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Authors say church got it wrong by emphasizing crucifixion

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SAVING PARADISE: HOW CHRISTIANITY TRADED LOVE OF THIS WORLD FOR CRUCIFIXION AND EMPIRE
by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker
Beacon Press,592 pages, $34.95

"It took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century."

Those are the provocative opening sentences of the new book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Beacon Press), by Protestant scholars Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker.

Saving Paradise turns upside down the history of the church's view of Jesus' crucifixion and its stress on the importance of suffering. The authors attempt to show that for the first thousand years of its existence, the Christian church placed much more emphasis on the resurrection and paradise than the crucifixion.

Before the 11th century, Brock and Parker found, Christian imagery portrayed Jesus alive -- teaching and healing and living in this world. At first, the authors were stunned when they discovered the dearth of crucifixion images in Mediterranean churches, especially given their importance to centuries of later doctrine.

Brock, an ordained Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister and director of Faith Voices for the Common Good, and Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, Calif., are also co-authors of the critically acclaimed book, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us* . Parker has dual standing as an ordained minister in both the United Methodist Church and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Expanding on themes in *Proverbs of Ashes*, Brock and Parker argue in *Saving Paradise*, which includes 90 pages of footnotes, that the Christian church of the first millennium never stressed that Jesus' suffering on the cross was necessary for the salvation of humanity.

In *Saving Paradise*, they attempt to reveal that the early Christian community did not so much draw inspiration from suffering and the next world, but from the here and now, from earthly life and a vision of paradise.

"During their first millennium, Christians filled their sanctuaries with images of Christ ... as a shepherd, a teacher, a healer, an enthroned god; he is an infant, a youth, and a bearded elder. But he is never dead," the book says.

"When he appears with the cross, he stands in front of it, serene, resurrected. The world around him is ablaze with beauty. These are images of paradise -- paradise in this world, permeated and blessed by the presence of God. But once Jesus perished, dying was virtually all he seemed able to do."

The authors tackle what they consider the subversion of the Christian message -- exemplified by the ninth-century Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne, who instituted the death penalty for conquered people who refused to convert.

After Charlemagne, killing, suffering and dying in the name of Christ began to represent the highest honor for Christians, the book maintains.

Brock and Parker argue that Charlemagne's attitude of conquest remains an undercurrent in some countries' foreign policy, tying it into modern-day wars and imperialism.

By re-emphasizing early Christians' focus on paradise, on the kingdom of God on Earth, the authors are convinced they are reclaiming authentic "traditional" Christianity.

For instance, even though the 13th century monk, Francis of Assisi, is now admired as the patron saint of animals, the authors argue that his love of suffering marked an epochal downturn in the history of Christian theology.

When they cite how Francis of Assisi taught that "perfect joy (is) to share in the suffering of the world as Christ did," they say it was a sign of how far the Christian church had turned from promoting images of paradise and enjoyment of this earth.

Instead, *Saving Paradise*says Francis was fueled by a burning desire to be martyred, to be "torn limb from limb." He brought that belief, they maintain, to his support of the Crusades, which aimed to convert Muslims by the sword.

Alternatively, Brock and Parker urge readers to see church history in a new light, with an eye toward social justice. They call upon readers to "rekindle Christian traditions that hold fast to love and thereby teach Christian people how, in the midst of horror and tragedy and loss, to resist violence, honor the earth, and to humanize life."

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