

John Dominic Crossan

By Tawa J. Anderson

Definition: February 17, 1934, in Nenagh County, Tipperary, Ireland.

Selected Publications: *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*; *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon*; *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative*; *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*; *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*; *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*; *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus*.

Affiliations: Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, DePaul University (Chicago); Co-Founder of the Jesus Seminar.

BIOGRAPHY

John Dominic Crossan is one of the most prominent, prolific, and popular Historical Jesus scholars of the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Born “John Michael Edmund Crossan” to a banking family in Tipperary, Ireland, Crossan excelled in school, graduating at 16. Growing up in the south of Ireland, Catholicism was an unquestioned aspect of personal and family identity. After high school, Crossan entered the Servite Order, a monastic Catholic community, not due to personal piety, but rather due to the monastic promise of adventure and excitement. In the Servite Order, Crossan was given the new name “Dominic.”

After seven years of monastic preparation, and having been recognized as a promising priest-scholar, Crossan was sponsored for further education, and completed a Doctor of Divinity in his native Ireland and post-doctoral studies in Italy and Jordan. He then returned to the Chicago area to teach in the Catholic Theological Union. There, he fell in love with Margaret Dagenais, with whom he became sexually involved (in clear violation of his vow of celibacy). Crossan was already drawing scholarly conclusions that departed from Catholic orthodoxy, and in 1969 received a ‘dispensation’ from the Servite Order. He promptly married Margaret, and was hired to teach Religious Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, where he remained until (and past) his 1995 retirement.

In addition to his teaching duties at DePaul, Crossan has been a remarkably prolific researcher, writer, and speaker. He began publishing articles focusing on Jesus’ parables and historical-critical study of the Gospels, culminating in his first (post-Servite) book, *In Parables*, published in 1973. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Crossan continued to publish extensively, with a particular focus upon literary criticism and parable interpretation.

Margaret died tragically in 1983; Crossan re-married (Sarah Sexton) in 1986. In the later 1980s, Crossan’s focus shifted toward historical Jesus research, which led to the best-selling book *Historical Jesus* that serves as the fulcrum of John Dominic Crossan’s career.² The *New York Times* review of *The Historical Jesus* launched the book to the top of the religious best-seller chart, where it remained for six months. His publisher, Harper San Francisco, sponsored a lengthy tour to promote the book, and Crossan appeared in numerous bookstores and newspapers, and on many television and radio programs, presenting his fundamental conclusions regarding Jesus. It also served as the source for the next twenty-five years of Crossan’s academic publishing.

Over the course of Crossan’s forty-five-year (post-Servite) academic career, he has authored twenty-two books, co-authored another six (three with Marcus Borg, two with Jonathan Reed, and one with Richard Watts), contributed forty-eight chapters to compilations, and published another sixty-three articles in academic and popular journals. He has lectured at fifty-six scholarly conferences, been invited to deliver nearly one hundred fifty academic lectures, and presented over two hundred fifty popular lectures and addresses.³ His scholarly conclusions are widely disseminated through his books, popular lectures, and public appearances.

Simply put, John Dominic Crossan has been arguably the most prominent, popular, persuasive, and prolific historical Jesus scholar of the past fifty years.

MAJOR CLAIMS

John Dominic Crossan publishes widely, and his scholarly arguments include numerous controversial and heterodox conclusions.

Structuralism / Metaphor: First, Crossan believes that there is no history beyond language—history is not a concrete reality consisting of actual past events, but rather is constructed through language about past events. In essence, our language about the past creates the past in our understanding. So, too, our words in the present create our present reality—a school of thought known as *structuralism*.⁴ The historical Jesus, then, can only be known through the words about him, particularly the parables contained in the Gospels. Those parables, in turn, are purely metaphorical in nature, intended to engage the listener in the parabolic world through ornament (beauty), illustration, and participation. Crossan's structuralism has grave implications for traditional religions, propositional religious truth, and transcendental experience.

"If there is only story, then God, or the referent of transcendental experience, is either *inside* my story and, in that case, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition I know best, God is merely an idol I have created; or, God is *outside* my story, and I have just argued that what is 'out there' is completely unknowable. So it would seem that any transcendental experience has been ruled out, if we can only live in story."⁵

Hence, God can only be known within our linguistic constructs, and cannot be said to exist of His own nature—His existence is dependent upon the language and thoughts of human beings.

