches and the worship within them could once again portray paradise, they might become the places where people experience the abundant life that Jesus brings, the life that is the foretaste of heaven itself.

Half way through this book, the story line changes dramatically. In a chapter entitled "The Expulsion of Paradise," Brock and Parker begin a narrative in which they "unearth the story of imperial politics, relig-

ious ideas, and this new visual world that centered on death" (224). They begin with Charlemagne who, following the example set by his grandfather Charles Martel and his father Pippin III, worked mightily to subdue the Saxons on the northern border of his expanding empire. Central in his campaign was the use of military assaults to force them to conform to the Latin version of Christianity. Whether their former religion was their ancestral pagan religion or the hybrid version of Christianity they had developed during Roman times, they had to yield to rebaptism. Because of this conversion, Charlemagne believed, the Saxons could be required to live according to treaties that would bind them to his expanding empire.

Whereas the older Saxon version of Christianity had valued life in this world as an experience of paradise, Charlemagne's new regime focused increasingly upon life after death. Paradise had to be expelled from this world so that a Christian political order built upon military might could flourish. This transformation soon influenced Christian art. The prototype, the authors believe, is the Gero Cross, a life-sized oak sculpture from the tenth century that hangs in the Cologne Cathedral, which they say is "the earliest surviving crucifix" (223). This kind of art performed two functions: by validating death as central to the Christian life, it justified Christian soldiers as they slaughtered people in the name of their Savior, and it provided solace to the people who suffered from these onslaughts.

In some of the most distressing theological writing I can remember reading, the authors review the work of several major figures in the western tradition, among them Gregory VII, Peter Damien, Urban II, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter the Hermit, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, and Abelard. Working from various angles of vision and locations in the empire-building process, these writers developed theological systems that prized death more than life, a paradise located in heaven more than in the world we enjoy now, an ethics of violence and warfare over an ethics of peace and harmony, a domineering patriarchal structure of human community over a way of life in which men and women, and people of all sorts and conditions, live together in mutuality.

A significant part of this transformation was the redefinition of the Eucharist. No longer was it a joyful feast of life, a moment in which the experience of paradise, with all that this word implied, was realized, nor was it the occasion when the eternal Christ and his friends, who themselves were moving toward deification, feasted under an architectural canopy of heaven. Instead, it was an occasion in which Christians, by means of their priest's words and actions at the altar, repeated the sacrifice, once more brought Jesus to his cruel death, demonstrated the inherent evil nature of humankind, repeated the devaluing of this world despite its beauty. The Eucharistic theology of Paschasius, the atonement theology of Anselm, and the moral theology of Bernard worked together to support the bloody, imperialistic purposes of the Crusades, generated and justified the marauding hordes that wreaked such havoc throughout Europe and the Middle East. Popes became military emperors more than spiritual leaders and even the monasteries became garrisons producing warriors whose instruments were swords of steel rather than the prayers of the just.

Despite their participation in constructing this world in which paradise had been expelled, some of the writers yearned for something better. Heloise, in particular, "stood in a long line of Christian dissenters who rejected the worship of violence, the demonizing of sexuality, and the valorization of suffering. She offered a love grounded in honesty, mutual care, obligation, and responsible uses of power" (305).

The dominant trajectory, however, shaped the Protestant Reformation, especially the portion in which Calvin was the leading theologian. Even the Reformers could not change in any significant way the history of Christianity in Western Europe. The church that "had once been in love with the risen Christ, who joined his bride in the earthly garden of delight and helped her tend it," later "took a violent Lord into her bed, lay with him, blessed him, and finally took him into the Christian family by marrying him." The fruit of their union were "devotional pieties of fear, sorrow, torture, and death, whose progeny journeyed into the world determined to destroy their own shadows and neighbors" (306).

Their progeny included the conquistadores and pilgrims who came to the Americas. The authors' depiction of the American part of the story occupies most of the final fourth of their book. Framing their nar-

rative with the phrase "escape routes," they show how people in the 1400s and thereafter, longed for ways to move out of the death-dominated world that the church had created and reenter the life-affirming world that long before had been at the center of Christian worship, theology, piety, and life. They wanted once again to live in a paradise in this world.

