

A Probe of John Dominic Crossan's 2022 Book *Render Unto Caesar*, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Article abstract

I style my short essay here as a probe because it is exploratory in nature. In it, I use certain points from the work of the American Jesuit Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) to explore possible alignments with certain points in the Irish American biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan's 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar: The Struggle Over Christ and Culture in the New Testament*.

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A Probe of John Dominic Crossan's 2022 Book *Render Unto Caesar*, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Abstract: I style my short essay here as a probe because it is exploratory in nature. In it, I use certain points from the work of the American Jesuit Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) to explore possible alignments with certain points in the Irish American biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan's 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar: The Struggle Over Christ and Culture in the New Testament*.

My favorite scholar is my former teacher at Saint Louis University, the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter Jackson Ong, Jr. (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). In 2000, I published my book *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* – which won the Marshall McLuhan Award for Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology, conferred by the Media Ecology Association in June 2001. It is an introductory-level survey of Ong's life and eleven of his books and selected articles. In addition, I explored certain aspects of Ong's thought in my article "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom Can Help Us Understand the Hebrew Bible" in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2012). In it, I further explore what Ong refers to as the world-as-view sense of life and the world-as-event sense of life in his article "World as View and World as Event" in the *American Anthropologist* (August 1969). Ong's 1969 essay is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 69-90). Briefly, I align the Hebrew Bible with what Ong refers to as the world-as-event sense of life, albeit in the case of the Hebrew Bible, a residual form of the world-as-event sense of life. For the record, I also align the New Testament with a residual form of what Ong refers to as the world-as-event sense of life. In addition, I align the Homeric epics with what Ong refers to as the world-as-event sense of life, even though they were transcribed by literate ancient Greeks. Ong aligns the world-as-view sense of life with ancient Greek phonetic alphabetic literacy as exemplified in Plato and Aristotle – and in the subsequent Western tradition of philosophy. For further discussion of the Homeric epics, on the one hand, and, on the other, Plato, see the classicist Eric A. Havelock's 1963 book *Preface to Plato*.

For a relevant discussion of the Hebrew Bible, see the biblical scholar, James. L. Kugel's 2017 book *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*. Kugel's use of the term Shift in his title calls to mind Ong's use of the expression "aural-to-visual shift" in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history in his pioneering media ecology account of our Western cultural history in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (for specific page references, see the entry on aural-to-visual shift in the "Index" [p. 396]). But what Ong refers to as the aural-to-visual shift is not a once-and-done shift; rather, it is a gradual, albeit dramatic, and ongoing shift – which is

why Ong uses the terms hypervisual and hypervisualism to refer to further developments after print culture emerged in our Western cultural history.

I explore Ong's account of the aural-to-visual shift in his massively researched 1958 book in my OEN article "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020):

https://www.opednews.com/articles/Walter-J-Ong-s-Philosophi-by-Thomas-Farrell-Communication_Communications_Communications_Consciousness-200920-664.html

In Ong's 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of Ong's 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University, he indicates that he is working with the conceptual construct of the sensorium (for specific pages references, see the entry on Sensorium in the "Index" [p. 356]).

Now, Ong bookends his account of our Western cultural history with what he refers to as primary orality and secondary orality – with the predominance of visuality in ancient and medieval Western culture. In this way, Ong works with a kind of threefold account of our Western cultural history. However, he also uses the terms hypervisual and hypervisualism to characterize the visualist accentuation in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s, producing **print** culture. By his use of the terms hypervisual and hypervisualism, Ong means to differentiate the visualist accentuation in print culture from the preceding visualist accentuation in ancient and medieval culture in our Western cultural history – thereby producing a kind of fourfold account of our Western cultural history.

I have discussed Ong's account of our contemporary secondary orality in my essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991).

Now, in 2022, the controversial Irish American biblical scholar, and historical-Jesus specialist, John Dominic Crossan (born in 1934 in Ireland; Doctor of Divinity degree, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1959) published the learned but accessible book *Render Unto Caesar: The Struggle Over Christ and Culture in the New Testament* – he is a gifted writer. In it, our learned author discusses the entire sweep of books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as well as certain related literature. However, even though our learned author is also a prolific author, he does not refer to any of his own publications in his 2022 book.

Now, Crossan is controversial primarily because of his densely reasoned 1991 book *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.

The American Catholic Dr. Peter Steinfels reviewed Crossan's 1991 book in the *New York Times* in his article titled "Peering Past Faith to Glimpse the Jesus of History" (dated December 23, 1991):

<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/23/us/peering-past-faith-to-glimpse-the-jesus-of-history.html>

In Dr. Steinfels' review, he says, "But for many scholars looking not with the eyes of faith but the lenses of historical research, Jesus of Nazareth is an elusive and puzzling figure, one who was probably not born in a stable or even in Bethlehem, whose personal life was a mystery and whose essential message remains subject to vastly different interpretations."

