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Christianity and US Prison Abolition: Rupturing a Hegemonic Christian Ideology

Mark Lewis Taylor

... salvation is a serious matter – it cost Christ His life in order to free us from our sin.

James C. Vogelzang, *Doing HIS Time: Meditations and Prayers for Men and Women in Prison* (2008)

... the meek and humble Savior of the world in no instance meddled with the established institutions of mankind – he came to save a fallen world, and not to excite the black passions of men and array them in deadly hostility against each other.

Professor Theodore R. Dew, against abolitionism, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature, 1831–1832*

We need to rupture the ideological structures embodied by the rise of the prison-industrial complex.

Dylan Rodríguez, interview with Angela Y. Davis¹

In this article, I argue that the political task of rupturing ideological structures embodied in US mass incarceration today must include a rupture of dominant US Christian religion, particularly its widespread teachings about crucifixion holding the torture/death of Jesus to be a necessary source of transformation for personal and social life.

The first quote, by businessman and Prison Minister James Vogelzang, encapsulates the widely disseminated teaching that Jesus' death was a payment for sin, necessary for restored life, "salvation." The quote is from *Doing HIS Time*,² the core text for a prison ministry of

1. Angela Y. Davis and Dylan Rodríguez, "The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation," *Social Justice* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Fall 2000), 217. Dylan Rodríguez is a scholar/activist, now Professor and Chair of Ethnic Studies at the University of California/Riverside, and a founding member of the prison-abolition advocacy organization Critical Resistance.
2. James C. Vogelzang with Lynn Vanderzalm. Foreword by Charles W. Colson, *Doing HIS Time: Meditations and Prayers for Men and Women in Prison* (Santa Barbara, CA: Doing His Time Prison Ministry, 2008), 80.

the same name. Over 300,000 copies of this book have been distributed worldwide, and it was also promoted by Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministry (PFM), the world's largest prison ministry organization today, with an annual income reported at \$50 million. It was awarded in 1993 with a \$1 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Research and Discoveries about Spiritual Realities.³ The second quote is from Professor Dew (of "History, Metaphysics and Political Law," 13th president of the College of William and Mary), who summarized this view of Christian salvation amid his 133-page defense of slavery against abolitionists in Virginia.⁴ Dew's words came just months after Nat Turner's 1831 uprising in Virginia caused US elites to shudder. As I explain below, Dew's language exemplifies a coalescence of white racist disparagement of material affect ("black passions") and a de-politicized Christian messaging with a rationalization for confining black and brown bodies. What I will show is a depoliticized and abstracted religious ideology in a hegemonic Christianity, which makes it, along with other ideological forces, a key purveyor of the torture and death that is US mass incarceration.

To be sure, the task of rupturing ideological structures does not replace the practices of social movements to dismantle the expanding prison system's infrastructure – its architecture, technologies of surveillance and torture, and corporatization by economic elites. Nevertheless, Rodríguez's call "to rupture the ideological structures" is crucial. Ideologies are the sets of ideas springing from that infrastructure, but they make class relations and institutions of violence appear normal and acceptable.⁵ Rupturing ideologies, thus, is part of a revolutionary "comprehensive abolition" for which Davis and others have long argued as part of a socialist future.⁶

I am not arguing that *all* religious expressions or practices are ideological obstacles to prison abolition, or that Christians cannot

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3. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 71. Charles Taylor, the philosopher, also received the Templeton Prize (2007).
 4. Theodore R. Dew, *A Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831–1832* (Richmond, VA: T.W. White, 1832), 106–107.
 5. On ideology, see John H. Kavanaugh, "Ideology," in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Studies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 306–320; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Pt. I, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2nd ed., (New York: Norton, 1978), esp. 147–150.
 6. Angela Y. Davis, "Abolition Democracy," in Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2012), 114–115. On abolitionist imagination and discourse, see Davis and Rodríguez, 216–217.

themselves be important participants in material practices to end US mass incarceration. Such Christian participation, though, will require a break with the idealization of Jesus' torture/death, which is found not just in prison ministries of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, but often, too, among liberal philanthropic Christians, and even in some forms of liberation theology.