Coming to America was the most important of these escape routes. In various ways, the new world was described as an earthly paradise, a place in which the delights God had always intended were present, ready to be experienced. The challenge facing the people escaping the old world was to develop human communities and a way of life that were appropriate for life in the physical paradise. Regrettably, their ecclesial systems, including theology, ethics, and worship, continued to be rooted in the empire-building, death-dealing model that Charlemagne, Anselm, Urban II, and others had created. Just as their ancestors had slaughtered the Saxons and Saracens, the colonizers believed that it was their righteous privilege to conquer the "demented people" whom they encountered in the new world. Their efforts to construct Christian civilization in the new world destroyed much of the natural paradise they met, brought a continuing harvest of suffering to the people who lived here already, and established regimes in which many of the worst characteristics of old world systems were replicated in slightly different forms.

Although, they touch briefly other American narratives, the authors devote much of their attention to the New England experiments and the revivalist tradition of the Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards, who in theological literature today often rides high, becomes an exemplar of some of the worst continuities with the older theology. "God's punishing mercies were frightening to those estranged from God, who experienced God's wrath with terror. But the truly faithful should receive them with calm happiness" (365).

Brock and Parker do find people, mostly New Englanders, who moved away from the pieties of death and affirmed life in this world. Thoreau and Emerson were among the intellectual leaders of the new romanticism in American life and painters like Thomas Cole portrayed the vision on canvas. Their efforts, however, fell far short of restoring

the patterns that once had existed. By acquiescing to the decimation of the Native American population, they showed their continued acceptance of a death-oriented ideology. By emphasizing the inwardness and solitariness of their romantic vision, they failed to acknowledge how much they were, in fact, dependent upon others. Absent from their vision of a natural paradise in the pristine wilderness of America was the ethical grace that was central to the Christian understanding that prevailed during the first millennium of the church's life. Despite their efforts to locate paradise in this world, Calvin and his American descendents failed for "as long as such efforts imagine paradise as purification and salvation as the ultimate and final separation of the pristine from the corrupt and the wild from the civilized, visions of paradise will foster disassociation from the present in all its complex demands" (388).

More successful efforts to recover an authentic Christian vision of paradise, the authors report, were made by writers representing a tradition they name Christian Universalism and other church leaders in the Unitarian tradition. Among the authors they cite are John Murray, Judith Sargent Murray, Hosea Ballou, Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, and Margaret Fuller. One of the distinguishing marks of this new point of view was that they "embodied their faith by working for social change that rejected redemptive violence and expressed God's love for all souls" (393).

Some Christian writers, with Horace Bushnell as an example, accepted part of this revision of long-standing ideas. Bushnell's "benevolent paternalism emphasized God's kindness, but retained the "crucifixion as an image of compassion." Bushnell's system also preserved the dominance of white people. Greater clarity about sin and a clearer call for a just society came from Walter Rauschenbusch. Even he, however, failed to see that racism was a northern as well as a southern problem. Not until the coming of people like Ida Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Jr., was there a movement in American religious life that seriously addressed the engrained abuses in American society. Wells-Barnett named violence and injustice clearly and by so doing "she cut through the illusion of redemptive violence and disrupted the unholy rituals of repeated tortures and crucifixions. Like many Christians committed to social change, she saw herself as a

prophet, believing truth to be self-evident and persuasive if it were clearly declared" (407). The authors declare that people cannot mourn alone and that a religious community provides the embrace that allows people to mourn. "Paradise is a place for the brokenhearted [and] the realm of God's ongoing creativity" (407).

Brock and Parker complete their narrative with three paragraphs that eulogize terrestrial paradise. "We can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth" (409). Paradise "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" (410).

In their epilogue, Brock and Parker offer final comments that provide an outline of the book that needs to follow this one, a book in which these perceptive writers describe a course of action for churches that desire to reshape themselves in ways that are consistent with the themes of their book. They state the tendencies of the Protestant point of view, which are to focus on a pristine past and a wonderful future, thus maintaining a way of life filled with nostalgia and hope. The corollary is to look upon the time in which we live with cynicism, disillusionment, despair, and impotence.