Religious Pluralism: Crossan argues in favor of religious pluralism, insisting that the major world religions are equally valid responses to divine reality. Crossan holds that religion is like language: human beings are hard-wired for both in the abstract, but each is realized as a concrete particular. Crossan insists that the 'ultimate reality' should not be conceived of exclusively in theistic terminology. Thus, Crossan prefers to avoid terminology such as "God" in religious studies, preferring the "common rubric of the Holy."⁶ In Crossan's estimation, particular religious responses to the Holy are equally valid and effective. The world's major religions are equally valid responses to the Holy, and use different metaphors to describe and relate to the Holy. As a consequence, Crossan holds that the metaphors and parables used by various religions should be accepted on the same terms. Thus, the narrative of Jesus' miraculous conception in Matthew and Luke must be treated on a par with the divine conceptions of Caesar Augustus, Alexander the Great, and the Buddha.

Divine Consistency: Crossan embraces a naturalistic worldview which he terms "divine consistency." On the one hand, Crossan affirms the reality of miracles, even stating that Jesus healed people: "The power of healing is a gift of God built permanently into the fabric of the universe."⁷ On the other hand, radically redefines miracles, such that Jesus' healings were not "interventions in the physical world," but rather re-orientations of "the social world." Indeed, Crossan explicitly states that Jesus "did not and could not cure that disease [leprosy] or any other one."⁸ When miracles are understood in their traditional fashion (as suspensions or violations of the natural order by a divine agency, Crossan emphatically rejects their very possibility. For example, Jesus could not have raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11), the proclamation of that resuscitation is the reason why "churches are losing credibility."⁹

The Historical Jesus, Sources & Conclusions: Crossan spent the better part of two decades studying the Historical Jesus. Academically, he began with an examination of early sources concerning Jesus of Nazareth. In the process, he drew some conclusions that were contested by some and considered speculative by others concerning the earliest and most reliable documents.

First, the Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the canonical Gospels written (not terribly controversial), but was preceded by an earlier version, *Secret Mark*, which has homoerotic overtones and was later suppressed by the church. Mark originally writes, not the recollections of Peter as held by church tradition, but explicitly to oppose Petrine authority in Jerusalem. Second, the canonical Gospels are all written by anonymous authors, none of whom knew or followed Jesus. Third, the *Gospel of Thomas*, discovered in Nag Hammadi in the 1940s, predates the canonical tradition, with its earliest version dating to the 50s.¹⁰ Furthermore, Thomas is written by a community of Christians independent of the Jerusalem/canonical tradition, exemplified by a focus on the life and teaching of Jesus and an entire lack of interest in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Fourth, both Matthew and Luke use an independent source, *The Sayings Gospel Q*, which dates to the 50s and shows (like *Thomas*) no interest in Jesus' miracles, death, or resurrection. Fifth, the *Cross Gospel*, now embedded within the second-century *Gospel of Peter*, was written around A.D. 50, and serves as the sole source for the canonical passion-resurrection narratives.

When you combine Crossan's structuralism, pluralism, and naturalism with his highly unusual assessment of historical Jesus sources, the outcome is predictably unorthodox. Thus, Crossan

holds that Jesus did not work miracles, but rather counter-culturally embraced the outcast and the sinner; he did not come to be a Savior for the sin of man, but rather a wisdom teacher who spoke in aphorisms and parables; he did not die to atone for wrongdoing, but rather to express divine opposition to violence of all forms; he was not born of a virgin, but rather was presented as the alternative to Roman power and oppression.