What precisely needs rupturing or critique is explained in the theses that I advance below. Each one raises many questions that could generate independent essays.⁷ But each thesis makes a key claim needed for warranting my case that core Christian beliefs are powerful contributors to the ideological apparatus supporting US mass incarceration.

1. On religion as transcendentalizing force

Religion functions as a transcendentalizing force that attaches and orients people to values beyond embodied finite life. By transcendentalizing, I refer to believers' claims to "move upward" (*trans-/scendere*), such that they embrace some set of values and beliefs they claim are outside and above embodied finite life. The attachment can be so routinely cultivated, through rituals and practices, that religious believers' attachment to these values becomes a kind of binding, as the very etymology of "religion" suggests (Latin *religio*, "to bind"). I am aware that there are religions that seek to value embodied material life, and Christians themselves often find ways to do so in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, the dominant tendency, especially in European and US Christianities, reflects a strong attachment, a "binding," that masks and even demeans embodied material life, its hard questions and tangled complexities.

I am not simply claiming that believers care only about a future life, some "hereafter." I am focused more on the "transcendentalizing" tendency of religion, which produces a way of living, a pervasive ethos that slights and even hides from material being, its sufferings and its pleasures, large and small. James Baldwin noted this tendency in his critique of US churches, whether black or white. He identified three "principles" in his experience of the church. The first he termed "Blindness," which was, he wrote, "necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the other two - "Loneliness" and "Terror" - results of

7. Indeed, this essay distills analyses I have offered at greater length elsewhere. See, for example, my "Decolonizing US Mass Incarceration: 'Flesh Will Wear Out Chains,'" *Journal of Religious and Cultural Theory* Vol. 13. No. 1 (winter 2014): 121-142.

living in a white racist society. Baldwin especially pointed to the churches' language of proclaiming the greatness of "God's love" as promoting the Blindness. He saw it as a refusal to ask hard questions about everyday material living, such as, "why were we, the blacks, cast so far down?"⁸

The transcendentalizing move upward also often sets the conditions for oppressive binaries and hierarchical structures. Beliefs in God, a divine realm, the supernatural, interact with other constructs of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation. The values "on high" or in some "beyond," then anchor from above, as it were, chains of subordination. In the history of dominant Christian thinking, the examples of this are many: God is privileged over world (as its Creator, Sustainer), then heaven over earth, spirit over matter, the pure over impure, white over non-white, man over woman, heterosexual over trans-sexual persons, the respectable wealthy over exploited laborers. A key example is Christianity's centuries of linking whiteness and purity to its sovereign God, a figure which had to be stripped of its material impurities, kept in a pure white beyond. Not surprisingly, when he saw the Church's neglect of his hard material question ("why are we, blacks, cast down so far?"), Baldwin surmised the Church's God to be white.⁹ This was Baldwin's church; what about Christianity's religious power in the US today?

2. Christianity as hegemonic US religion

In spite of a polyreligious US society today, Christian beliefs and practices remain the most influential among religious viewpoints in US public life. Among the many religious groups in the US, Christians feature the greater strength in numbers.¹⁰ More significantly, some display of Christian affiliation, some accommodation to its ideology, seems necessary for leaders to attain elective office in the US corporate and penal state. In spite of a US landscape of multiple religions and a vibrant secular realm, Christianity still remains "the legitimate religion." It occupies a privileged space, legitimated, as Judith Butler notes, "to provide the cultural preconditions of the public, whose

8. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), 44–45.

9. *Ibid.*, 45.

10. Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (2009). "American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008" (PDF). Hartford, CT: Trinity College. "Table 75. Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990, 2001 and 2008, The methodology of the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)." US Census Bureau 2012 *Statistical Abstract*.

symbols circulate freely within the public," as distinct from less legitimate and suspect forms (Judaism, Islam, Indigenous, Asian religions) which are thought "to threaten the foundation of secular life, whose symbols circulating within the public are considered ostentatious or threatening to democracy itself."¹¹

From the very founding of the US penitentiary to today's disseminating of state terror over US prisons' abject "inmates," Christianity's belief in God, one of its key notions, has played a significant role. Historically, white Christian philanthropists, with influences from Europe, founded the penitentiary in Pennsylvania. It was meant to facilitate the prisoner's isolation, for making penance before God (thus "penitentiary," a place of "penitents"). It was miserably dehumanizing for whites in these eighteenth and nineteenth century prisons. Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont described the prisons as "spectacles of the most complete despotism." Charles Dickens on his tour called them "cruel and wrong...immeasurably worse than any torture of the body."¹²

With the blackening of the prison population after slavery, through Jim Crow, and into today's predominantly black and brown prison populations (black, Latino/a, and American Indian, but increasingly also Asian/Pacific Islander and Arab-American¹³), the dehumanization was ratcheted up, setting prisoners in ever more abject conditions. Rodríguez cites imprisoned activist and political theorist D.A. Sheldon's description of state terror in the prisons as designed to put "the fear of God" into prisoners, through its routinizing of total control, seeking ultimate power over prisoners.¹⁴ State terror is often a secular substitute for God, even while many conservative Christians will see it as a terror given to the state by God, "the power of the sword." Whether making penance before God, or living in state terror (in the "fear of God"), the idea of Christianity's God haunts the prison. But it is not only a deployment of God-language that works ideologically in America's hegemonic religion. More important is an idealization of the torture/death of its founder, Jesus.

11. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 115.

12. *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*. Eds. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111-112.

13. Kenneth Quinell, "Shattering the Model Minority Myth: Mass Incarceration and Asian and Pacific Islanders," AFL-CIO Now, May 21, 2014.

14. Cited in Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Radical Imprisoned Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 149.

3. On Christian discourse's center: a rhetoric of the cross

At the center of hegemonic Christian discourses is their rhetoric of the cross, i.e. an interpretation of Jesus' suffering of death by crucifixion. Christian belief features many themes and topics: not only God, but also Holy Spirit, church, sin, guilt, and much more. Nevertheless, the center of its discourse is its "rhetoric of the cross," some way of interpreting the death of Jesus. This death is especially significant because for most Christians, Jesus is believed also to be God in the flesh. Thus, it is *God* that dies on the cross. It is the great drama of Christians' "Passion week," commemorating Jesus' death and events leading to it. Even if the week culminates in a claimed "resurrection" of Jesus, all has meaning because of the death. This can divinize, or sacralize, a fascination with Jesus' death, and also with others' deaths as well. Franz Graziano, in fact, has argued that sacralizing Jesus' death emboldened torturers in the Argentine "Dirty War" to view the torture room as their sacred theater, where they positioned victims in the place of Jesus, to receive punishment for the good of the nation.¹⁵ Most Christians would find this repellent, but it happens more often than many know, at sites of violence where Christianity has been influential.¹⁶ Many liberal Christians pass by Jesus' death quickly, finding "nobler" virtues about Jesus in his pre-death teachings, or in his resurrection. But how do you really get "noble" virtues from Jesus' torture/death on the cross? Precisely here we come to what I will call the *leitmotif* of the rhetoric of the cross.

4. The *leitmotif*: a torture/death makes life

Recurring amid the Christian rhetoric of the cross, is its *leitmotif*, the belief that Jesus' crucifixion was a saving torture/death, a suffering that achieves a kind of rescue for humans from death, a restoration of life. The torture/death is seen as an evil Jesus suffered to facilitate some good for humanity. There are multiple modes by which Christians link the death-work of the cross to the making of life. I here identify just two of these. First, there is a "liberal philanthropic mode," which highlights Jesus' death as an example, showing Jesus' steadfast commitment to religious principle (say, to love, justice, peace). In this mode, believers try to align themselves with Jesus' example through their own

15. Franz Graziano, *Divine Violence: Spectacle, Psychosexuality, and Radical Christianity in the Argentine 'Dirty War'* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 147-190.

16. Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10-11.

practices of these principles. A Christian may go into a prison, for example, trying to “show love” to prisoners, thus living out a love they understand Jesus to have modelled. Many a prisoner can spot this kind of liberal practice, labeling it “do goodism,” which is less interested in prisoners’ present material conditions than in liberal Christians’ own display of virtuous love.

