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The high cost of getting Christian history wrong

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

For Christmas, one of our children gave me the 2013 book *Killing Jesus: A History* by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard.

I'm not an O'Reilly fan, having met him and heard him speak, which added to my non-fandom position. But I wanted to honor the gift-giver and try to be fair to the authors by reading it without expectations.

Nice try.

Oh, it's a compelling read. And no doubt it captures some of what happened and the context of the times.

But I came away from the book grateful for such towering biblical scholars as Raymond E. Brown, whose 1994 two-volume *The Death of the Messiah* remains on my shelf as the go-to book for the Passion narratives. I felt blessed to have heard Father Brown speak a year or two before his death, and I hope Catholics know what a great contribution this Catholic priest made to modern biblical scholarship.

In the preface to Brown's crucifixion books, he evidences humility, noting that there are many "extremely difficult problems presented by the Passion Narratives. How many of them I have solved I do not know."

By contrast, at the beginning of O'Reilly's book, hubris reigns: "But the incredible story behind the lethal struggle between good and evil has not been fully told. Until now."

As the discipline of general semantics has taught me, it's impossible to say all about anything. So nothing is ever "fully told." Brown, of course, comes closer to "fully told" in his 1,608 pages than O'Reilly does in his 293.

But what is especially striking about O'Reilly's book is that he calls it a history, though it reads like a historical novel. Here and there, he and his co-author insert footnotes to indicate a bit of uncertainty about such things as the exact year of Jesus' birth. But mostly, the book states as fact what others report as conjecture or reasonable estimates.

And when it comes to a faith rooted in historical events, we must be careful about saying what we know and what we don't know. Time and again, O'Reilly blows through that caution flag.

Early in the book, for instance, O'Reilly notes that he and Dugard also have written about two presidential assassinations in *Killing Lincoln* and *Killing Kennedy* and that "both Lincoln and Kennedy believed Jesus was God."

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The evidence for that about Lincoln, however, is extraordinarily thin. Despite claims by such folks as the late televangelist D. James Kennedy that Lincoln was a devoted Christian, the record suggests Lincoln was a deist with Christian sympathies. If you care about Lincoln's religion, the four-volume series to read is *Lincoln and His World* by Richard Lawrence Miller, who delves into the nuances of all this with great care.

Another example of O'Reilly's penchant for stating flatly what is uncertain is his account of King Herod's slaughter of the innocents, the order to murder all boys 2 years of age and under in Bethlehem so as to kill the next "king of the Jews," Jesus.

The estimates of the number of babies killed -- if, indeed, this event ever took place -- have ranged from as many as 64,000 to as few as six or seven. The lower number is more credible, and at least O'Reilly winds up in that range by saying Herod murdered "more than a dozen infants." But he writes as if there's no doubt about the event or the number.

When studying Christian history, we'd do well to use multiple reputable sources and to question everything so that when an O'Reilly reports that Paul "became a convert to Christianity," we'll know that's anachronistic poppycock, given that there was yet no separate Christian religion and that Paul always thought of himself as a Jew. (See the work of scholar Mark D. Nanos.)

The costs of getting Christian history wrong, after all, are unaffordable, including terrible relations with adherents of other faiths.

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