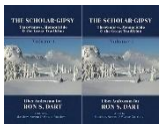
Chapter 5: Ron Dart and the Multiverse: Reflections



Two others (Matthew Steem and Brad Jersak) and I also worked on another book project in 2024, done for a good friend, Ron Dart,[1] with contributions from 84 colleagues, students, and above all, friends: *The Scholar-Gipsy: Thrownness, Memoricide & the Great Tradition: Volumes 1 & 2*. Not a *Festschrift*, requested Ron, but a *Liber Amicorum — Book of Friends.*
The following is my contribution.

The term "*multiverse*" has a current *cachet*. Indeed, Ron for decades has taken us on an exploration that is multi-varied, multi-voluminous, and sometimes poetically multi-verse. Hardly though, the stuff of pop celluloid or comic books.

We first met in the 1980s at Marineview Chapel, Vancouver, while Ron was completing an MCS at Regent College UBC, Vancouver British Columbia. He preached from time to time at that church, memorably on social justice/peacemaking themes.

In the early 2000s, Ron donated to a prison visitation agency I'd become Director of. I wrote him a thank-you note and asked about getting together with him. That was the beginning of (for me) a frontier-crossing friendship that has endured.

At Regent College, I had been challenged to apply theological understandings to Christian vocation; to broaden my theological horizon to see that the Judeo-Christian Tradition addresses the pressing sociopolitical, indeed the vast ecological/cosmological realities of existence; to understand that Christian vocation is to be lived in the social/political realm — *in short all-of-life realm!* — in accord with the nonviolent way of the Cross. Ron became a nurturer/guide along that new path.

I was further introduced by him to more writings of the Church Fathers and Mothers; to an array of other theological writings throughout the centuries; to an understanding that the Reformation in fact sewed the "*DNA of schism*" (Ron's phrase) into the Church politic, and I ultimately discovered,[2] that the Christian faith is ". . . the most influential framework for making sense of human existence that has ever existed,"[3] and ". . . still shapes the way that even the most secular modern people think about the world."[4]

An increased interaction began with Ron's co-founding the Contemplative Order of the Sons of the Holy Cross.[5] The Order has stimulated an array of (mainly Anglican — *not I*)

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Dart, accessed August 23, 2024.
[2] As for instance charted by noted historian Tom Holland in Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World.
[3] *Holland, Dominion*, 535.
[4] Douthat, "The World Christmas Made." https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/21/opinion/sunday/christian-past-secular-present.html, accessed February 22, 2024.
[5] See: http://sonsoftheholycross.org/, accessed August 23, 2024.

Christians to deepen our faith journeys. We meet regularly at Ron's home (*Chelsea*[6]) and go on an overnight retreat twice annually. It has been very meaningful. Ron also initiated in 2022 an annual publication of collected writings by Sons members, entitled *Legatum*,[7] each year designated by a further uppercase Roman numeral.

Ron, together with a retired head chaplain for Correctional Services Canada (Jesuit-trained[8]) Gerry Ayotte, have been meeting more or less bi-monthly at Hugs in a Mug Coffee Bistro[9] in Abbotsford for a few years. These have been precious times. *Anyone is welcome to join with us!*

Over the years, Ron has many times contributed to a website I keep. He also regularly posts to Clarion Journal: For Religion, Peace & Justice,[10] whose gatekeeper and frequent contributor is Orthodox theologian, Brad Jersak.[11] Brad is representative of so many students, friends, scholars, etc., whom Ron has mentored, and continues to do so — attested to in this lovely publication.

I have gone with Ron, sometimes together with others, on long hikes. Ron is an experienced mountaineer, hiker, skier, etc. He has also published in that field. I have travelled with him on lecture tours; co-planned events; listened to his presentations on an array of topics; read (edited and published one of) his books,[12] listened to his podcasts.

Above all, I have ever felt privileged to be, simply, a friend — one of so many *amicorum!*

There has been one issue, which, though not an elephant in the room, is nonetheless *elephantine* in import. While Ron and I have walked/spent many miles and years together, that's not to say we're always in lockstep. One of so many qualities I love about Ron is his generous, irenic spirit. He knows my thoughts on the following quote. Part of honouring him is reminding myself that where our opinions here somewhat diverge, he's never used that as an occasion to break our fellowship.