A second mode of linking Jesus’ death to something life-giving is more typical of hegemonic US Christianity. This mode propounds Jesus’ death as an act of appeasing God, a substitutionary death, wherein Jesus takes all humans’ place and dies to satisfy God’s anger over “evil and sin.” Historically, this was a dominant motif of religion in the “Biblical commonwealth” of white settler communities of North America (where Calvinist views of Jesus’ death as appeasing God were prevalent). It persisted in many missionary enterprises that accommodated or promoted US westward expansion, a colonizing venture with often genocidal consequence.¹⁷ This substitutionary mode is still often the preoccupation of today’s Christian prison ministries, a “carceral Christian fundamentalism.”¹⁸ Vogelzang, in *Doing HIS Time*, quotes perhaps the most influential evangelical writer in America, British scholar, C.S. Lewis: “The central Christian belief is that Christ’s death has somehow put us right with God and gives us a fresh start.”¹⁹ The giant PFM places “the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus” right at the heart of its Statement of Faith, and PFM founder Chuck Colson argues explicitly for its centrality as well.²⁰ To propound this message – not to challenge mass incarceration – is the primary goal of Prison Ministry. The aim is to promote a “born again” experience in which Jesus’ sacrificial death is received by prisoners as their new inner life. Then, with individuals becoming Christians, social problems will automatically be solved: inequality, systematic injustice and group conflict.²¹ Or as Colson himself puts it, “Christ changes lives

17. Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2005). David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, 1993). One of the finest historical studies of the Christian contributions to racial oppression in European colonization is Willie James Jennings, *Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

18. Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 91.

19. Vogelzang, *Doing HIS Time*, 80, citing C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1943), 58.

20. Prison Fellowship Ministries, “Statement of Faith.” For Colson’ argument, see Chuck Colson, “Foreword,” in Vogelzang, *Doing HIS Time*, i–ii.

21. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117; cited in

...and changing prisoners from the inside out is the *only* crime-prevention program that really works."²² The salvific death is thought to make all this possible.

There are other ways of linking Jesus' death to life. Yet, the ideological force I highlight dwells in the simple fact of the linkage, that a death is believed necessary to occasion life. This recurs throughout Christian rhetorics of the cross. It persists like the ever new inflections of a symphony's always recognizable *leitmotif*, or like the recurring refrain in an ever newly-improvised jazz standard. This *leitmotif* is the gateway that hegemonic Christianity opens for promoting widespread tolerance of mass incarceration's rampant injustice and suffering. But to understand precisely how this Christian moral logic supports all this, we need to take another important step, noting the ahistorical nature of this *leitmotif*.

5. Crucifixion: abstracted from history's material politics of state terror

Hegemonic Christianity frames the torture/death of Jesus within a transcendental divine plan that depoliticizes and dematerializes Jesus of Nazareth's own bodily torture and death. Dominant Christianity uses a moral logic that relentlessly abstracts Christians into talk of a divine plan. Reverence for the divine plan often blocks Christians from historical and political analyses of the crucifixion as what it actually was, a gruesome and prolonged torture, exacted from thousands of bodies in Jesus' time. It especially was reserved for the rebel. It was state-sanctioned or extra-judicial torture specified for politically transgressive human bodies, analogous to practices of imperial execution and lynching.²³ The divine-plan scenario enables a depoliticizing of the crucifixion, abstracting from the cross's role as material imposition of torturous death by an imperial state.

As Mumia Abu-Jamal once queried, "Isn't it odd that Christendom ... claims to pray to and adore a being who was a prisoner of Roman power, an inmate on the empire's death row? ... [while] the majority of its adherents strenuously support the State's execution of thousands

Sullivan, 67–68. For other Prison Ministry statements ratifying the "miracle motif," see Sullivan, 69.

22. Quote in Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 78.

23. This is recognized even by conservative Lutheran writer, Martin Hengel, whose *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976) remains perhaps the most concise and richly documented history of the practice of crucifixion.

of imprisoned citizens?"²⁴ Abu-Jamal's query is an acerbic one, exposing the ways Christian life and thought have depoliticized its own founder's death at the hands of empire.

