

Glasgow August 2010

**Is there any reason at all why Unitarians should be interested in the
Apostle Paul?**

By Iain Brown

“It is better to marry than to burn.” Thus wrote Paul and his words went down the ages. In his epistles Paul quite often fulminated against fornication. In some of his writings he appears to label all homosexuality as unnatural (Romans 1: 26-27). And now here we have what seems to be his view of the very heterosexuality on which the future of the human race rests. Coming from Paul the celibate, this is a grudging acceptance at best. Elsewhere he often recommended celibacy to his followers. It has been speculated that the affliction he is often mentioned as suffering from made celibacy imperative but, even if this was so, his attitude is still a very mean ‘dog in the manger’ one towards those who can. When you put this attitude to sexuality alongside the strange coyness of the Gospels about the sexuality of the Jesus of history you might well comment that Paul gave a massive boost to the Catholic churches high valuation of celibacy, a valuation which was further boosted by St Augustine the sex addict. You may remember his famous prayer, “Oh Lord, make me chaste – but not yet.” When he did become chaste, inspired by a meditation on Paul, then, like many addicts in what Patrick Carnes calls the de-escalation phase of sexual addiction, he turned savagely against his former addiction, like smokers who have newly given up, like many drinkers who have taken to total abstinence. As the founder of the redemption theology which was the basis of the Catholic churches intrusion into the thinking and feeling of the individual through the practices of confession and absolution he also began the construction of the massive machinery of guilt-generating oppression which the Christian priesthood exercised throughout Europe.

Good. Now, having got that off my chest, I feel much better thank you!

Then there is the Paul who supports slavery, “Slaves, obey our earthly masters with fear and trembling and singleness of heart as you obey Christ” (Ephesians 6: 5); the Paul who endorses the basis of the anti-semitism which later scarred all Europe, declaring that that the Jews “killed both Jesus and the prophets” (First Thessalonians 2: 14-15) and finally there is the Paul of the subjugation of women, “Women should be silent in the churches” and “it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” (First Corinthians 14: 33-36) As Borg and Crossan comment “Half the New Testament is about Paul.”

So you can see why, even if we ignore our little local theological disagreement about Paul’s certainty of the divinity of his Christ, Paul the Apostle is not much in favour with Unitarians who love life, creativity and freedom

We might think we know enough about Paul to write him off as a bad loss to humankind. Yet, have we got it right?

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, both scholars of the Jesus Seminars have begun a fresh evaluation of the apostle in the light of the higher criticism and what recent gains in historical knowledge can tell us about the world he lived in. Each in their own ways, and recently together, in a book called “The First Paul; Reclaiming the Radical Visionary behind the Church’s Conservative Icon” they have come up with similar conclusions.

John Dominic Crossan is the probably the more helpful in understanding the world Paul lived in. In his book “God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now” Crossan reminds us of how brutal the *pax romana*, the Roman peace really was. All civilisations are built on violence and underpinned by violence and it was the technology and brilliant organisation (for its time) of the Roman military which won and held the *pax romana* that allowed civilisation to flourish in peace. The new engineering of the roads and the flood proof bridges made it

possible to send one of the twenty eight legions to any part of the empire and enforce the roman will and the roman peace. And it was Roman law, crude as we may now see it, that maintained the acceptance of their dominance because it was a version of justice the subjugated peoples could come to understand and accept.

But there was another factor, one of several, which cemented the relative acceptance of Roman rule and that was what Borg and Crossan call 'the theology of the Empire' and Paul attacked it head on, like a moth to the flame in a way which, at first, made him the true spiritual successor of Jesus.

The Roman Emperors were indeed worshipped as gods and unless you lived in too close proximity to them to be taken in, that made quite a lot of sense at the time. Once Augustus had defeated Anthony and Cleopatra and finally unified the whole Mediterranean world, the cult of the emperor as god made rapid progress. What Borg and Crossan call "this imperial theology" was, if you like, the 'hearts and minds' programme of Roman domination. It was Rome's non-violent power of persuasion which was as essential to the maintenance of the empire as the Catholic church was to the maintenance of law and order by the secular powers in medieval Europe.