While I have understood Erasmus to have been the premier 16th-century pacifist (and Christian humanist), whose writings for instance inspired and taught Anabaptists their pacifism, Ron writes in the book I published for him:

But Erasmus was no absolute pacifist. He was very much the nimble, subtle and nuanced owl of his age, ever finding a thoughtful and navigating a thoughtful pathway between the pacifist doves and warlike hawks.[13]

Ron's assessment that such thinkers are "*the nimble, subtle and nuanced owls of their*

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[6] Ron named his residence after that of T. S. Eliot, who lived in a three-bedroom flat, London England, on the third floor for 11 years between the 1940s and early '50s, likely penning a number of his greatest works in that space.

[7] Latin for Legacy. See Dart, Legatum II.

[8] Gerry, at Ron's invitation, led us in two sessions on Ignatian Spiritual Exercises at our "Sons" 2023 spring retreat. They were graciously delivered and inspirational. They are available here: https://youtu.be/bGW9Xkvylo8, accessed August 23, 2024.

[9] Formerly Clik's. Some jokingly say this is Ron's second office!

[10] See: https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2018/06/institute-for-religion-peace-and-justice-this-just-in-annual-newsletter.html.

[11] See: https://bradjersak.com/, accessed August 23, 2024.

[12] Erasmus: Wild Bird, Abbotsford: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

[13] Dart, *Erasmus*, vii.

age" has always struck me as passing strange. If "*Teaching the Gospel Message that Jesus was totally nonviolent, and we're called to be nonviolent too*,"[14] then aren't exception caveats in the otherwise dovish Erasmus more of a departure from *The Way* than being "nimble" on *The Way*? And can it be denied that Erasmus' opposition to church militarism became part of his legacy — *not* nimble path-picking between doves and hawks?

As Grant Havers points out in this publication with his review of Ron's *The North American High Tory Tradition (NAHTT)*, Ron can tend towards what at times appear as slight "*Procrusteanisms*."[15] Havers writes:

I am instead calling for the need to avoid an ahistorical romanticism towards the "good old days," a temptation which is all too evident within conservatism today.[16]

With reference to Ron's depiction of "the 'pre-Reformation world' as exhibiting dominant ways of 'the good, true and beautiful'" in England, Havers also says:

One does not have to be a diehard Marxist to smell the romanticism in this portrait of history. . . In short, the pre-Reformation world wasn't missed by poor immigrants who, mercifully, escaped it.[17]

Havers also points to a too-rosy portrait of Grant and others on matters of white superiority, that certainly tend towards racism. He writes:

> . . . the High Tories whom Dart celebrates often embraced attitudes which do not square with the leftist or egalitarian features of Red Toryism.[18]

I wonder whether this is not the case too with Ron on Erasmus and whether sometimes the *via media* path inclines towards ahistoricism. And of course: *we all are tempted to fit our ideas to preconceptions.*

I think Erasmus would find much of his view echoed in an understanding by Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh,[19] who makes clear (in drawing on an article by sociologist Charles Tilly, entitled "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,"[20] which explores the analogy of the State's monopoly on legitimate violence with protection rackets), that

> . . . a portrait of war makers and state makers as coercive and self-seeking entrepreneurs bears a far greater resemblance to the facts than do its chief alternatives: the idea of a social contract, the idea of an open market in which operators of armies

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[14] The Beatitudes Center for the Nonviolent Jesus, https://beatitudescenter.org, accessed August 23, 2024.

[15] Use of such a word is rare, and is based upon the idea of a "Procrustean bed," which is seen to be an arbitrary standard of forced conformity to one's presuppositions, etc. (See *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procrustes, accessed August 23, 2024.)

[16] Havers, "Book Review," 144 – 145, (for context see 142 - 145).

[17] Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* writes: ". . . the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." (XIII.9, 1651/2023)

While this was written during a time of Civil War in England, it could also in many ways be descriptive of pre-Reformation Britain. We read:

> . . . in the decades from 1430 to 1480, the "Plague" returned in force. An outbreak in 1471 took as much as 10 — 15 per cent of the population, while the death rate of the plague of 1479 — 1480 could have been as high as 20 per cent. (*cont'd*) (*Wikipedia*, "Black Death in England," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death_in_England, accessed August 23, 2024.)