The depoliticization process has been quite effective. Ask most Christians what the fundamental meaning of Jesus' crucifixion is, and they will rarely tell you about the politics of Jesus' death, the cross of Rome as tool of state violence. Even if the brutality Jesus suffered *is* mentioned, what really matters is Jesus' death as event in a divine plan that makes life possible today. It matters less, seemingly not at all (save in some liberation theologies²⁵), that crucifixion was a death of slaves and rebels, of the poor and the imperial transgressors. The politics of the cross as state terror is hushed up. "Sinful" prisoners need only confess and kneel, to receive the gift made by Jesus' death.

Of special consequence for Christians in the age of mass incarceration, is that this depoliticizing of Jesus' cross gives additional strength to a whole way of living that neglects material life and history. Given that power and politics are essential to material conditions, to depoliticize the meaningful center of Christian belief – Jesus' death on the cross – is all the more to intensify Christians' bondage to a life "above," neglecting material conditions. This sets the stage for a denigration of matter and bodies, which in turn often yields a toleration of degrading punishments meted out upon bodies – especially upon racially marked bodies in a white dominant society. The next thesis addresses this directly and brings us still closer to understanding hegemonic Christianity as ideology for mass incarceration.

6. Christian practice as repression of the raced, material "other"

The depoliticized and de-materialized Christian moral logic involves not simply a general neglect of the material and of bodies, but often also a repression of raced bodies. Here I explain how this depoliticizing abstraction from materiality and from bodies drives a white racist social psychology and political practice. It leads to one of the most insidious and

24. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms: Reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1996), 39.

25. Even in the liberation theologies of Christianity, it is rare that a theologian would deny that the Jesus who suffered death was divine, was God. In not making that denial, the liberation theologians allow to stand the idealization and sacralization of Jesus' death. If a God can undergo and survive this torture/death, then that death's full material consequence has been denied. There is still an abstracting from the materiality of human being, becoming, death.

dehumanizing aspects of white supremacy pertinent to the racialization of confinement in the US. Frantz Fanon articulated it in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, and it has been more recently developed theoretically by socialist psychoanalyst Joel Kovel and others.²⁶ These writers stress that white subjects, especially religious subjects prone to abstraction from material realms, often find themselves repudiating their own materiality, their own embodiment, sexuality, proneness to death. In Fanon's language, "deep down in the European unconscious has been hollowed out an excessively black pit where the most immoral instincts and unmentionable desires slumber... and the European has attempted to repudiate this. ... In Europe, the black man has a function: to represent shameful feelings, base instincts, and the dark side of the soul."²⁷ Baldwin wrote, similarly, that "white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them."²⁸

Death, sexual desire, material finiteness and bodily affect-ability – each presents threatening, uncontrollable dimensions of the human, and they come together to brew a sinister socio-political psychology in this "dark side" of the white soul. This white opaqueness, in Kovel's language, is by whites "designated as black and projected onto a man whose dark skin and oppressed past fit him to receive the symbol."²⁹ "Black," "dark," "non-white" are different terms, but each marks what white subjects take as threat, even though the cultures and histories of African, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian, and Arab bodies in America give threatened whites multiple ways of mixing race with sex in their repressive fantasies. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin wrote of sexualized blackness in the US, "to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others [of whites]."³⁰ Baldwin here identifies a scapegoating function: he "pays... for the sexual insecurity of others." This sinister

26. For more on this whole subject with bibliography, see Derek Hook (2004) "Fanon and the Psychoanalysis of Racism," *LSE Research Online*, at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2567>. Also, Hook, "Fanon, Desire, Fantasy, and Libidinal Economy," in Derek Hook, *A Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial: The Mind of Apartheid* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 94–155.

27. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), new tr. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 166–167.

28. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 106.

29. Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 66–67.