Subsequently, Dr. Steinfels says, "in recent years, different scholars have sketched the

historical Jesus as a political rebel, an ancient magician, a maverick Pharisee, a thoroughly Jewish prophet announcing that God was about to restore Israel, and a Hellenistic gadfly with no mission beyond questioning the world's conventions.

“Professor Crossan’s [1991] book reflects a shift away from the depiction of Jesus as proclaiming an imminent end of the world and coming of God’s kingdom. The professor argues that although Jesus was originally a follower of the apocalyptic prophet, John the Baptist, he became a wisdom teacher using Zen-like aphorisms and puzzling parable to challenge social conventions.

“By His parable, miraculous healings performed without reward, itinerant lifestyle and insistence that meals be shared with all and sundry, Jesus challenged the Mediterranean codes of honor and patronage, the professor says, as well as all the hierarchical and patriarchal assumptions of Jewish religion and Roman imperial power.”

Yes, these are claims that Crossan makes in his 1991 book. But why would these claims about the historical Jesus make Crossan’s 1991 book controversial among contemporary Christians? What, exactly, do contemporary Christians believe about what biblical scholars refer to as the historical Jesus? Or is it the case, that for many contemporary Christians their sense of the historical Jesus is just a composite of the Jesus portrayed in the four canonical gospels? In any event, Crossan subsequently published the bold and daring short 1994 book *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images*. In it, he identifies what he refers to as 93 original sayings of the historical Jesus. I focus on it in my article “Walter J. Ong’s Bold Thought and John Dominic Crossan’s Timid View of the Historical Jesus” in *New Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication* (2022):

<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/nexj/article/view/38353>

Now, on the inside front flap of the dust jacket on Crossan’s 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar*, we are told that it is a “follow-up to his prophetic book *God and Empire*.” In 2007, Crossan published his book *God and Empire; Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*. In Crossan’s “Prologue” in his 2007 book *God and Empire* (pp. 1-5), he says, “I emphasize that contrast between Pilate’s Kingdom of Rome as violent repression and Jesus’s Kingdom of God as nonviolent resistance because that juxtaposition is the heart of this book, which is an attempt to rethink God, the Bible, and empire, Jesus, Christianity, and Rome” (p. 5). Now, more recently the American Catholic diocesan priest John Dear has explored three of the four canonical gospels from the perspective of nonviolent resistance in his 2024 book *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence* – but without any references to Crossan’s works.

I reviewed Dear’s new 2024 book in my OEN article “John Dear on the Synoptic Gospels and Bottom-Up Nonviolence” (dated January 31, 2024):

<https://www.opednews.com/article/John-Dear-on-the-Synoptic-Bottom-up-Jesus-Nonviolence-Nonviolence-240131-874.html>

Now, Crossan’s 2007 book *God and Empire* comes equipped with an “Index” (pp. 243-257), but his 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar* does not. We can scan the pages of the “Index” in his 2007 book and see at a glance all the specific references in it to contemporary American events. But contemporary American events are not a prominent feature in his 2022 book – even though our contemporary American polarization provides the matrix for Crossan’s 2022 book in what are known as our culture wars. Hence, Crossan’s reference to culture in his

subtitle. However that may be, Crossan's 2022 book would have been strengthened by the addition of an "Index" – or at least by the addition of an "Index of Scripture Passages" because of the enormous number of scripture passages that Crossan quotes.

Now, the sociologist James Davison Hunter (born in 1955; Ph.D. in sociology, Rutgers University, 1981) of the University of Virginia originated the term culture wars in his 1991 award-winning book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. According to the *Wikipedia* entry about Hunter, his 1991 book "describes a battle for control of American culture and social institutions fought between conservative religious groups (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) and their politically progressive counterparts."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Davison_Hunter

So in our contemporary American culture wars, the warring parties are conservative religious groups, on the one hand, and, on the other, their politically progressive counterparts? Even though former President Donald Trump is not famously religious, his most ardent MAGA supporters tend to be. But President Joe Biden is known as a devout Catholic, and yet he also tends to embrace a politically progressive agenda.

Hunter further explores the psychodynamics of our contemporary culture wars in his new 2024 500-page book *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis*. The columnist Michael Sean Winters reviewed Hunter's new 2024 500-page book in two installments in the *National Catholic Reporter*: (1) "New book examines cultural roots of our political crisis" (dated June 21, 2024); and (2) "From 'culture wars' to 'cultural exhaustion': James Davison Hunter diagnoses our cultural ills" (dated June 24, 2024):

<https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/new-book-examines-cultural-roots-our-political-crisis-0>

<https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/culture-wars-cultural-exhaustion-james-davison-hunter-diagnoses-our-cultural>.

