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Preface

There is not, nor has there ever been, such a thing as “Christianity” or “Judaism.”

Upon even brief reflection, this perhaps startling statement is obviously true. Whose “Christianity” does one mean when using the term: that of fundamentalists, orthodox Roman Catholics, members of various mainline or evangelical denominations, or that expressed within the realm of countless nondenominational “Christian” communities throughout the world? Similarly for “Judaism”: does it refer to Zionists, the ultraorthodox, “secular Jews,” or any other place on a wide and broad canvas? To attempt to place meaningful parameters on either term is to face the reality that the words simply have no concrete and specific meaning and never have.¹

And yet, we find these labels used daily and throughout history as if they did have such concrete and specific meaning. One can take courses in “the history of Christianity” without ever confronting the radically indeterminate nature of the primary terms. One sees the media refer to “conservative” or “progressive” Christians without questioning how either qualifying adjective relates to what Jesus is actually reported to have said and done in the New Testament. We see even cautious and otherwise precise biblical scholars refer to “early Christianity” or “Judaism at the time of Jesus” as if those terms were self-explanatory.

The results of this usage have been disastrous in several ways. *First, it has been a disaster for determining whether being “Christian” can or should have any identifiable content both in terms of worldview and way of life.* People see media reports of “Christians” speaking or acting in certain ways and assume, on the one hand, that this reflects how “Christians” are supposed to act, or, on the other hand, see that “Christians” apparently hold such impossibly paradoxical and irrational views that only the mindless would identify with this label.

Second, it has been a disaster for the understanding of Western history. One surveys the sweep of “Christianity” across Europe and around the globe with its Crusades, colonialism, and conquest and quickly associates it with the power wielded by kings and their elite supporters. It is thus no surprise

1. Consider, e.g., Mason, who examines the scholarly confusion over terms such as “Jews” and “Judaism” in the context of the ancient world. Consider also the plethora of recent books challenging the assumption that there was a clear division between “Jews” and “Christians” in the first decades and even centuries of the common era, e.g., Boyarin (2006); Becker and Reed.

that people disgusted by this history of violence, oppression, and exploitation would want nothing to do with the banner under which it has been carried out over the past seventeen hundred years.

Third, it has been a disaster for interreligious dialogue, first between “Jews” and “Christians,” but also between Christians and Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others. I will leave it to people who claim one of these other categories as their “religion” to determine whether my claim is equally true for labels such as “Islam” or “Buddhism.” However, we see today how “Islam” has become associated with small factions of violent radicals, when in fact, “Islam” refers to a wide range of viewpoints and practices. When the “world religions” are engaged as if they each embody a specific and clear content, rather than a spectrum of perspectives, constructive conversation is impossible.

The impetus for this book was not directly to engage interreligious dialogue. Rather, my motivation was to trace the biblical and historical roots of “Christian warfare” and other forms of violence and domination in the name of Jesus. I hope, however, that the lens through which I engage the traditions of ancient Israel may also bear fruit beyond my initial purpose. Coming to see world history as well as current events from the perspective of the ongoing struggle between the “religion of empire” and the “religion of creation” may enable us to find new avenues for conversation among people who appear to embody different “religions” but in fact share a common worldview expressed in different cultural and historical forms. I think of the Vietnam War-era dialogue between the American Catholic monk Thomas Merton and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh as a precursor of what is possible.²

Further, this lens may enable people who have rejected “Christianity” in particular or even “religion” in general to reconsider the quest for worldviews that bond people in the pursuit of authentic inner and outer peace and justice for humanity and all creation. For example, I shared the manuscript of this book with a friend who had been raised, like me, in a family that was culturally “Jewish” but was not “religious.” Now sixty years old, he had never claimed a “religion.” Yet his perusal of the opening chapter of this book and Table 1 in particular led him to exclaim, “What you are calling ‘the religion of creation’ is just what I believe!”

Similarly, my use of the manuscript with undergraduate students at Seattle University has opened minds otherwise closed to “religion.” Countless young adults have rejected “Christianity” and “religion” because of the perception that both categories refer to the endless, violent, and hate-filled battle between people who are sure that they are “right” and their opponents are “wrong.” Many have retreated either into a vague “personal spirituality” or into a world seemingly apart from “religion” altogether. As a result, they find themselves bereft of resources to engage with others in the work for a

2. See, e.g., King (2003).

more just and humane world. However, when they discover the “religion of creation” in the Bible and beyond as presented in this book, there is excitement about a new and hopeful way to understand “religion” that they had not thought possible.