This theology claimed that Rome, to quote Crossan, "was a transcendental empire divinely mandated to rule without limits of time or place. It did not simply proclaim dominion around the Mediterranean Sea. It announced world conquest, global rule and eternal sovereignty. This belief was propagated everywhere, like a saturation advertising campaign, in poetry (Virgil especially, but Ovid and Horace too) and prose. It was on the coinage, in countless inscriptions and texts, at the beginning and end of all public speeches. Since the world was ruled by gods or a god and the emperors were the solid ever present evidence of that rule it was but a small logical step to perceive the emperor as god.

We in the UK came near enough to it with the Stewart doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings.

So Augustus, the Emperor, was the glorious, the triumphant one, the Lord (with a capital letter) and he was the saviour of mankind (especially in the case of Augustus who saved the known world from war and brought peace). No titles were too much: "Divine"; "Son of God"; "God from God"; "Lord"; "Redeemer"; "Liberator"; "Saviour of the World". Augustus was called all of these within the lifetime of Jesus. So a good citizen of the empire believed that the roman religion of the state (emperor as God) brought victory and through victory, peace. And the results were plain for all to see in public safety and prosperity. It all worked, so the 'theology', as Crossan calls it, must be right. No?

Now, perhaps, we can see more clearly where a lot of the Christ-language of Paul comes from. "Ridiculous or grossly overblown" we might call it today, if it was used of any man, but in those days it was no such thing. The same kind of language, I learned a few years ago, was used of the emperor gods of China at that time and of the heads of several states in the history and geography of humankind. My father used to say to me that I could not ignore a man who made the sweeping claims that Christ did. I had no answer then but ignored the claims just the same. Now I do so with more confidence.

It is interesting how intoxicating this imperial language can be. The psychoanalysts would say that the intoxication arises from the identification with power. One of the roots of the superego was supposed to be the identification with authority. The child is on the side of big daddy and so has, magically, all his power. We all have known people who have identified with authority and derived a false power from doing so. In this way the man with the battered ego, and the tattered clothes to go with his reputation, can rise from the doss house and walk the streets proclaiming the end of the world and the redemption of the Christ and enjoy all the intoxication of power by proxy

by being on the right side, the side that the bookies of the scriptures forecast will win. Instant ego boost.

Crossan says of the early Christians “they were taking the identity of the Roman emperor and giving it to a Jewish peasant. Either that was a peculiar joke or a very low lampoon, or it was what the Romans called *majestas* or high treason.” It was more than that. It was blasphemy too.

Almost all of Paul’s writings were in the 50s in the first century so when the gospels came to be written 20 years later the ideology of Paul with what I shall call his ‘anti-theology of empire’ was almost certainly in widespread currency among the first Christians. And so it crept into all of the seed literature of the Christian movement. And of course three hundred years later when the Roman state was crumbling in internal strife, it fitted nicely into the Emperor Constantine’s need for a replacement imperial theology. And it became the foundation for a replacement imperial church with all the power, and more, of the old ideology!

There is a sense in which we, today as the inheritors of the Christian religious left, laud the Jesus of history for taking on the Jewish establishment of the Sanhedrin and risking his life because he must have known that the Sanhedrin was hand in glove with the Roman power which eventually silenced him. He was a radical reformer within the Jewish tradition but had little concerns outside Judaism with the wider Roman state. But Paul, if he was a Roman citizen, must have known that, as a radical in a larger and much more dangerous fish pond, he was on a suicidal path in what he was advocating. It took a while for the Roman state to catch on to him and catch up with him, but of course it did. There is also a sense in which if Jesus was a ‘pink-going-to-red’ reforming Jewish prophet critical of the establishment, and therefore subversive, then Paul was not just ‘full red’ but an incandescent white-hot revolutionary beside him. So Paul gave early Christianity a powerful

and disruptive dynamic for change. And the Empire persecuted him and his followers.

And what were the values of Paul's revolution? Equality, non-violence, justice and compassion – all the values of the Jesus of history. Paul was a true successor in a significantly different and larger world. As an educated and able man who was no stranger to the abstract thinking of the Greeks, he was a universalist, not in the narrow nineteenth century theological sense, but in the wider, best sense of the word.

So what went wrong and why did my opening tirade raise some appreciation among you Unitarians?