[18] Havers, "Book Review," 141.

[19] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_T._Cavanaugh, accessed August 23, 2024.

[20] Tilly, "War Making."

> and states offer services to willing customers, the idea of a society whose shared norms and expectations call forth a certain kind of government. . .[21]

Tilly argues that historically, what distinguished "legitimate" violence had little to do with the assent of the governed or the religious sentiments that bind. *The distinction was secured by emerging nation-states' effective monopolization of the means of violence within a defined territory*, a gradual process only completed in Europe with the birth of the modern State in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The line between State violence and banditry was a fluid one early in the State-making process. *Eventually, the personnel of States were able to purvey violence more efficiently and on a wider scale than the personnel of other organizations*.[22]

My conditional "*If*" above is of course the *nub*. As I read Jesus in the Gospels,[23] might not one wonder that the burden of proof is on those "nimble" thinkers to explain why they *seem* to contradict/obviate/set aside what Jesus explicitly taught: *Love your enemies*?

What follows is not so much an argument *for* Christian Pacifism as *making space for* a challenge to its alternative, *in one's commitment to taking Jesus and the New Testament seriously*.[24] It does not address the minefield of thorny practical issues of "*living in, but not of, the world.*"[25] Then again, neither does Jesus.[26]

But if, on this issue, one does not take the witness of Jesus and the New Testament as primary, what is one left with but "the apparently countervailing forces of tradition, reason, and experience," as cited below by New Testament theologian Richard Hays?[27] One then must surely ask:

> By what authority does one privilege these "countervailing forces" — and not

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[21] **Tilly,** "War Making and State Making," 169.

[22] For more on this, please see my post on: "A FIRE STRONG ENOUGH TO CONSUME THE HOUSE: THE WARS OF RELIGION AND THE RISE OF THE STATE.", https://waynenorthey.com/2020/03/07/a-fire-strong-enough-to-consume-the-house-the-wars-of-religion-and-the-rise-of-the-state/, accessed February 22, 2024.

A classic instance of Charles Tilly's contention is the founding and perseverance of the mini-Empire, the modern state of Israel.

[23] The outstanding, massive study to be guided by is Willard Swartley's magisterial *magnum opus*, Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics. My book review is found here: "Covenant of Peace," https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/covenant-of-peace-2/, accessed February 22, 2024; and in Dart *et al.*, Legatum II.

The author understates at the outset:

> Put simply, why have *peace* and *peacemaking* been topically marginalized in the NT academic guild? (Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 3.)

Noted New Testament scholar Richard Hays, in his book review, "The Heart of the Gospel (https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2007-05/heart-gospel, accessed February 22, 2024)," writes:

> Willard Swartley's powerful, comprehensive study of the theme of peace in the New Testament is his *magnum opus*. Swartley describes the book as a study of a single neglected theme in scripture and offers it as "a companion volume to texts in New Testament theology and ethics." But this volume is something much more. Not just an overgrown dictionary article on eiréné [peace] in the New Testament, *it is nothing less than a comprehensive theology of the New Testament presenting peace as the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity.* (Emphasis added.)

[24] This issue is discussed much more extensively in my post, Northey, "Christian Pacifism."

[25] John 17:16.

[26] Jesus, however, does expressly say in John 16:5 - 16 that this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

[27] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_B._Hays, accessed August 23, 2024.

Jesus and the New Testament?

This is an immensely pressing issue. If not Jesus, what?

. . . If not Jesus, why not?

Richard Hays writes:

> One reason that the world finds the New Testament's message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. . . This indictment applies alike to liberation theologies that justify violence against oppressors, and to establishment Christianity that continues to play chaplain to the military-industrial complex, citing just war theory and advocating the defense of a particular nation as though that were somehow a Christian value.[28]

Then, a little later:

> This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason,* and *experience*.[29]

"Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world,"[30] writes recently deceased contemporary cultural observer and theologian, Walter Wink.[31]

More than any religious spirituality, he argues, *violence is the cultural air we breathe* — like no other. How can this be so after 2,000 years of Christian influence on Western/world culture, as described in Tom Holland's book,[32] noted above?