Finally, this new lens has borne fruit in ecumenical dialogue among people whose “religion” is grounded in, one way or another, the New Testament and the person of Jesus Christ. I have discovered an exciting, worldwide circle of discipleship that transcends previous denominational divides, ages, and nationalities in which people are seeking to discover and to live the authentic Way of Jesus, leaving behind the legacy of “Christian” empire. Recognizing how Jesus definitively embraced the “creation” story in the Bible while rejecting the “empire” story provides a new foundation for engaging our scriptural inheritance in service of personal, communal, and global transformation. The path to this place requires a return to “the beginning.” The ideas of “Christianity” and “Judaism” have exerted so much power across the centuries that it takes disciplined work to remove the thick layers that have been built up on our perceptions of what the Bible’s message is and where Jesus’ proclamation of “good news” fits within the larger biblical story. I hope that readers will engage this book not simply as isolated individuals, but also as small groups of people seeking to be bound together in proclaiming and practicing lifeways that are authentic, sustainable, and joyous. I believe with all my being that the Way of Jesus is a path that calls us out of “empire” and into the immediately available beauty and power of the Creator God’s realm of overflowing abundance. If this book contributes in some small way to the revealing of this path, I will be deeply grateful.

As with all my books to date, I am grateful for the steadfast and gifted team at Orbis Books with whom I’ve been privileged to work now for almost two decades, including my wonderful editor and friend, Robert Ellsberg; efficient production manager, Catherine Costello; and expert copy editor, John Eagleston. In addition, I am thrilled to thank a new member of the team, Pony Sheehan, for her beautiful cover design. Each of these talented and experienced people could find greater fame and fortune at “big name” publishers, but chose instead to participate in embodying Orbis’s four decades’ long commitment to produce books that change the world. In our challenging economic times, they have not only persisted, but have redoubled that commitment.

This book is the result of more than two decades of study, reflection, and experiments in discipleship. I could not begin to name all the people whose ideas and lives have shaped my thoughts and established the foundation on which I am laying my own stones. The list includes not only countless scholars but also friends, colleagues, and companions, both living and dead, who have sought to hear the Good News of Jesus and to do it. I truly thank God for each and every person whose insight, witness, and faith have inspired me. Perhaps this book will, in turn, inspire others to continue the joyous work to which God has called us: to love one another and all creation as we have been loved.

Introduction

“Is God on Our Side?”

THE TWO RELIGIONS

“Is God on our side?”

This question has taken center stage in many of the dramas played out on the world stage in recent years. A U.S. president claims God’s inspiration for the invasion of Iraq or Afghanistan. Suicide bombers do the will of Allah. Zionist Jews defend the “Holy Land.” There is no authority more desired nor controverted than the favor of the divine.

Many people respond to the cacophony of cries claiming God’s favor by throwing stones at “religion.” One editorial writer in a Seattle newspaper expressed it like this: “Is it any wonder so many of us who were religious and have come to doubt religion or who never were involved in religion dismiss it or harbor suspicion toward it?”¹ Others dig in their heels and substitute rhetoric and “justified violence” for conversation that seeks mutual understanding. Still others, believing in a God of inclusion and love but overwhelmed by the vehement pride of those claiming God’s support for their violent cause, withdraw to a “smaller” religion of home and hearth.

Can anything be done besides fighting fire with fire or retreating into private “spirituality”? This book attempts to join clarity of thought and deep faith in the Word claimed by Jesus in response. First, though, we must take a few steps back from the fray and look with a wider lens.

Have you ever walked into a room where people are watching a movie already in progress and tried to get a sense of what’s going on in the story? One can leap to all kinds of wild (and false) conclusions about plot and motivation of characters by taking one or two scenes out of their narrative context. Another example: have you found yourself in a foreign land or with people from a different culture and discovered (perhaps after an embarrassing moment) that you had completely misunderstood one another’s words or actions? These two kinds of experiences — confusion or misunderstanding as a result of experiences taken out of narrative and/or cultural contexts — are behind much of the failed dialogue around the question of God’s partisanship in politics, economics, and war. We already know how to fix the first problem: start the film at the beginning. The solution to the second kind

1. John McBride, “Religion Is Not a Primary Need,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 18, 2006.

of situation is similar: find out how “the others” think and act and why they believe and behave the way they do.

But how do we “start the film at the beginning” when it comes to complex global struggles? One answer is to gain as much understanding as we can about how the situation we’re in came to be. In other words, what happened from “the beginning” until we “entered the room”?

