



## OUT OF EMPIRE

by Alison Healey

### Introduction

*'Empire is the only form of power able today to guarantee the global order and protect the interests of the rich and powerful. Empire is constituted by a global network of collaborating powers, including the dominant nation states, the major capitalist corporations, supranational institutions, along with various local and regional powers. Some powers are obviously dominant over others in this network, but none can "go it alone". We would do well to begin to understand this and work against it today.... There is nothing more natural and noble than to throw off the chains of tyranny. Just when the powers of Empire are extending ever more broadly and deeply in society, the bases of resistance are proliferating everywhere.'*

This excerpt is from a book that commanded a great deal of attention when it was published in 2000<sup>i</sup>. I was, at the time, contemplating the signs and deeds of Empire in our contemporary world - in politics, economics, business and finance, social and cultural policies, in religious institutions. More than ten years later I had the opportunity to spend a weekend in a group retreat with Wes Howard-Brook, a Scripture scholar from the USA - his theme, *'Come out, my people': God's call out of Empire.*<sup>ii</sup> Here was a chance I welcomed to explore my experiences and perceptions of Empire today from a Biblical perspective.

I propose to share some thoughts and insights derived from Howard-Brook's intensive Biblical study and other sources.

### Two religions

Howard-Brook's thesis is that, throughout the Bible run two competing religious visions – one he names the 'religion of Creation' and the other the 'religion of Empire'. They are, as it were, two opposing magnetic poles. They can be seen in on-going conflict with each other throughout human history between and within cultures, societies, institutions and individual persons. Those gathered around either pole may claim that God is on their side.

Before exploring these two visions we need to clarify how 'religion' is being used here. The word is derived from a Latin word meaning 'to bind'. Without probing its complexities, we will describe a 'religion' simply here as an identifiable body of beliefs, practices, experiences, stories, rituals and symbols that 'bind together' adherents and distinguish them from others.

The religion of Creation is a way of being and acting in the world grounded in the experience of relationship with a God who is source of blessing and abundance for all people and all creation. The religion of Creation is characterised by a spirit of inclusion and openness to transformative change. Its social structures are based in equal respect and participation and in relationships of love, justice and hospitality.

The religion of Empire is a human-made product developed to justify and legitimate attitudes and behaviour that seek abundance for some, at the cost of others. It is grounded in the accumulation of possessions, wealth and power and engenders both a desire to acquire more and more of these and a determination to keep them secure from others. And so it is a way of living that is at the same time aggressive and defensive. It sets up structures of control that are hierarchical and manipulative; it relies on violence and patronage to maintain 'peace' and suppress opposition. *'The genius of Empire is that it is able to establish an aura around itself that communicates that the way Empire is the way things are supposed to be'* (Howard-Brook).

Throughout the Bible we see how those drawn to the religion of Creation and those to the religion of Empire both claimed God to be on their side. Empire will always seek to claim a higher transcendent source for its

authority. The Roman Empire went so far as to proclaim the Emperor as a god. The monarchy of England was once justified by the doctrine of the 'divine right of kings'. For the Russian Empire of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the 'higher transcendent source' was the 'secular religion' of atheistic communism.

Generations of readers of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) have been shocked by the violence and punitive behaviour they found there, which, according to those describing the events, had the Lord's approval and collaboration. How to interpret this? Many have concluded that the God of the Old Testament was a harsh and violent God in contrast to the compassionate God of Jesus in the New Testament. No, the God of the Hebrew Bible and the God of Jesus are the one same loving creator and source of abundant blessing on all people and all creation. God was never on the side of deeds of Empire, although people claimed this.

Wherever Empire could gain cooperation in its enterprise from religious institutions and their adherents, it has sought to do so, offering them opportunities to consolidate or extend their field of influence and, with exceptions, compromising their integrity at the same time. Some examples from the modern era would be the involvement of Christian churches in imperial enterprises of invasion, colonisation and exploitation; and religious communities today that ally themselves with the acquisitiveness of unregulated capitalism.

### **Empire and the city**

The writers of the Hebrew Bible link the flourishing of Empire with the growth of cities – concentrated human settlements of accumulated possessions, resources and power. It is not accidental that we are told that, when God called such models of the religion of Creation as Abraham, Moses and David to their particular roles of leadership of the people, they were, like Abel, tenders of grazing animals, signifying reliance on the God-given resources of nature; and 'movement' rather than 'settlement'. David becomes a king and does not escape grievous sins of Empire in his eventful life but his capacity for genuine repentance and humility keeps him ultimately true to his God. With his son, Solomon, however, the monarchy succumbed to the seductions of Empire.