Exception-Clause Footnote Theology?

Search as I might throughout the New Testament, I find nowhere any "*exception-clause footnote theology*"[33] at work that permits, let alone encourages, an end-run around this central text and theme. Surely a "nimble mind" does not try to find a way around this, while seemingly ignoring that

> *. . . peace [is] the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity.*[34]

Whereas, one must wonder at the apparent abnegation or refusal of simply seeing this unifying theme of the New Testament!? Or. . .?

Test Case for Love of God

For is not the *enemy* in the New Testament *extreme test case of neighbour*? When asked for the Greatest Commandment, one might say, Jesus gave two for the price of one, implying —

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[28] Hays, Moral Vision, 343.
[29] Hays, Moral Vision, 341.
[30] Wink, Engaging the Powers, 13.
[31] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Wink, accessed August 23, 2024.
[32] Holland, *Dominion*.
[33] See Northey, "Exception Clause."
[34] Hays, "Heart of the Gospel." He is reviewing Willard Swartley's *Covenant of Peace*.

did he not? — that the first is predicated upon, and nonexistent without, the second (Matthew 22:40)?

Might one not rightly express it thus?:

> *The Gospels indicate that the test case for love of God is love of neighbour. The test case for love of neighbour is love of enemy. Therefore, to the extent we love neighbour and enemy, to that extent we love God. And to the extent we fail to love neighbour and enemy, we fail to love God.*[35]

Though so many Christian theologians for over two millennia privileged a "God of violence" *à la* Old Testament, Jesus as God's final Word (John 1 and Hebrews 1) says God's entire revelation to the ancient Hebrews is ethically summed up in two simple *requirements*:

Love God. Love neighbour.[36]

One asks:

Do then "nimble minds" . . . *see* something in the New Testament that isn't there?; *fail to see* in the New Testament what is there? *Or . . .?*

For (if I might push Ron's beloved metaphor to another awareness) "nimble, subtle and nuanced owls," unlike doves, are vicious birds of prey too — a point Erasmus himself made about the warring princes' use of avian imagery.

Thinking to attach themselves to the nobility and strength of eagles, Erasmus points out that those nations that used them as their standard become vicious predators.[37] Erasmus writes the following definitively — if not with a dash of understatement — and opts for what some dub "*the evil of two lessers!*"[38]:

Finally, [war] is not compatible with the purity of the gospel, and *we must not seek to derive the right to go to war from gospel precepts[!]*. . . There are many necessary evils in human affairs, which are tolerated because they prevent greater evils; yet they are not approved as gospel teaching.[39]

In stating it so plainly, Hays' "*unambiguous witness of the New Testament canon*" comes to the fore. He writes elsewhere:

> . . . the immediate result — as [Karl] Barth observed — is to underscore how impressively univocal is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point.[40]

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[35] Søren Kierkegaard wrote:

> *Love to God and love to neighbor are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open the one without opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other*. (Kierkegaard, 3: 2434.)

[36] Matthew 22:34 - 40.

[37] Erasmus wrote:

> If you want a comparison for the tyrant, take the lion, bear, wolf, or eagle, all of which live on their mangled prey. Since they know they are open to the hatred of everyone and are beset with ambuscades all around them, they dwell on rugged cliffs, or hide away in caverns and desolate regions — unless perchance the tyrant exceeds the savageness even of these beasts. (*Institutio principis Christiani,* in *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Desiderius Erasmus, trans. Lester K. Born, New York: Octagon Books, 1965, 16.)

[38] See: "Lesser," Wikipedia.

[39] Erasmus, *Christian Prince*. One asks of Erasmus: Is not "the lesser of two evils" concept nowhere to be found in the Gospels?

[40] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 329.