We cannot restart the disc of human history. But we can, in a meaningful way, go back “to the beginning” and discover patterns that play themselves out again and again. And this is where, perhaps surprisingly to some, one of our most helpful tools is also the world’s most frequently misunderstood book, the Bible. This ancient collection of writings, just like a modern-day film or an experience of a foreign land, can be abused by having its stories told outside of the narrative and cultural contexts in which they were composed and first heard. If you are irreversibly committed to the idea that the Bible proposes simple and straightforward “answers” that can be extracted when needed to “prove” God’s support for your views, you are likely to find this book challenging. But if you are willing to approach with an open mind, you may be joyously surprised by the wisdom the Bible contains and the light that wisdom can shed on our struggle to discern God’s partisanship in current events.

The Bible does not present a single, unified perspective on what it means to be a “Jew” or a “Christian.” Rather, it gathers together witnesses to a passionate, historical *argument* over what it means to be “God’s people.” It constantly keeps before its audience questions that must be wrestled with before our central question can even be addressed. “Which ‘god’ are you talking about?” Which ‘side’ are *you* on?”

The Bible insists that there are no “sidelines” from which to watch others do battle. All people are inevitably and unavoidably drawn into the fray, or at least its consequences, by the fact of sharing this beautiful, abundant, yet fragile and finite planet as our home. We can choose to run away, to be silent, or to hide, but we cannot choose not to *participate*. We may not agree with our neighbor’s “religion,” but we cannot remain unaffected by it.

This calls us to take our first step back to consider one of the basic terms in this argument: “religion.” Ask most people (ask *yourself* right now), “what is religion?” and you’re likely to get something like one or more of these responses. Religion is:

- ◆ a system of beliefs and practices associated with labels such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism;
- ◆ teachings that provide a moral framework for one’s life;
- ◆ things you do in a church, synagogue, or mosque;
- ◆ a set of rewards and punishments that motivate people to behave in a certain way;

- ♦ answers to questions like, “What happens when we die?” or “What is the purpose of life?”
- ♦ a remnant of more primitive times before reason and science when people developed myths to explain natural phenomena such as earthquakes or disease.

For the purpose of this book — and, I’d suggest, for the purpose of any reading of the Bible — I’d like to offer a different meaning, one grounded in the root of the word itself. The Latin *religio* means literally, “to bind again.” Even in ancient times, *religio* became associated with some of the specific practices and beliefs associated with “religions.” But I invite you to consider throughout this book its broader sense of *the attitudes, beliefs, and/or practices that bind individuals together as a “people.”*² Seen this way, there are countless “religions” beyond the organized and institutional traditions at the top of the list. Ask yourself: What binds me to other people? Consider some possibilities:

- ♦ immediate family;
- ♦ ethnicity or race;
- ♦ language (formal, such as English; technical, such as “computerese”; or popular, such as slang);
- ♦ nationality;
- ♦ neighborhood or geographic region;
- ♦ common interests, such as sports, music, arts, or hobbies;
- ♦ membership in an organization such as a labor union, professional association, or political party;
- ♦ concern for social or political issues.

It is obvious that some of these “religions” are stronger than others in that they exert a comparatively more powerful and permanent bonding force. One might scream and cheer with one’s fellow football fans, for instance, but one isn’t as likely to lay down one’s life for them as one might for one’s fellow family members or citizens. Similarly, we might feel bound to people whom we see regularly but quickly lose touch if we move away. In contrast, we are likely to stay bound to family or our ethnic group wherever we are.

2. Mason argues at length that the term “religion” does not fit any category of collective identity before at least the sixteenth century of our era. I acknowledge that my use herein is heuristic and anachronistic, not “historical.” I am not aware of another category that can be used to take into account all of the elements shown in Table 1. Further, he shows definitively that the English words “Jew(s)” and “Judaism” are anachronistic and unwarranted translations of the corresponding Greek words, *Ioudaioi* and *Ioudiasmos*. Therefore, throughout this book, I will use various substitutes, depending on context, such as “Israelite,” “Judean,” or “Jews” with quotation marks. I have left intact the use of forms of the word “Jew” in quotations from other authors.

