

# John Dear, *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence* (Orbis Books, 2024)

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**Review: John Dear, *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence* (Orbis Books, 2024).**

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I usually do not review reference books, because they are designed to be dipped into and consulted for specific targeted information, not read straight through. For example, biblical commentaries are usually designed to be used as reference books to be consulted for information about specific biblical passages, not read straight through.

However, the prolific American Catholic diocesan priest and advocate of and activist for nonviolence John Dear (born in 1959), of the diocese of Monterey, California, a former Jesuit (1982-2014), who lives in Cayucos, California, has designed his new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence* as a biblical commentary on each of the three synoptic gospels. In it, Father John Dear says, “This book is probably the first ever commentary on the Gospels from the perspective of nonviolence” (p. xvi).

Now, in Father John Dear’s 2011 book *Lazarus Come Forth! How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us into the New Life of Peace*, he discusses the Gospel of John. The concise *Wikipedia* entry about the prolific Father John Dear lists the books he has written and edited.

Now, Father John Dear himself says, “Matthew’s Gospel includes 90 percent of Mark’s Gospel; Luke’s Gospel includes 50 percent of Mark’s” (p. 148). These percentages regarding Mark’s Gospel suggest that perhaps it would be most efficient to read Father John Dear’s commentary on Mark’s Gospel (pp. 148-221) first. In it, Father Dear says, “The best scripture commentary

ever written on this Gospel is Ched Myers's masterpiece, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*" (Dear, 2024, p. 149; Myers, 1988) – which Dear often refers to in parenthetical references in the text as *BSM*. The main title of Myers' book alludes to the Gospel of Mark 3:27: In a parable, Jesus says, "But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man" (NABRE, 2010). In Myers' 1988 book, he provides "References" (pp. 473-489) and three indexes: (1) a "General Index" (pp. 491-494), (2) an "Author Index" (pp. 495-497), and (3) a "Scripture Index" (apart from the Gospel of Mark; pp. 498-500). Myers frequently draws on the works of New Testament scholars, including four works by the New Testament scholar Werner H. Kelber of Rice University (pp. 24, 93, 95, 106, 187, 188-189, 210n.2, 217, 225, 280, 327, 328, 417, and 434). Kelber is the distinguished author of the 1983 book *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*, with a "Foreword" by Walter J. Ong, S.J. (pp. xiii-xiv).

Now, as an aside, I should point out here that now-former Harvard University president Claudine Gay's plagiarism in her published works has been in the news lately – just as the posthumously discovered plagiarism of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his published works was in the news at one time in the past. However, in ancient times, during the time of the Roman empire, when the anonymous authors of the synoptic gospels known as Matthew, Mark, and Luke were composed and written down in ancient Greek, the still predominant lingua franca, not in Latin nor in Hebrew or Aramaic, our modern notions of plagiarism had not yet been formulated. For further discussion of Dr. King's posthumously discovered plagiarism, see Keith D. Miller's 1992 book *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources*.

Incidentally, on the reverse side of the title page in Father John Dear's new 2024 book *The*

*Gospel of Peace*, we read “Includes bibliographical references and index.” But the book does not include an index. No doubt an index would call attention to the understandable repetition in the book. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to have an index in the book.

Now, if you have no interest in the three synoptic gospels, then you will probably not be interested in Father John Dear’s new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace*. However, in honor of opednews.com Jewish founder Rob Kall’s fascination with bottom-up imagery, I should also mention here that Father John Dear says, “My hope and prayer are that every Christian from now on will read the Gospels from the perspective of Gandian/Kingian nonviolence, and that with this perspective, we might all choose Jesus’s way and wisdom of active nonviolence, that we might carry on Jesus’s bottom-up, people-power grassroots campaign of creative nonviolence for global disarmament, justice, and environmental sustainability” (p. xxix).

Now, Father John Dear, the former Jesuit, refers to the Spanish Renaissance mystic St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order, when he says, “We are told to let our light shine, and if we do this, we glorify the God of peace, which is the ultimate goal; in the end, it is the only goal that matters. St. Ignatius put it this way: try to go even beyond that and bring ‘greater’ glory to God” (p. 21). It is true enough that St. Ignatius Loyola himself originally used the expression in Latin “Ad majorem Dei gloriam” (For the greater glory of God) that Jesuits popularized as a kind of motto – and made into an inscription: A.M.D.G.

The American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) wrote perceptively about this expression in his article “A.M.D.G.: Dedication or Directive?” in the now-defunct Jesuit-sponsored journal *Review for Religious* (September 15, 1952); it is reprinted in volume three of Ong’s *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 1-8).

Digression: With Father Ong’s permission, I unofficially audited his ambitious interdisciplinary

graduate course Polemic in Literary and Academic Tradition: An Historical Survey in the summer of 1971 at Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in the City of St. Louis. The course met daily from June 22, 1971, to July 27, 1971. Ong had earlier explored polemic in his 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (for specific page references to polemic, see the “Index” [p. 354]), the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University. In any event, the material that Ong worked up in his course on polemic became the basis of his 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University – published as the book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness* (1981).

Now, at the time when I unofficially audited Ong’s course on polemic in the summer of 1971, James Brown McGinnis III (1942-2009) was serving as the director of the Institute for the Study of Peace (later known as the Institute for Peace and Justice) at Saint Louis University – a position he held as he worked on his Ph.D. in philosophy (with a doctoral dissertation on *Freedom and Its Realization in Gandhi’s Philosophy and Practice of Non-Violence* [1974]). In any event, McGinnis arranged to have Ong offer his course on polemic in the summer of 1971 (Ong had offered it for the first time in the spring semester of 1971). And McGinnis also arranged to have Ong tape record each class meeting in the summer of 1971. In any event, we may infer that the psychodynamic of what Father Ong in his 1967 book refers to as polemic and of what he refers to in his 1981 book as contest is not necessarily incompatible with what Father John Dear refers to in his new 2024 book as peace and nonviolence. The complete antithesis of polemic and contest would be a completely catatonic state.