30. James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press, 1961), 217.

dementia of white culture – mixing spiritualized disembodiment and white supremacy with sexual projection and stereotype – helps account for the hypersexualization and sexual repression, violation and torture of black and other nonwhite bodies, extending from America’s lynching and burning rituals, to police violence against black and brown bodies on American streets, and to the routine racial and sexual violence in US prisons today.³¹

Perhaps, historically, one of the clearest examples of the mixing of disembodied, depoliticized Christianity with white fantasies about blacks is evident in the quotation by Professor Theodore R. Dew, given as this essay’s second epigraph: “the meek and humble Savior in no instance meddled in the institutions of mankind – he came to save a fallen world, not to excite the black passions of men, and array them in deadly hostility against one another.”³² Note that the depoliticized “meek and humble Savior” is also abstracted from the plane of institutional forces (he never “meddled”). Moreover, the Savior’s coming is placed in stark opposition to any exciting of “the black passions of men.” This marking of the passions as “black” shows a denigration of passionate affect and, by extension, of black bodies rendered as excitable. This symbolically loaded sentence is the highpoint of Dew’s 1832 essay against abolitionism, amid the white fear generated by Nat Turner’s rebellion.

The logic is still in place when today’s Christians link transgression and evil with blackness, and posit a disembodied spirituality as ruling over affect and passion. The atoning death of Jesus for human sin, the heart of the “born again” experience so central to PFM, involves frequent mention of “victory over the power of darkness.”³³ One required text by PFM projects in prisons is Neil Anderson’s book, *Victory Over the Darkness: Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ*.³⁴ Christians will claim they use “darkness” in only a symbolic sense, not to demean nonwhite peoples; nevertheless against the backdrop of a history where the color, black, has marked bodies and a wide range of other phenomena as “evil,” the usage is hardly incidental.³⁵

31. Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: The Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999). An earlier study by Trudier Harris is still crucial, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

32. Dew, *Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831–1832*, 106–107.

33. Cited in Sullivan, *Prison Religion*, 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 41.

35. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Moreover, whatever the intention of speakers, this religious language, mixed with spiritual disembodiment, with fear of matter and the scapegoating of raced bodies, helps lock in place the larger social denigration of nearly all nonwhite groups, linking them to the excitable and uncontrollable (and, of course, to the insurrectional). White subjects make of themselves what social philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva terms the “white transcendental subject,” who takes him/herself as overseer of marked, non-white “affectable others.” These affectable others do not just require control, but also, according to the white subject’s mind, are fated to “engulfment” and even “elimination.”³⁶ The religious language of conquest over matter and darkness is a scapegoating ideology, servicing the material forces of punitive control, especially over racially marked bodies.³⁷

7. Christian scapegoating and US mass incarceration

In particular, this Christian scapegoating rationalizes and reinforces the US penal state’s imposition of mass, concentrated suffering upon designated, “fixed” and immobilized racial “others.” A further step links still more closely Christianity’s scapegoating logic to mass incarceration. Prisons that warehouse people of color become collective symbols for feeding de-politicized and abstracted religious consciousness. The darkened prison nation offers to the Christian white public consciousness a spectacular drama, i.e. collectivized dark bodies, concentrated en masse, thus isolating transgression and transgressive bodies from the allegedly purer regions whites think they inhabit. At the very least, within such a mindset, the presence of institutions of confinement for raced “others” will not erupt as a crisis of conscience for hegemonic

36. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 134, 164–165.

37. It should be stressed that this psychology of “European collective consciousness,” does not make psychology or consciousness the driver of racist oppression. This mix of religious abstraction and sexual fantasies is, in fact, one expression and provocation that is rooted in the history of material conditions of white enslavement and political domination of nonwhite, particularly black bodies. In Marx’s terms, the stereotyping fantasies of this collective consciousness result from whites’ use and abuse of the productive and reproductive labor of enslaved men and women. Kovel clearly states that these white fantasies almost always “erupted whenever the power relationships were threatened” (emphasis added, Kovel, *White Racism*, 68). Moreover, if we consider Fanon’s comments on Europe’s “collective consciousness,” it is clear that it must be understood as produced by Europe’s material domination of the everyday world of “the colonized countries.” See Hook, *A Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial*, esp. 131–136.