The Resurrection & Life After Death: Crossan's conclusions regarding the historical Jesus become most pronounced when it comes to His post-mortem fate. He was once asked: "Do I personally believe in an afterlife? No, but to be honest, I do not find it a particularly important question one way or the other."¹¹ Crossan emphatically rejects heaven and hell as post-mortem fates, and holds to the absolute extinction of the human person at death.¹² Sadly, when Crossan does acknowledge his presumption of human finitude, he neither explains how he arrived at that position, nor critically examines the perspective. Post-mortem extinction is simply presupposed without comment or defense. That unexamined presupposition has tremendous effects upon Crossan's scholarly reconstructions. First, Crossan states unambiguously, "I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time, including Jesus, brings dead people back to life."¹³ When the Gospel of John portrays Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, Crossan simply confesses that "I do not think this event ever did *or could* happen."¹⁴ Second, if there is no life after death and if no one, at any time, in any place raises anyone else from the dead, then *the resurrection of Jesus Christ absolutely cannot be a literal bodily resurrection*. Third, the resurrection becomes for Crossan metaphorical rather than literal, symbolic rather than bodily. More fully, Crossan argues that Jesus' disciples fled before his crucifixion; afterward, Jesus' body was unceremoniously tossed into a shallow grave to be eaten by dogs—hence, no empty tomb to be discovered. His disciples had grief hallucinations wherein they saw their beloved rabbi after his death; eventually those visions were presented as resurrection appearances, and were utilized to convey the ongoing meaning and significance of Jesus' mission and ministry in the community of Christian faith. If Crossan's reconstruction of the resurrection as a metaphor is correct, then Christianity as historically conceived is gravely mistaken and in need of serious reformation. Indeed, if we follow the Apostle Paul's clarion call in 1 Corinthians 15, then historical Christianity has been a tragic waste of time.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Structuralism / Metaphor: Crossan's embrace of structuralism (the belief that language constructs reality) is self-referentially absurd. As many philosophers have noted, if structuralism were accurate, it would mean that we could cure HIV by simply ceasing to talk about it—no language of HIV = no infected patients = no further deaths from AIDS. Indeed, we could also conveniently do away with unpleasant historical realities like the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Black Plague, American slavery, and the Holocaust. As nearly everyone is aware, there is a real physical world beyond us, that exists and has objective properties that hold regardless of my particular beliefs. Words may have significant power and influence, but they do not change historical reality—they might alter the way *people understand history*, but that is *not* the same thing as constructing reality.

Religious Pluralism: Given Crossan's belief that there is no life after death, no salvation, and no resurrection, the extent to which religions are 'equally valid and effective' is limited to personal self-transformation. This not how religions understand themselves. Rather, the world's great religious traditions (Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) articulate unique and exclusive truth-claims about reality, human nature, the human predicament, and the solution to our problems. Furthermore, Crossan's underlying claim that religious traditions contain a response to the same divine reality is refuted by the mutually contradictory claims they actually make: e.g., divine reality is an impersonal all-pervasive force in Hinduism, but a transcendent personal being in Christianity.¹⁵

Divine Consistency: Crossan's 'divine consistency' could be perceived as deceptive, and masks an unbiblical naturalism. He tries to maintain a Christian stance by affirming divine activity and Jesus' miracles, yet defines both out of existence—God *only* works through the fabric of the natural (never via direct intervention), and Jesus only 'healed *social illness*' by accepting the outcast, but never 'cured *physical disease*' because that is impossible. Crossan's naturalism trivializes the ministry of Jesus, and renders the rise of early Christianity astoundingly incomprehensible. Table fellowship with lepers and prostitutes would have been insufficient either to get Jesus killed or to mobilize an enduring movement. Furthermore, it is more reasonable to believe that Jesus did in fact cure physical disease in the first century and that, furthermore, God continues to do the same around the world today.¹⁶

Historical Jesus, Sources & Conclusions: Crossan's unorthodox conclusions concerning the Jesus of history are dependent upon his unsustainable assertions regarding historical Jesus sources.

Without those source-claims, Crossan's reconstructed Jesus (including his view of the resurrection) is a house of cards. But those source-claims are tendentious, specious, and widely-rejected by scholars across the theological spectrum, including many highly skeptical scholars.¹⁷ First, it is broadly conceded that *Secret Mark* is a non-existent source, a forgery foisted upon academia by Morton Smith.¹⁸ Second, Crossan's contentions regarding *The Gospel of Thomas* are circular and false. One assumption (independence) produces a conclusion (an early date) which then supports the original assumption. Furthermore, there are good textual and historical reasons for dating *Thomas* to the late 2nd century, rather than the mid-1st century. Perrin persuasively argues that *Thomas* is dependent upon Tatian's *Diatessaron*, while the early church fathers show no awareness.¹⁹ Third, scholars have conclusively demonstrated that Crossan's hypothesized *Cross Gospel* is without textual or testimonial foundation.²⁰