From the perspective of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the exile of the leaders of the people in Babylon, the writers of Genesis attribute the founding of the first city to Cain, the first murderer. After the cleansing flood, Empire once again asserted itself when Noah's descendant, Nimrod, 'the mighty hunter', built many cities including Babel. It is written that building the city and tower of Babel was motivated by a desire of the people to '*make a name for ourselves*', in contrast to God's promise to Abram, in return for his faithfulness, '*I will make your name great*'. The refusal of the people of Sodom to offer hospitality to strangers who came to their city gates stands at the opposite pole from the reception that Abram and Sarah gave their unknown visitors arrived at the door of their tent. Howard-Brook quotes Ezekiel's judgment of Sodom's destruction: '*this was the guilt of ... Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy*' (Ezek. 16:49). (Abram's bar-gaining with God as he tried to save Sodom is another image of the religion of Creation, in which frank and trustful negotiation can occur – impossible in an imperial context of domination and suspicion). Egypt's prosperous and powerful cities are an abiding presence in the Biblical narratives and Babylon itself became an enduring symbol of the ideology of Empire (see, for example, the Books of *Jeremiah* and *Revelation*).

The city and temple of Jerusalem became infected with attributes of Empire from the time of Solomon. Cyrus of Persia shrewdly co-opted the social and religious elites to his project, when he allowed them to return from Babylon to their traditional lands and funded the restoration of the temple which the Babylonians had destroyed. The Romans ruled their Empire by gaining collaboration from the local authorities, whether by ruthless punishment or patronage. These elites, in turn, often abused their power over the people. It was the collusion of both of these powers – the local elites and the Roman Empire - that brought Jesus to crucifixion.

### **God's call to 'come out'**

Howard-Brook contends that the core message of the Bible is God's call to humankind to come out of Empire.

*'From the call of Abram to the Bible's final call to 'come out' in Revelation 18, God's Voice always presents hearers with a definitive choice to turn from one path to another... to leave behind all that...leads to death and move into the way that is blessed and leads to life in abundance'.*

God called Abram out of his settled state in Ur to journey to a place unknown to him. *'Leave your country, your family and your father's house for the land I will show you'* (Gen,12:1). Jesus' call to his disciples parallels this (Mk 1:16-20). His mission was to bring a people out of Empire, not in the sense of a political revolt against the Romans as many expected of the Messiah, but so that they could show to others a way of living in true harmony with God, one another and creation.

Responding to God's call depends on a capacity to listen. Kosuke Koyama<sup>iii</sup> refers us to Ps. 115 for a challenging explanation as to how we humans lose this capacity – more than this, how we can become totally insensitive to the presence of God's Spirit. It happens when we become seduced by idols, 'products of human making'. The psalmist describes idols thus: *'they have eyes but never see, ears but never hear...feet but never walk'*; and concludes that *'their makers will end up like them'*. Daniel Berrigan makes a comparable point about people's incapacity to comprehend the realities of their situation when he writes: *'People who live in Babylon don't know they are there'*.<sup>iv</sup>

God's call also asks for a willingness to move, in trust and hope – to move in mind and heart and spirit and body away from Empire towards 'the kingdom of God'. There is much journeying in the Biblical narratives signifying this, and God is presented as an enduring companion on the way. Koyama, reflecting on the Hebrews' forty years crossing from servitude in Egypt to a Promised Land, writes of *'a mobile God'*, a *'three-mile-an-hour God'* walking at the average pace of a person, faithfully accompanying them.<sup>v</sup> To those in the centres of power these were people on the periphery, of no consequence. Jesus also showed a preference for the company of such people. He, too, was mobile, having *'nowhere to lay his head'* (Lk 9,58).

When Jacques van Ginneken SJ chose the legendary stories of the Grail to inspire a movement of young women in the Netherlands in 1921, his thinking was fully in harmony with this Biblical message. These are stories, too, of going forth on a quest. The goal was the Holy Grail, the repository of transformative blessing. Only as a result of continuing conversion of heart, growing in humility and compassion in the quest, could the seeker attain what he sought. *'To live is to change and to be perfect (whole) is to have changed often'*, Blessed John Henry Newman once said.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Abundance and scarcity**

Walter Brueggeman observes in the world today that, where people have a wealth of material resources and an abiding appetite for acquiring more, a *'myth of scarcity'* becomes a pervading narrative that can develop into *'a demonic spiritual force among us'*.<sup>vii</sup> It is one of the contradictions within the religion of Empire that acquisitiveness leads to a mindset of scarcity: 'There is not enough'. The result is a lack of hospitality, fear of loss, a refusal to share, suspicion of strangers, increasing security measures. In Australia, we have seen how easily the myth of scarcity can be used to support the Federal Government's 'border protection' policies against refugees and asylum seekers arriving in boats: 'They will take our jobs; they will add to overcrowding in our cities, they will be a drain on government budgets, some of them could be terrorists', and so on. Abundance in Empire means material abundance for some only; and real scarcity and deprivation for many.