Table 1: The Two Religions

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Religion of Creation</i>	<i>Religion of Empire</i>
Source of “divine power”	One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth	Many gods and goddesses
God’s “home”	Beyond and within creation and among people	In a temple near the palace in the royal city
Places of sacred encounter	Earth: mountains, rivers, wilderness; direct encounter; table fellowship; human intimacy	Urban temple, mediated by priestly elite; urban royal rituals
Purpose of human life	Praise God with joy in gratitude for the abundant gift of life	Serve the gods through loyalty to “empire”
Basic social structure	Egalitarian kinship	Hierarchical patronage
Basic economic structure	Gift, barter, collaboration amid abundance	Money, debt, competition amid scarcity
Basic social architecture	Village, small town	Urban, megalopolis
Basic political ideology	God alone reigns	Human king reigns as presence of supreme god
Relationship with unknown “others”	Hospitality; love	Suspicion; violence
Religious “obligations”	Love and praise of God and neighbor expressed in “right relationship” (justice)	Rituals expressing loyalty to “patrons,” both “divine” and human
Relationship with earth / land	Belongs to God; people are “tenants”	Belongs to king and those who can afford to buy it
Relationship with “enemies”	Love them	Destroy them

Some religions simply express our personal preferences, while others are vigorously passed down across the generations as “truth.”

Let’s move from this general definition of “religion” to the specific worlds of the Bible. We may presuppose that the Bible is seeking to encourage and support commitment to one of two religions called “Judaism” and “Christianity.” There are indeed two religions in the Bible vying for the loyalty of listeners and readers. But to label one as “Judaism” and the other as “Christianity” is to miss the central point.

For example, consider the topic of war. Are “Christians” *for* war or *against* war? We know that people using the label “Christian” to identify their religion fall along the spectrum from absolute pacifism to enthusiastic support for “just war.” We’d find a similar spectrum for numerous issues, such as homosexuality, poverty, abortion, the global economy, and so forth. We’d also find “Jews” who are adamant supporters of Israel and justify its defense by any means necessary, while others renounce both nationalism and

violence. Yet anywhere on these spectrums, we find people claiming “God is on our side.”

This was also true in biblical times, whether within monarchical Israel or among the first communities of Jesus’ disciples. But rather than the image of a *spectrum* to portray the range of views on topics that bind or divide people (i.e., *religious* topics such as politics and economics), we can think of the biblical authors speaking in relation to *two opposing magnetic poles*—that is, *two religions*—each pulling on people in opposite directions. The biblical narratives repeatedly show its characters pulled toward one pole and away from the other. Once we can see the Bible Story’s big picture—that is, once we start at the beginning and read it in its narrative and cultural contexts—we can see the basic pattern that repeats itself across the generations. What can be especially confusing is when people in the biblical Story gather around the pole that is *away from God* yet claim that God is on their side *in that place*.

To make this clearer, let’s jump ahead and look at the features of these “two religions” that will be revealed in our engagement of specific texts. Although this risks oversimplification, let’s call them “the religion of creation” and “the religion of empire.” That is, we can understand one of the Bible’s religions to be grounded in the *experience of and ongoing relationship with the Creator God*, leading to a covenantal bond between that God and God’s people for the blessing and abundance of *all* people and *all* creation. The other, while sometimes *claiming* to be grounded in that same God, is actually a human invention used to justify and legitimate attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for *some* at the *expense of others*. We’ll explore the details as we go. Table 1 provides a schematic overview of these two religions.

One can view all human history—indeed, the very formation of what we call “history”—as the interplay between these two religions. The Bible takes up the story about four thousand years ago, which is, in the big picture, much closer to the “end” than the “beginning” of the roughly two-million-year human existence. But that four thousand year period does give us a sufficiently wide angle with which to view current events rather than simply starting from when we “entered the room.”

It might help to pause before we engage the biblical narratives to clarify the use of the term “empire” as a label for the religion at the opposite pole from the religion of creation. Political scientist Herfried Münkler observes that

the concept of empire has had an arbitrary, often simply denunciatory meaning. Political science has not provided solid definitions and backed them up with examples, but has rather left the field to the whimsical operations of everyday journalism.³

3. Münkler, 4.

He goes on to remedy this problem by arguing for concrete and specific criteria by which one can distinguish “empire” from other forms of political power, such as “hegemony.” For our purposes, we can simply note the major elements he names:

1. “*Imperial boundaries . . . involve gradations of power and influence*”: that is, there is a structural difference between imperial and nonimperial space.
2. “*Imperiality . . . dissolves . . . equality and reduces subordinates to the status of client states or satellites*”: that is, international relations are not between equals, but between a “center” and a “periphery.”
3. “*Most empires have owed their existence to a mixture of chance and contingency*”: that is, there need not be a “will to empire” (i.e., “imperialism”) or a “grand strategy,” but rather, a series of circumstances that lead to increased power and control of people and/or territory.
4. “*The capacity for reform and regeneration . . . makes an empire independent of the charismatic qualities of its founder (or founding generation)*”: that is, there is temporal continuity that transcends the original situation that generated the empire.
5. “*An empire cannot remain neutral in relation to the powers in its sphere of influence*”: that is, it cannot allow either independence or nonparticipation without retaliation.⁴

These elements help us to avoid the risk Münkler names of reducing “empire” to a mere pejorative label.⁵ At the same time, it allows us to be inclusive of various historical social orders that were not far-flung geographically yet manifest these elements. Thus, an ancient city-state that exerts long-term authority over its neighboring cities and villages could be understood as the embodiment of the “religion of empire.”