Christians. This is because the phenomenon of incarceration conveniently fits the need of abstracted Christian consciousness to gaze upon raced others who are fixed in place, thus shoring up white identity.

Again, Baldwin writing in the 1960s was especially discerning here. He wrote to his nephew about the white “innocents” who believe that “imprisonment made them safe.” Baldwin continues, “the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.”³⁸ White abstractions and stereotypes try to make “fixed stars” of black and brown bodies, reference points to assure white subjects of their identities based on position and power. Yes, mass imprisonment is created and sustained by economic and material social forces, but this ideological fixing of dark bodies is also crucial. The sociopolitical consciousness reinforces immobilization, and all the modes of containment, which historically have massified “fixed” black and brown bodies in set spaces. And when the state terror of prison life works disintegration and elimination for the abjected “inmates,” as the best studies of prison show it does,³⁹ then the prisons take their place in the larger history of US genocidal terror and violence.

Knowledge of this terror and violence is often foreclosed by a certain “pleasure” that white dominant society takes in mass incarceration’s immobilizing of racialized others. This is one of the ugliest, perhaps most ignored, dynamics of mass imprisonment today. Here, the Christian ideology of scapegoating strengthens a broader public ideology of US punishment that operates beyond Christian circles. As Columbia law professor Robert Ferguson argues, it is not just prison guards who can drift into a functional sadism that takes pleasure in punishing the confined; the wider public, too, can be caught up in the pleasure. This is because there is widespread pleasure “in isolating [human] failure in the punished in a claim of righteousness and in the assumed right to condemn.”⁴⁰

Christianity, America’s “legitimate public religion,” by idealizing a torture/death (Jesus’ imperial execution) contributes ideological force

38. James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” in *The Fire Next Time*, 23.

39. Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

40. Robert Ferguson, *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 64. On the sadism of guards, see Ted Conover, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

to public views of state terror as a good, even as a locus of pleasure for those whose identities and lives are served by it. Signs of US citizens taking pleasure today in mass incarceration – often mixed with their fear and fascination – range from the laughter of homophobic teens making prison-jokes about male-on-male rape, to the several television shows on prison life (such as *Orange is the New Black*), to politicians whose tough-on-crime rhetoric is rewarded with the pleasure of electoral victories. But most importantly, Christian idealization of torture/death, even sacralizing it as means of achieving the good, reinforces the pleasure that the wider white dominant society takes in isolating the condemned. This rationalizes what Baldwin exposed as the lie of imprisonment: “the righteous must be able to locate the damned.”⁴¹ The pleasure of being a good “free” citizen is often a delight taken in highlighting one’s own righteous and respectable position in contrast with that of the massively “unfree” confined black and brown bodies. Indeed, a nationalist pleasure inserts itself here, too, as Ferguson notes, wherein confined others are rendered enemies of the state.⁴² (Recall, “felons” often lose their right to vote and other signs of citizenship.) The subordination of these others to prison terror is rationalized as serving the good of the nation. Indeed, there is a long history of public rhetoric in the US wherein confinement and even elimination of black bodies and racialized “others” was seen as a mode of “saving the nation.”⁴³ Ending mass incarceration will mean rupturing hegemonic Christianity’s idealization of torture/death and thus ending its contribution to public pleasures taken in the righteous isolation of the punished.

8. Toward liberating material spirituality

The critique and rupture of this ideology can uncover a dynamic that hegemonic Christianity masks, namely, a revolutionary and liberating material spirituality among the very ones put to the cross, lynched, executed (whether on the streets or on lethal injection tables), raped, tortured, impoverished, abandoned, incarcerated, or subjected to imperial wars abroad and to state terror in the US. What often remains hidden by Christianity’s depoliticizing of the cross, and by its denigrating of matter and of raced bodies, are the creative revolutionary practices forged among the collective bodies of the oppressed, often animated by a liberating material spirituality. “Material spirituality” – these two words together seem

41. Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), 192.