The Biblical God is always a God of abundance for the whole of creation, a God of incomparable generosity who is not only the giver but also the gift (Karl Rahner<sup>viii</sup>). Following the way of this God asks for a mindset of abundance: open to inclusive, appreciative relationships with others, caring for the well-being of God's creation.

### **Sabbath and Jubilee**

Those who follow the way of Empire always accumulate wealth and power at the cost of others' dependence and indebtedness. God's call out of Empire is a continuous invitation to choose the way of Creation, to make a new beginning. It is an option always available. The Hebrew Sab-bath day, the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee, stood as consistent reminders of this.<sup>ix</sup> Every seven days, every seven years, every seven-times-seven years, the people were directed to 'Stop', even productive work, in order to be grate-fully attentive to the God-giver of everything that is; and to reaffirm their participation in the com-munity of love that binds God, all people and all creation. The injunctions for the seventh year and the year of Jubilee involved freeing slaves, cancel-ling debts, remedying injustices and sharing generously with those who were poor or needy. These were times of opportunity for radical renewal, not only for human beings but also for the animals and the land they worked. What pro-found wisdom lay in these anti-Empire Sabbath institutions,

repeatedly offering the people a practical program of reorientation towards the religion of Creation? It is chilling to read now the curse in Leviticus 26 on those who refused to pay any heed. Whatever practice of Jubilee actually occurred among the Hebrews, there can be no doubt that it presented an enduring vision (cf. Is.61:1-4; and Lk. 4:16-21).

### **Vision of the New Jerusalem**

The Biblical Canon ends with the *Book of Revelation* where the conflicting visions of the two religions are depicted passionately and dramatically by John of Patmos, addressing seven churches in Asia Minor living under Roman imperial rule. He tells of the ultimate demise of one and triumph of the other in his vivid contrasting of Babylon, here again symbolic of the ideology of Empire, and the ideal city of the New Jerusalem. The first is unstable, exclusive, corrupt, violent and destined to self-inflicted ruin and misery, the second is full of productive life and radiant beauty for all to share, and its inhabitants live in trust, peace and joy with God who dwells with them.

New Jerusalem is not yet, and is already present among us. It is to be found *'wherever the human community rejects the lies and violence of empire and places God at the centre of its shared life'*. *Revelation called the ekklesiai of Roman Asia, just as it does the Christian communities of our own day, to recognise that, when we gather for worship, we are making a public statement of political allegiance. We are taking a stand against empire and in celebration of the reign of our just and true God'*.<sup>x</sup>

### **To conclude...**

Among the last words of the Bible - in the Epilogue of the *Book of Revelation* - we hear again God's call, Jesus' call, to 'come, follow me':

*'The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come". Let everyone who listens answer, "Come". Then let all who are thirsty come: all who want it may have the water of life and have it free'.*

It is an invitation for all time, never withheld, always patiently awaiting a response.

*'Time is endless in thy hands, my Lord. There is none to count thy minutes.*

*Days and nights pass and ages bloom and fade like flowers. Thou knowest how to wait.*

*Thy centuries follow each other perfecting a small white flower.*

*We have no time to lose and, having no time, we must scramble for our chances. We are too poor to be late.*

*And thus it is that time goes by while I give it to every querulous [person] who claims it and thine altar is empty of all offerings until the last.*

*At the end of the day I hasten in fear lest thy gate be shut; but I find that yet there is time.'*<sup>xi</sup>

*These Resource papers are an initiative of the International General Assembly 2011. They are intended for distribution to all Grail members. They are produced by the editors of the GJOP Bulletin.*

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press 2000, in which these two post-Marxist philosophers contemplate 'the new world order' emerging out of globalisation.

<sup>ii</sup> Wes Howard-Brook, *'Come Out My People': God's call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond*, Orbis, New York, Third Printing 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: a critique of idols*, Orbis, New York 1985.

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Berrigan, *The Nightmare of God*, Sunburnt Press Portland Oregon 1983.

<sup>v</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Three-mile-an-hour God*, Orbis New York 1980.

<sup>vi</sup> John Henry Newman, 'On the development of ideas', *Newman Reader*, National Institute for Newman Studies 2007.

<sup>vii</sup> Walter Brueggeman, 'The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity' in *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, pp. 342-47.

<sup>viii</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith: an introduction to the idea of Christianity*, Seabury Press 1978, Ch.4.

<sup>ix</sup> Exodus Ch. 23; Deuteronomy Ch. 5; Leviticus Chs. 25 and 26.

<sup>x</sup> Wes Howard-Brook & Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: reading Revelation then and now*, Orbis New York, 1999.

<sup>xi</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali (Song offerings)*, first published 1913. Tagore himself translated these songs from the original Bengali. He uses the second person singular form of the pronoun and verb, outdated in 20<sup>th</sup> Century English, to convey intimacy as it does in some other languages.