Agreed: Erasmus was not an "absolute pacifist." He was, however, all but thus — much like Thomas Merton,[41] another much-admired-by-Ron (20th-century) brilliant Catholic writer. Ron writes in *Erasmus*:

> Erasmus and Merton had strong pacifist leanings, and this was not a convenient position to hold in an age dominated by hawks or bourgeois just war theorists. Erasmus and Merton were very much soul friends as prophets to their times.[42]

Catholic sociologist Gordon Zahn comments in Thomas Merton: The Nonviolent Alternative:

> His careful elaboration of what he considered to be the Christian's mission with respect to war and peace was, to this observer's way of thinking, profoundly pacifist.[43]

The same may be said of Erasmus.

Finally, in this brief inquiry, there must be a nod at least to the most unusual approach to this issue I have ever read: Killing From The Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War.[44] Acknowledged, this takes us outside the New Testament witness, but addresses Erasmus' utilitarianism.

Of it:

> Armies know all about killing. It is what they do, and ours [America's] does it more effectively than most. We are painfully coming to realize, however, that we are also especially good at killing our own "from the inside out" silently, invisibly. In every major war since Korea, more of our veterans have taken their lives than have lost them in combat. The latest research, rooted in veteran testimony, reveals that the most severe and intractable PTSD — fraught with shame, despair, and suicide — stems from "moral injury."
>
> But how can there be rampant moral injury in what our military, our government, our churches, and most everyone else call just wars? At the root of our incomprehension lies just war theory — developed, expanded, and updated across the centuries to accommodate the evolution of warfare, its weaponry, its scale, and its victims.
>
> Any serious critique of war, as well as any true attempt to understand the profound, invisible wounds it inflicts, will be undermined from the outset by the unthinking and all-but-universal acceptance of just war doctrine.
>
> *Killing from the Inside Out* radically questions that theory, examines its legacy, and challenges us to look beyond it, beyond just war.[45]

So, I wonder, in light of Jesus and the New Testament, might not one legitimately ask: Is "Just War" theory, if not a kind of ultimate Christian heresy, at least some sort of grand

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[41] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Merton, accessed August 23, 2024.

[42] Dart, *Erasmus*, 16. *This is why Ron and I are essentially in agreement.* It must also be pointed out: *Nothing in these times (in all times!) has changed.*

[43] Merton, Nonviolent Alternative, ix.

[44] Meagher, From The Inside Out. The Foreword is by pacifist theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, who writes:

> He concludes his book with the strong claim that just war theory has been a cover for the support of war without in any decisive way limiting the violence of war. That is a challenge that hopefully those committed to just war will take seriously. [*Please point me to, if there are, such instances.*]

[45] Book cover summary of Killing.

theological con job?[46]

Conclusion

While Christian pacifism, except in the early church, has been a minority view,[47] no Christian I know/know of would dispute our need to take Jesus seriously about it. If *nimble thinking* means disregarding Jesus — *which Ron does not!* — I could dismiss his non-absolute pacifism readily enough. *One may only guess why Western Christianity has given Jesus and the New Testament such a seeming "nimble" wide berth on this issue. . .*[48]

At least this: *It is certainly conceivable, if to Christian pacifists not credible, that non-pacifism is somehow drawn from Jesus; but surely it is not irrational to ask for somewhat stronger arguments on its "nimble-thinking" behalf.*[49]

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[46] An outstanding feature of the Trump phenomenon is fabricating false "reality"/offering "alternative facts." Is Just War theory possibly the *longest-standing* BIG LIE of the Christian West?

[47] Yet, as seen above, *Erasmus, Swartley, Hays, and Barth* state the New Testament witness on violence to be at once

- ". . . not compatible with the purity of the gospel;"
- ". . . *a comprehensive theology of the New Testament presenting peace as the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity;*"
- ". . . *unambiguous witness [for peace] of the New Testament canon;*" and
- ". . . impressively univocal is the testimony [for peace] of the New Testament writers on this point."

[48] It's called "sin." More theologically, there is this, from Romans 12:

> **1***Therefore I urge you, brothers, on account of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.* [Or: *your reasonable service*] **2**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

[49] A riff on this brilliant statement by retired Catholic physicist Stephen Barr:

> It is certainly conceivable, if to many of us not credible, that materialism is true, but surely it is not irrational to ask for somewhat stronger arguments on its behalf. (Barr, Modern Physics, 256.)

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