Now, the most efficient way for me to provide you with an overview of Crossan's 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar* is to tell you it's parts:

Prologue: "Triumph Too soon, Tragedy Too Fast" (pp. 1-8).

Overture: "The Things of Caesar and the Things of God" (pp. 9-21).

Part One: "Culture Rejected and Demonized" (p. 23).

Chapter 1: "God Shall Overcome Someday" (pp. 25-38).

Chapter 2: "The Coming of What Is Already Present" (pp. 39-52).

Chapter 3: "The Once and Future Beast" (pp. 53-67).

Chapter 4: "Among These Dark Satanic Hills" (pp. 68-82).

Chapter 5: "The Longest Lie" (pp. 83-103).

Part Two: "Culture Accepted and Canonized" (p. 105).

Chapter 6: "Creating a Counternarrative" (pp. 107-125).

Chapter 7: "'Whom Paul Had Taken with Him'" (pp. 126-143).

Chapter 8: "The Vision of Roman Christianity" (pp. 144-161).

Chapter 9: "The Way of the Holy Spirit" (pp. 162-184).

Chapter 10: "The Cost of Acculturation" (pp. 185-207).

Part Three: "Culture Confronted and Criticized" (p. 209).
Chapter 11: "The Invention of Nonviolent Resistance" (pp. 211-222).
Chapter 12: "'We Are Unarmed, as You See'" (pp. 223-237).
Chapter 13: "'Jesus Called Christ'" (pp. 238-249).
Chapter 14: "Sanctions and Sabbaths" (pp. 250-262).
Chapter 15: "'Love Your Enemies'" (pp. 263-273).
Epilogue: "The Things of God Against the Things of Caesar" (pp. 275-280).
Appendix A: "Intercultural Translation of 'Kingdom of God/Heavens'" (pp. 281-283).
Appendix B: "Violent and Nonviolent Response to the Romanization of Israel" (pp. 285-286).
Appendix C: "Genesis 1:1-2:4a as Overture to the Bible" (pp. 287-288).
"Notes" (pp. 289-290).

On the opening page of Crossan's Prologue: "Triumph Too Soon, Tragedy Too Fast," the title is followed by a somewhat lengthy epigraph from pages xx-xxi of Mike Duncan's 2017 book *The Storm Before the Storm* about certain bleak-sounding echoes in our contemporary American Republic and the ancient Roman Republic, which eventually gave way to the rise of the Roman Empire under Augustus (63 BCE – 19 CE). In Crossan's 2022 Prologue, he informs us that he worked on the Prologue to his bleak 2007 book *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (pp. 1-5) in Hiroshima on May 8, 2006.

In this way, Crossan's Prologue in his 2022 book calls to mind Christopher Nolan's 2023 blockbuster film *Oppenheimer*, starring the Irish actor Cillian Murphy as J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who was instrumental in the development of the atomic bomb that President Harry Truman dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 to bring World War II to an end. Ah but, did the world-historical bombing also signal the beginning of the end of the American Republic – and the possible definitive rise of the gradually emerging American Empire -- parallel to the rise of the Roman Empire under Augustus? No, I do not think that former President Donald Trump is nearly as clever as Octavian was. Nevertheless, I do see Trump-the-presidential-candidate in 2024 as a threat to our American Republic. However, I admit that the parallels that Mike Duncan enumerates in the epigraph to Crossan's 2022 Prologue are cogent. Now, as you can see, the word overture appears twice here. In the first instance, the title "Things of Caesar and Things of God" is followed by three epigraphs: (1) "The things of Caesar *give back (apodote)* to Caesar" – Mark 12:17; (2) "*Give back (apodote)* therefore the things of Caesar to Caesar" – Matthew 12:21; and (3) Then *give back (apodote)* the things of Caesar to Caesar" – Luke 20:25 (these are evidently Crossan's own literal translations of the Greek texts; the italics are in his texts in the epigraphs). In my estimate, the title of the Overture combined with the three epigraphs pretty much serve as an overture of the Overture – and of the title of Crossan's 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar*.

In Crossan's Chapter 9: "The Way of the Holy Spirit," he says, "One way to start a production in music, film, or literature is with an *overture*, which introduces in symbol, metaphor, or parable the major theme of themes organizing, controlling, and dominating the work as a whole" (p. 162; his italics).