What is needed, they affirm, is a religious point of view that focuses on living in ethical grace right now. "For ethical grace to flourish, however, we require strong communities, rituals to train perception, and beauty to hold us and give us joy" (418).

When we develop our churches so that they become communities like this, we can again become constructive participants in the larger process of making the world a place where people can flourish. "Perhaps if we can learn to worship and live within ethical relationships here and now, we will see our way to honest disclosure about where we are and where we can go together to change unjust systems and institutions, to establish justice and peace, and to protect the created world" (419).

The practical implications of the Brock-Parker analysis are impressive. They demonstrate that worship, theology, liturgy, and art work together to create personal, familial, and community life that are strong, healthful, humane, and divine. The religious stories that we tell, the visual art and music which create our environment, the language of our prayers, the form and content of our liturgies, and the way we bind ourselves to one another in ritual determine what kind of people we will be and what kind of world we live in. Rather than being an impediment to spirituality, religion with its many trappings is spirituality's source and sustainer. The proper sequel to *Saving Paradise* would be a book that drafts new liturgical materials, especially Eucharistic prayers, suggests criteria for music in worship, explores art and architecture that are contemporary and truth-bearing. This book would show how to overturn the banality that prevails in churches today; it would give churches and their leaders courage to replace triviality in worship, preaching, and congregational life with religious activity that is serious enough to match the character of life today.

The reconstruction of Christian worship that *Saving Paradise* calls forth will require unending diligence by pastors, musicians, and others who plan and prepare worship. The language of death, sacrifice, and distrust of life in this world permeates the hymnals, evangelical song books, prayer books, popular devotional guides, preaching aids, and serious theological tomes. Every element introduced into worship needs to be tested by the criteria that are implied in *Saving Paradise*.

The history of Christians in the world is too complex to be organized around a single theme as Brock and Parker have endeavored in this book. Two thousand years of life have generated too many voices, too many conflicting purposes and programs, too many shifts and changes in how Christians have understood their faith, organized their churches, and interacted with other forces in the world. These two authors can make their case only by highlighting certain themes and tendencies, and underplaying others. Their success depends upon their ability to show how their thesis illuminates everything, including some of the factors that do not fit nicely into their schema.

I am more persuaded by their treatment of the first millennium than of the second. Perhaps it is because I am better acquainted with

the history of Christianity since the Protestant Reformation than I am with the thousand years that preceded Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, and Menno Simons and their descendants. The interaction of Christian theologians and ecclesial leaders with philosophers, scientists, ethicists, artists, and politicians has been—and continues to be—overwhelmingly complex. The fracturing of the church into ever more different types, ever more different systems, ever more diverse cultures makes the challenge of creating thematic simplicity increasingly difficult. One wonders if any theme can explain the last five hundred years with the same simplicity and clarity that Brock and Parker have achieved for the first fifteen hundred.

One of the most illuminating aspects of the first half of the book is the authors' use of art, architecture, and liturgical language, including the poetry of hymns, as primary sources for their reinterpretation. The weaving together of Eucharistic theology, political ideology, and Christian worship to portray life in paradise and then to promote death in this world illuminates so much of what has happened. In comparison with the richness of the first half of this study, the second half seems impoverished.

One other hesitation about this book needs to be mentioned. No matter how much life in this world is like paradise, it contains much that is deeply tragic. The history of Christianity and of worship includes the intertwining of the glorious and tragic themes. From time to time, the balance between them is upset and corrective measures have to be taken. Brock and Parker have given us this kind of book. In a time when official theology valorizes death, the time has come to reclaim the vision of life. The constancy and aggression of evil forces, however, have to be kept in mind. In order to do what Mircea Eliade says a world religion has to do—which is to enable believers to “cope with the terror of history”—the religion of life and glory has to absorb and overcome the historical reality of death and terror. Brock and Parker expound the way that Christians long ago accomplished this task. Churches today need help to do the same.

These hesitations about *Saving Paradise*, however, in no way diminish my serious interest in this book's primary thesis. More than anything I have read in many years, *Saving Paradise* presents the issues which I must ponder as I continue to reflect upon the nature of

the Christian faith, the character of Christian worship, and Christian life in the world.

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