The Resurrection & Life After Death: Crossan gives no logical or evidential support for his presupposed worldview belief that human life ceases at death. His rejection of Jesus' bodily resurrection is driven exclusively by that unexamined worldview presupposition. There is, however, good reason to believe that death is not the end of us—evidence from near-death experiences (NDEs) is strong and persuasive.²¹ Furthermore, Crossan's reconstruction of Jesus' resurrection as a metaphor or symbol does tremendous violation to the biblical texts and the historical church. Crossan is unable to account for the conversion of Paul the violent opponent or James the skeptical relative; nor can he account for Jesus' appearances to groups of disciples (grief hallucinations are private events, not shared experiences). If one is not committed to Crossan's structuralism, naturalism, and post-mortem extinction, there will be literally no reason to take his stance on Jesus' post-mortem fate seriously.

John Dominic Crossan is one of the most: witty, kind, and gentle biblical scholars one could hope to meet. His unorthodox conclusions do not undo his intelligence or sincerity. However, an examination of Crossan's scholarship demonstrates that all of his conclusions are built upon tendentious and unsupported worldview presuppositions.

Notes

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*.

² Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.

³ Information derived from John Dominic Crossan, "Professional Resume," [on-line], accessed 20 February 2017, <http://www.johndominiccrossan.com/Professional%20Resume.htm>; Internet.

⁴ Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, 10.

⁵ Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, 40-41. Emphasis original.

⁶ Crossan, *A Long Way from Tipperary*, 101.

⁷ Crossan and Watts, *Who Is Jesus*, 69.

⁸ Crossan, *Jesus*, 82.

⁹ Halsted, "The Orthodox Unorthodoxy of John Dominic Crossan," 514. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 428. Crossan's dating of *Thomas* has gotten progressively earlier over the years. In his first mention of *Thomas*, Crossan suggests a date "from the late 4th or early 5th century." John Dominic Crossan, *Scanning the Sunday Gospel* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), 139.

¹¹ Crossan and Watts, *Who Is Jesus*, 131.

¹² "Sarah [Crossan's second wife] says she hopes I am wrong about that afterlife stuff. But, be that as it may, my own hope is for a church empowered by divine justice that will take on the systemic normalcy of human violence. A church, in other words, that will oppose rather than join that process. That is more than enough hope for me. The rest, I am afraid, is parable at best and fantasy at worst." Crossan, *A Long Way from Tipperary*, 202.

¹³ Crossan and Watts, *Who Is Jesus*, 77. The same phrase, without "including Jesus," appears in Crossan, *Jesus*, 95. In both contexts, Crossan is describing how the story of Lazarus' resurrection or resuscitation is not (cannot be) a historical account of a literal event but rather a metaphorical incarnation of "the process of general resurrection," how "Jesus brought life out of death."

¹⁴ Crossan, *Jesus*, 94. Emphasis original.

¹⁵ The most cogent critique of religious pluralism is to be found in the work of Harold Netland, particularly his *Encountering Religious*

Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel and Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); and Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

¹⁷ See, e.g., F. Neirynck, "The Apocryphal Gospels and the Gospel of Mark," in *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, ed. Jean-Marie Sevrin (Leuven-Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1989), 133; idem., "The Historical Jesus: Reflections on an Inventory," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 70 (1994): 233; Hans-Martin Schenke, "The Mystery of the Gospel of Mark," *The Second Century* 4 (1984): 71; Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel of Peter and Canonical Gospel Priority" *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 321-43. See O'Collins and Kendall, "Did Joseph of Arimathea Exist?" *Biblica* 75 (1994): 237-38.

¹⁸ For Smith's claims, see Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); and idem, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973). For the lengthiest refutation of Smith's claims, see Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ For a fuller treatment, consult Craig A. Evans, Robert L. Webb and Richard A. Wiebe, *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian*; and Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel of Thomas and St. John's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 9 (1962-1963): 155-77.

²⁰ See, e.g., Tawa J. Anderson, "The Myth of the Metaphorical Resurrection" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011); Raymond Brown, "The Gospel of Peter and Canonical Gospel Priority," 333.

²¹ See, e.g., Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998).



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