



Book Review of *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*, Mark Lewis Taylor, Fortress Press, 2001, 208 pp.

By Wayne Northey

“Is it a contradiction that Christians pray and adore their imprisoned and executed God while supporting or tolerating the execution and imprisonment of so many today?... Is there a contradiction when in 2001 a new U.S. president, George W. Bush, confesses Christian belief, attends church, and seeks the blessings of Christian leaders, while proudly announcing his support of executions, overseeing more than 150 of them during his term as governor of Texas (pp. xi and xii)?”

The burden of the book is to present an affirmative answer.

“Lockdown America” refers to the current in excess of two millions in prison, an almost fourfold increase since 1980, fully seventy percent of whom are people of colour. There has never been such a reliance on prisons by any other nation in world history. Connected is the expression, “prison industrial complex”, taken over from the familiar “military industrial complex”, referring to the interdependence of entities combining to create a “theatrics of terror” of those targeted for incarceration and execution. “Terrorism” by any other name...

The author writes with amazing prescience in light of September 11, 2001: “The fusion of our nation’s punishment regime at home with a military regime abroad was dramatically signaled in 2001 by the rise of George W. Bush from chief executioner among U.S. governors to chief executive commanding the U.S. military forces that guard transnational business interests (p. xvi).” It seems that since September 11 the former gubernatorial chief executioner has simply extended his life and death mandate to the entire planet.

The sentence after the last quote reads: “This is empire nearly as real and as vicious as that of Rome (p. xvi).” The organizing principle of “lockdown America” and of “bombs away world” (my expression) according to the author is *empire*. “The United States, contrary to many of its citizens’ expectations is not an anti-imperial force. To the contrary, it is the key and privileged player in supporting the imperial ways of transnational, global empire that services primarily the wealthier nations and the elites in poorer countries (p. xv).” He calls this *Pax Americana* (“the imposed ordered peace of America (p. xvi).”)

Taylor writes further: “The overall argument of this book is that remembering the executed Jesus and enacting what I will call his *way of the cross*, are crucial for mobilizing effective resistance to lockdown America today and to the Christendoms that are complicit with it (p. xiii).” And again: “We might dare to hope that ... Christians [will] embrace the Jesus whose life and death challenged, in his time, the *Pax Romana* (the imposed ordered peace of Rome) (p. xvi).”

Part One establishes the reality of Lockdown America as a domestic form of mass terrorism he dubs “The Theatrics of Terror”. They are designed to “deal with surplus populations amid growing economic disparity, [and] can be seen as a system of sacrifice within a U.S.-led imperium that practices domination on both internal and global fronts (p.

65).”

Part Two calls for a “Theatrics of Counterterror” along three lines: practising the way of the cross as “adversarial politics”, practising counter spectacles to those of prisons, thereby “stealing the show”, and practising the way of the cross as “building peoples’ movements” to counter empire ways of death. There is explanatory detail in each instance.

The Epilogue is a call to “Christian living [that] can be viewed as the fullness of rebellion (p. 156).” He draws upon the work of Albert Camus, particularly *The Rebel*. This is the Apostle Paul’s call: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed... (Rom. 12:2)”

The author, a theology professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, and longtime activist, illustrates with wide array. Given the scapegoating dynamics of criminal justice systems which he names and well describes, it is surprising he did not discuss more extensively the work of René Girard, for instance his latest book, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Orbis, 2001), and the vast body of interdisciplinary writings his work has inspired with relation to scapegoating violence. Given his reading of Jesus as profoundly political, it is intriguing that he does not once reference John Howard Yoder, especially his best-known work, *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1972). And he could have deepened and broadened his biblical analysis, like Yoder, sociologist Jacques Ellul (in several publications), prison abolitionist Lee Griffith (in *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Eerdmans, 1993) ), and Christopher D. Marshall (in *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Eerdmans, 2001) ) do in similar directions. He could have done likewise sociologically by adducing the works of prison abolitionists Nils Christie, especially *Crime Control as Industry* (Routledge, 1995), and Thomas Mathiesen, particularly *Prisons on Trial: A Critical Assessment* (SAGE, 1990). Finally, Taylor’s work is as if there has been absolutely no international movement known as “Restorative Justice”, that has dramatically challenged and changed *from within* the ways of lockdown America, and other gulag states the world over. The book could have been strengthened by engagement with this phenomenon and its expanding literature, including this journal.

The author is well aware that his thesis is alien to most churches and Christians, for whom “*Pax Americana*, that mighty and efficient empire, is simply accepted ... as a kind of stage upon which church ministries are to be acted out (p. 135).” For all Christians and others of good will so acquiescent to the state even when it pursues and supports empire ways, that is the book’s greatest challenge.

A fitting conclusion is the opening quote from black death row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal:

“Isn’t it odd that Christendom – that huge body of humankind that claims spiritual descent from the Jewish carpenter of Nazareth – claims to pray to and adore a being who was prisoner of Roman power, an inmate of the empire’s death row? That the one it considers the personification of the Creator of the Universe was tortured, humiliated, beaten, and crucified on a barren scrap of land on the imperial periphery, at Golgotha, the place of the skull? That the majority of its adherents strenuously support the state’s execution of thousands of imprisoned citizens? That the overwhelming majority of its judges,

prosecutors, and lawyers – those who condemn, prosecute, and sell out the condemned – claim to be followers of the fettered, spat-upon, naked God? (p. xi).”