The theme of faith and justice, which expands the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, emerged into prominence in Roman Catholic circles after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). For further discussion of Catholic social teaching, see Anna Rowlands’ 2021

book *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*. For further discussion of the ongoing reception of Vatican II, see *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (2023).

In any event, based on what I learned in Ong's course on polemic in the summer of 1971, I subsequently published the article "The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric" in *College English* (1978-1979). Later, I published the essay "Faulkner and Male Agonism" in the book *Time, Memory, and the Verbal Arts: Essays on the Thought of Walter Ong*, edited by Dennis L. Weeks and Jane Hoogestraat (1998, pp. 203-221). Most recently, I have further discussed Ong's thought about contesting behavior in my 6,350-word 2024 review essay "Harvey C. Mansfield's and Walter J. Ong's Thoughts About Male Agonism" that is available online through the University of Minnesota's digital conservancy. End of digression.

Now, in the detailed table of contents in Father John Dear's new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace* (pp. vii-xi), he provides far too much detail regarding specific contents of each of the three synoptic gospels for me to reproduce here. Suffice it to say that Father John Dear discusses "Matthew: The Mountaintop Sermon of Nonviolence" (pp. 1-147); "Mark: The Radical Discipleship of Nonviolent Resistance to Empire" (pp. 148-221); "Luke: The Grassroots Campaign of Peace, Nonviolence, and Compassion" (pp. 222-395). Father John Dear's "Conclusion" (pp. 396-397) is short and succinct.

In Father John Dear's "Acknowledgments" (pp. 402-403), he says that his new 2024 book "is the culmination of a series of books about Jesus: *The [300] Questions of Jesus* [2004], *Jesus the Rebel* [2000], *Lazarus Come Forth!* [2011], *The Beatitudes of Peace* [2016], *They Will Inherit the Earth* [2018], and *Walking the Way* [2015; rpt. 2021]" (p. 402).

The dates of publication of these books (2000 to 2018) show that Father John Dear has been ruminating about the New Testament texts and nonviolence for more than two decades. In other words, his new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace* represents an admirably lucid synthesis

-- a tour de force. Through Father John Dear's close commentary in his new 2024 book, he demonstrates that his understanding of Gandian/Kingian nonviolence enables him to closely interpret the three synoptic gospels as coherent literary works. Consequently, it is not unreasonable to conclude that each of the three anonymous authors understood the teaching of the historical Jesus.

Now, because Father John Dear ruminated on these matters for more than two decades, people who read his new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace* should not expect to digest it perfectly the first time they read it.

In Father John Dear's "Introduction" in his new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace* (pp. xiii-xxix), he says, "I have used only the New American Bible [revised edition, 2010] as my source. I consider it one of the best translations, if not the best, of the New Testament. It has two sets of excellent footnotes, and I highly recommend it" (p. xxiii). The Large Print version of the *New American Bible: Revised Edition* (NABRE; 2010) is attractive and easy to read.

In the subsection titled "What Is Nonviolence Anyway?" (pp. xx-xxi), Father John Dear operationally defines and explains this key term. He says, "In an effort to define nonviolence, I proposed in my book *The Nonviolent Life* [2013], that the holistic nonviolence of [Mohandas] Gandhi and [the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther] King demands three simultaneous attributes: [1] we have to be nonviolent to ourselves; [2] at the same time, we have to be nonviolent to all people. All creatures, and Mother Earth; [3] and also at the same time, we have to be part of the global grassroots movement of nonviolence. We can't just pick one or two of these attributes; we have to practice all three at the same time, otherwise it's not the holistic, authentic nonviolence of Jesus, Gandhi, and King" (p. xxi).

For a recent biography of Dr. King (1929-1968), see Jonathan Eig's *King: A Life* (2023) – which I reviewed in my *OEN* article "Jonathan Eig on the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

(dated May 28, 2023).

I discuss Dr. King's significance in my life in my *OEN* article "Thomas J. Farrell on Thomas J. Farrell" (dated November 17, 2023).

Now, in overall spirit, Father John Dear's new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace* is somewhat related thematically to the 2007 book *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* by the historical Jesus expert John Dominic Crossan. However, even though Crossan's 2007 book includes an "Index" (pp. 243-257), it does not include a list of "References."

Concerning the teachings of the historical Jesus, see my 9,000-word 2022 review essay "John Dominic Crossan on the Historical Jesus's 93 Original Sayings, and Walter J. Ong's Thought" that is available online through the University of Minnesota's digital conservancy.

Now, on the occasion of the celebration of the fiftieth World Day of Peace, January 1, 2017, Pope Francis (born in 1936), the first Jesuit pope, issued his message titled *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace*. Subsequently, Pope Francis published the book *Against War: Building a Culture of Peace* (2022).

I have succinctly profiled the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis in my *OEN* article "Pope Francis on Evil and Satan" (dated March 24, 2019).

However, I should also mention here that Pope Francis is not popular with certain vociferous conservative American Catholics – as the Italian Catholic papal biographer and philosopher Massimo Borghesi discusses in his book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock (2021; orig. Italian ed., 2021).

They say that birds of a feather flock together. Consequently, it is not surprising that Father John Dear, who has been writing about nonviolence for more than two decades, refers positively to Pope Francis' 2017 and 2022 publications about nonviolence. It would now be wonderful if Pope Francis were to discuss Father John Dear's new 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace* in one of his own future messages!



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