Crossan goes on the claim that "parabolic overtures appear in Matthew 1-2 for the whole of Matthew and in Luke 1-2 for the whole of Luke-Acts" (p. 162). For Crossan, following Father Joseph A. Fitzmyer, the work known as Luke-Acts was written as one single work but with two parts. In Crossan's Chapter 13: "'Jesus Called Christ,'" he says, "The Greek verb used for fighting (*agonizomai*) [in John 18:36] – whence our word 'agony' – indicates a spectrum of struggle from striving in a nonviolent sport to fighting in a violent battle. The former usage is

always a positive metaphor in the New Testament, as, for example, Christian life as ‘fighting the good fight’ (1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). In the present context [of John 18:36], ‘fighting’ is rejected by Jesus and should be taken to mean violent attack rather than nonviolent attempt” (p. 246).

Crossan’s short discussion of the Greek verb used for fighting in John 18:36 calls to mind Ong’s use of the term agonistic in his 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness*, the published version of Ong’s 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

Now, in Crossan’s Chapter 14: “Sanctions and Sabbath,” he says, “A *preface* starts or opens a book, but an *overture* summarizes or symbolizes it – in a phrase, a paragraph, or a chapter. . . . Keep the power of overture in mind as we turn now to the Hebrew Bible, which begot the Greek Bible, which begot the Christian Old Testament, which begot, *mutatis mutandis*, the Christian New Testament – that is, the re-New-ed – Old Testament. That bible begins with the book of Genesis, but how does Genesis begin – not with Genesis 2-11 but with Genesis 1?” (pp. 253-254; his italics). “Those who assembled the Hebrew Bible placed Genesis 1:1-2:4a at the front not just as a start but as an overture, not just as an obvious beginning but as an enabling vision for the whole Bible” (p. 254).

“The Sabbath is not a creation by God, but a state of God. It is not made by God but lived by God. *Distributive* justice is not a suggestion or a command of God, but the nature or character of God. It derives from God’s *distribution* of existence to everything and, especially, of God’s own image and likeness to humanity” (p. 256; his italics).

“How can Genesis 1:1-2:4a and its Sabbath climax be an overture through which we see the entire Bible? What is the *biblical* purpose and *biblical* meaning of the Sabbath – especially for humans as agents acting for and with the God of the Sabbath?” (pp. 256-257; his italics).

Now, as we can see in the above outline of the parts of Crossan’s 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar*, Crossan constructs a three-part structure in his 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar*. We have noted above how Ong constructs a sweeping threefold account of our Western cultural history – with the visualist accentuation of ancient and medieval and modern Western cultural history lumped together. Yes, to be sure, what Crossan discusses in Part Two of his 2022 book unfolded in ancient and medieval and modern Western cultural history. This alignment seems to leave the door open to aligning what Crossan discusses in Part Three of his 2022 book with what Ong refers to as secondary orality. This alignment sounds basically hopeful. Now, what Crossan discusses in Part One of his 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar* includes demonizing certain things. Consequently, because of this pronounced tendency to demonize certain things, I align what Crossan discusses in Part One with a residual form of what Ong refers to as primary orality, albeit the shadow form – and with what Ong characterizes as the world-as-event sense of life.

I align what Crossan discusses in Part Two of his 2022 book with what Ong refers to as the world-as-view sense of life, not with what he refers to as the world-as-event sense of life. However, I would align what Crossan discusses in Part Three of his 2022 book with what Ong refers to as world-as-event sense of life, but not with the shadow form involved in demonizing certain things.

I am here borrowing the term shadow form from Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's 1990 book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*. According to Moore and Gillette, each of the four archetypes of mature masculinity carries with it two shadow forms, but only one optimal form. (As far as I know, Ong does not use the expression shadow form in connection with primary orality or in connection with the world-as-event sense of life. As far as I know, he does not use the expression shadow form in connection with anything else either. As long as I am spelling out what Ong does not say anywhere, I should also point out here that he does not happen to use the expression demonizing either. But he does note the strong virtue-vice polarity that he associates with primary orality and with residual forms of primary orality. See his 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* [regarding virtues and vices, pp. 29, 80, 83-85, 200-222, and 255-258; and regarding hostility, pp. 131-138, 195-222, and 236-241; and regarding polemic, pp. 195-222, 236-255, 293, 301].)

In conclusion, Crossan's learned but accessible 2022 book *Render Unto Caesar: The Struggle Over Christ and Culture in the New Testament* is a far deeper and more profound exploration of our contemporary American situation than his 2007 book *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* was. As to whether or not Crossan's 2022 book contains the seeds for ameliorating our contemporary American culture wars, your guess is as good as mine. But it could, provided that reading his book persuades readers to undertake learning the art of nonviolent resistance.

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