There may seem to be a sad story about what happened to Paul the radical who, as he aged, might seem to have to have moved to Paul the conservative, even to Paul the reactionary. It looks like a common story but most of what we now hold against him seems almost certainly to be not genuine Paul himself.

Borg and Crossan are largely agreed that we can identify what might seem to be four stages in the development of Paul's thought on social issues. The lower textual criticism, largely by computer analysis, has identified seven books of the New Testament, the epistles – Romans one, second Corinthians, first Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians and Philemon – as definitely genuine Paul. These, Borg and Crossan contend, can be seen as conveying the first stage of Paul's thinking, what they call the radical Paul. There is a disputed group of letters, seen by most scholars as not genuine Pauline. These include Ephesians, Colossians and second Thessalonians and Borg and Crossan label them the conservative Paul. Finally, three letters were almost certainly not written by Paul and indeed belong to a period after his death. These are: first and second Timothy and Titus and Borg and Crossan label them as the reactionary Paul.

Borg and Crossan write, "The genuine letters of Paul are the oldest witnesses we have to what was to become Christianity." Some, but not all, of the quotations I have given you on slavery, homosexuality, subjugation of women, guilt of Jewery belong to the disputed writings of Paul but enough remain as genuinely Paul's, without going into details, to draw a picture of a man, very much of his time - and not of ours.

So why did Paul take the bull by the horns and take on the Roman state, head on, over the titles of the Christ of the cosmos as opposed to the deified Roman head of state as embedded in the theology of the empire?

First, it might have arisen from Paul's private personal experience as attributed by Luke to the vision on the road to Damascus. So let us take a moment to look at what we know of Paul's private personal experience from a twenty first century western perspective.

Visions are what we have, can sometimes share and accept as authentic or not. Hallucinations are private experiences which we can describe but may not be shared by anyone else or accepted as anything more than a private experience of no social significance. In seventeenth century Puritan England visions were essential to have if you were to have any spiritual authority at all. Lots of people had them. I always remember how three of the Mormon fathers went into the forest to fast and seek guidance as to whether the tablets found in the field were from God or not. Two saw a vision confirming their authenticity. The third did not but he went back into the forest and, after fasting for another fortnight, he too had a vision which authenticated them. So, too, claims of experiences of spiritual regeneration may or not be genuine but can, in my view, best be judged by the actions that arise from them. Paul's Damascus road experience could not have happened on the road to Damascus as Luke claims and there is considerable controversy about what it was, a visual experience or an auditory one. But be that as it may, it certainly established Paul's credentials and therefore his authority as a spiritual leader in the milieu of his times. .

Second, I guess Paul usurped the imperial titles for his own Christ and Lord because in doing so and thus reducing the emperor to the Jewish peasant was a dramatic expression of the egalitarian values of the Jesus of history, but on a wider and riskier stage. The implicit message was “This is more important than the state religion.”

I guess, and this is only a guess, that he felt deeply, driven perhaps by the universal ‘that of God within’, or as later theology would put it, by the Holy Spirit, that he should promote the values of what he knew of the Jesus of history but he could not struggle free of the imperialist thinking of his time. So he used the very ideology of the empire to turn it on its head, making a second mirror image ideology, without being able to develop a third ideology of his own. Who can blame him from 2000 years and a wider world later?

Third, I guess Paul usurped the imperial titles for his own Christ and Lord because it was superb publicity and propaganda. What better way of attracting attention than by opposing the ubiquitous advertising of the current dominant power?

Of course it got him into trouble. Probably it took the authorities such a long time to catch up with him only because he was always on the move.

There many other aspects of Paul which are of less interest to Unitarians:

- How his Damascus Vision leads naturally on to a belief, not so much in a physical resurrection but rather in the continuing existence of his cosmic Christ on another plane of existence**
- How his thinking laid the basis for the whole redemption theology with substitutionary atonement and the divinity of the cosmic Christ which we, as Unitarians reject**

- **How his emphasis on salvation by faith affected the protestant reformation – of which we also are a product**

There are many others but today I have tried to throw light on the titles of the cosmic Christ – which also we Unitarians mostly reject.

So worship is not about prostrating ourselves before a God of many titles as if he or she was some Roman emperor or eastern potentate