We’ll attempt in Part I to peer “behind” history to understand where the two religions came from and why. Although we cannot literally see “the beginning,” we can make some reasonable hypotheses based on the evidence we do have. Just as astrophysicists posit “the Big Bang” and biologists a theory of evolution to explain the movement from “the beginning” until now, so too the Bible proposes its own story of origins. This Story, while perfectly consistent with the scientists’ stories, addresses different questions:

4. Ibid., 4–14.

5. Cf. the definition of “empire” offered by Goldstone and Haldon, 18–19: “a territory (continuous or not) ruled from a distinct organizational center (which may be mobile) with clear ideological and political sway over varied elites who in turn exercise political power over a population in which a majority have neither access to nor influence over positions of imperial power.” They propose this definition in relation to “state,” about which they note that “no agreement has ever been reached on a universally acceptable definition that has any real analytic value. . . . Too rigid a definition merely acts as a conceptual straitjacket that ignores the fundamentally dynamic and dialectical nature of human social organization” (4–5).

those arising from a people confronted by, but standing in resistance to, the religion of empire. From that original confrontation, the biblical Story unfolds.

This will require not taking the biblical chronology at face value but rather asking questions about when various texts were written, by whom, and why. For example, in the immediately following chapters, we’ll consider the book of Genesis. Clearly, the story of creation coming to be in the first chapter of Genesis was not written at the time it narrates. Scholars have been exploring the question of the origins of Genesis for a long time and have proposed various theories. We’ll look at how the Genesis stories resonate against a very specific background, during and after the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE.

Similarly, in Part II, we’ll take up the texts that narrate the story “from Exodus to Exile,” that is, from the call of Moses, through the settlement in the Promised Land, continuing in the time of Israel’s and Judah’s kings, and ending with the fall of Jerusalem. We may be surprised to discover the likely sequence in which this long narrative came to be, and how different parts of it speak from the perspective of each of the “two religions.” This will require unraveling the existing narrative by looking for patterns of “who knew what when.” For example, Moses is rarely mentioned in the monarchy narrative. What might this suggest about which story came first? Similarly, Abraham is almost never “remembered” in the narrative of settlement in the Land. Might this suggest that Genesis was written later than the settlement story? By asking these kinds of questions, we’ll be able to look “behind” the final version of the narratives and try to discern the order in which they were written. This will also help us to understand what “religion” each text encourages listeners to practice.

In Part III, we’ll continue this exploration in the texts written from “Exile to Easter,” that is, during the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem up to the time of Jesus. We’ll see how the temple establishment elite encouraged the practice of “royal wisdom” in collaboration with foreign empires (Persian and Greek), while voices from the margins insisted that YHWH stood against such collaboration. Some of these texts speak in the vivid imagery of “apocalyptic” visions and dreams. This will invite us to delve into their symbolic worlds to see what they’re “really” trying to say behind their “heavenly” descriptions.

Finally, in Part IV, “from Easter to the Eschaton,” we’ll engage the New Testament texts. We’ll see how Jesus spoke and acted boldly on behalf of the God of Israel proclaimed in the texts of the “religion of creation” and against those who would claim YHWH’s authority for the “religion of empire.” This bold announcement of “Good News” led the supporters of the religion of empire to persecute and kill Jesus, only to have the Creator God’s triumphant power revealed once and for all by raising Jesus from the dead. It was up to Paul, the evangelists, and other disciples to continue to proclaim and

to embody this Good News of the victory of the God of creation over the “gods” of empire.

Although the biblical Story will take up most of this book, we’ll also explore some texts that were not included in the biblical canon. Perhaps these texts were excluded because they stood in vehement opposition to the prevailing religion of empire. History’s “winners” generally do not preserve opposition voices, yet remarkably, some of these can still be heard. They remind us that, as the author of Luke’s Gospel shows (Luke 3:1–7), we must listen not only to those upon whom the mainstream media focus, but also to those in “the wilderness” who speak truth that leads to life, for humanity and for all creation.