42. Ferguson, *Inferno*, 178–179.

43. Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 15–34.

nonsensical to many. This is because a hegemonic Christianity has so relentlessly and publicly promoted spirit over matter, making them antithetical to one another. But recall, spirit (from the Latin, *spirare*) is about breathing. It is the very material body's fragile but also intrepid and resilient life, especially thriving in collective struggle. Usually, the resilient breath of this struggle involves welding collective lament and rage with aesthetic expression (art-forms such as festival, dance, marching, music, poetry, painting), thus catalyzing and celebrating social movements that organize lasting institutions of revolutionary change. An example of this creative and revolutionary material spirituality, distilled in art-form, is Mumia Abu-Jamal's "Meditations on the Cross, by Rufus, the Slave." It is particularly relevant, here, as a creative rupture of hegemonic Christianity's rhetoric of the cross.

Abu-Jamal's meditations are written in verse form, and placed in the mouth of "Rufus, a Slave."⁴⁴ Rufus approaches Jesus on the cross with a questioning spirit, wondering about the vaunted claims of hegemonic Christians:

Lawd, Lawd, I look at the cross and pray -
 Can you hear the words I say?
 Can you see the things I do?
 Things done by folks
 who look like you?
 ...
 Can you bring my wife,
 son, daughter back to me?
 Can you bring an end to slavery?
 Lawd, O Lawd - can you truly make us free?

Then Abu-Jamal moves on to a taunt, an acerbic tone that exposes the bankruptcy of attaching freedom dreams and hopes here. He questions, especially, the dying one's alleged divinity:

Come to think of it, why am I
 asking you?
 ...
 Your hands is nailed to this here cross -
 How could you ever be the Big Boss?

"Rufus" reminds how personal these hard queries are. He sharpens his tones of existential anguish and political accusation:

The last time I thought of you
 was when they lynched my Daddy, Lou -

44. Mumia Abu-Jamal, "Meditations on the Cross,' by Rufus, a Slave," in Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms*, 106-109.

They tied his hands and bound his feet,
lashed him, slashed him like a piece of meat,
cut him, burned him, and just before they let him die,
they hung him from a tree, swingin' high.
How could your people do this, Lawd?
How could you give them the Power of the sword?

Rufus even challenges the entire substitutionary ideology of the cross wherein Jesus' death is so often preached as "for" others, as some kind of deliverance "for all":

Ol' preacher say you died for the poor;
Does that mean we won't be poor no more?
...
They say it's compassion
your life demonstrated,
but I wonder, if that's so,
why am I hated?

But then, the real power of a material spirituality emerges from Rufus in the last stanza, and by extension, from Abu-Jamal's own death row where he served 29 years:

Just think of this as my personal letter,
asking how things could be made better -
Finally, Lawd, lemme say I Love You,
'cause you went through the same
hell as we still do.

The ideological rupture with hegemonic Christianity is here deceptively simple but for all that, perhaps, especially powerful. Rufus's questions arise from a refusal to de-politicize Jesus on the cross. This *is* like a lynching. Even after questioning "ol preacher's" claims that Jesus' torture/death was "for the poor," Rufus still does not just dismiss the whole scene. Instead, he declares in emphasized capital letters - "I Love You" - a radical solidarity of love based on shared hell - the shared hell that "we still do" suffer like the crucified, in the here and now. In this, Rufus takes the initiative from the hegemonic Christians' salvific agenda. From death row, from state terror's political prison-hell, the ones to whom the cross would be preached now tear the crucified down, freeing him from hegemonic Christianity's divine scenario. This art form, born of Abu-Jamal's collective struggle, displays the counter-strength of a material spirituality, discerning ideological distortions, questioning them, challenging them. Here those who would preach the saving Jesus to the poor, find "the poor" talking back to hegemonic

Christians, asserting a humanity that can do without the salvific cross in their political struggle.

Rupturing hegemonic Christianity, then, not only helps subvert mass incarceration's ideology. It also frees this resilient resistance in struggle toward collective, transgenerational triumph, not just in "Rufus" and Mumia, but also in others - Viet Mike Ngo, Debby Africa, Mutulu Shakur, Sundiata Acoli, Tim Blunk, Eddy Zhang, Jalil Muntaqim, José Solis Jordan, Susan Rosenberg, Laura Whitehorn, and especially the many unnamed in Prison Nation USA.