

Introduction: The Executed God

If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

To consider the executed God and the spiritual practices it entails will demand some important preparatory work. Christians have written a great deal on the notion of Jesus' crucifixion and death. What new turn is taken when we emphasize today, as this book does, that Jesus' death was an execution?

I will begin by acknowledging the ways some traditional theologians have spoken of Jesus' death as disclosing a "crucified God" and will then suggest the difference it makes to speak of an "executed God." In Baldwin's terms, this concept of an executed God, I suggest, can help make us "larger, freer and more loving,"¹ especially when we confront imperial power today. If one is at all interested in confronting that power, whether one is a believer in God or not, such a concept can be welcomed as a gift in the human struggle for liberating life.

1. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), 61.

The phrase “executed God” does important conceptual work symbolically, and with practical effects for communities that center themselves around such a notion. The phrase links the state-sanctioned killing of Jesus to God, and then forces us to ask what precisely we mean by that three-letter term, “God.” In this chapter, after clarifying how that term functions in the phrase “the executed God,” I will suggest that we let die some all too common views of God (“other gods,” as I call them). These are the concepts of which, to recall Baldwin again, we do well to rid ourselves.² These concepts, many of them quite prevalent in the established religions and especially in U.S. Christianity, are not gifts but constructs that often reinforce exploitative power.

The Crucified God

Jürgen Moltmann’s still important book, *The Crucified God* (1973), reminds us just how central the fact of Jesus’ crucifixion is to Christian faith. Moltmann reminds us that the God of Jesus Christ, though confessed as risen and living—powerful, grace-full, liberating, reconciling, and salvific, if you will—is the one who was also crucified. Jesus’ crucifixion is interpreted by Moltmann as “the power of God as grace amongst the rejected.”³ Talk of the crucified God, then, links all of the basically positive meanings of “God” to the Jesus who was rejected by the powers of his day and who died on an instrument of torture amid Roman empire.

You will find in *The Executed God* no extensive speculating on just how it might be that God was “in” Jesus. Nor will I pretend to be able to offer precise descriptions of how one named “God,” taken to be beyond history and world, transcendent, as well as all powerful and

2. Ibid.

3. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 131.

all good, could be “in” the individual human figure, Jesus. Cogent and convincing descriptions of that are, to my mind, impossible. Neither will you find here, then, theologians’ quite intricate, often metaphysical, fantasies of a dogmatic calculus, about how two natures (divine and human) came together in Jesus “without confusion or separation.” Christian talk about the crucified God has not persisted, primarily, because of theologians’ reputedly “scientific” or “rational” explanations of how God became man, or became this crucified Nazarene. The power of the symbol works in relation to a more practical logic that it will take this book’s entirety to explain.

Christians themselves, especially the poor and exploited among them, have usually found it enough to believe and say that the life of love, power and justice they most need, a veritable power of “God” with and for them, somehow emerged by identifying their struggles with the life and teachings of this crucified Jesus. Oral testimonies and written narratives about a crucified Jesus, whose life was bound up with God, were kept alive and developed by communities variously called the “Jesus movement” or the “early Christian movement.” For these movements, first and foremost outgrowths and variants of Judaism, the reality of God was focused around communal remembrance of this one who had been crucified. The emancipatory meanings of this Jesus fused both Jewish elements and also larger currents in the Greco-Roman environment.⁴ *The crucified God* is a phrase that keeps to the fore this focus on liberating life for “crucified peoples.”⁵

4. On the interplay between Jewish and Greco-Roman currents in early Jesus movements, see Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002), 6, 246.

5. On the notion of “crucified peoples,” see Michael E. Lee, ed., *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays on History, Liberation and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 195-225. I would like to acknowledge here the work of Princeton Seminary’s doctoral student Francisco Peláez-Díaz, who relates Ellacuría’s concept of “crucified peoples” to Mexican immigrant communities’ suffering of violence in the U.S.

As Moltmann and others have pointed out, there is a risk that focusing our talk about God around such a crucified one will lead to a glorification of suffering. The risk is that suffering, weakness, and modes of being exploited become sacralized. Suffering is made so holy by talk of a crucified God that, for some minds, glorying in their own weakness seems in itself a kind of sacred worship.

The results of such pious worship of suffering have included quietism, acceptance of suffering (for self and others), and in the extreme, a kind of sacralizing of destructive sadomasochistic impulses. Regarding such sadomasochism, I am thinking of torturers during the Argentine Dirty War of the 1970s and 1980s who told their victims, “We are going to make you Christ,” and actually seemed to cloak themselves in the mantle of holiness because they were applying torture to victims, being God in the torture room, putting torture victims to the cross.⁶

Even though Christianity in the past and in the present sacralizes suffering, in both subtle and blatant forms, it is not a necessary feature of a Christian understanding of the crucified God. At its best, the expression *crucified God* reminds us that the power of all life, “God,” faces and suffers the worst that a creature can endure and emerges with newfound power, strength, and hope. What is sacralized or made holy is not suffering but the facing, endurance of suffering, the resisting it with hope and life.

A God believed to be entangled in crucifixion is an antidote to pieties and theologies that seek their God high above the earth, away from and untouched by suffering peoples. The crucified God takes believers on a journey into earth, into its and its people’s pain and

6. Frank Graziano, *Divine Violence: Spectacle, Psychosexuality, and Radical Christianity in the Argentine Dirty War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), 205. On the way meanings of gender and nation operated in the dirty war, see Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 223–54.

suffering, and finds in that journey not the holiness of pain but the wonder of life's power to persist and transform. The way of the crucified God seeks God in earth's humanity, especially among those who are what Jacques Rancière terms "the part that has no part," those included but always as excludable, usually repressed and viewed as disposable, and, as Rancière notes, also policed.⁷ These peoples often frequent the zones of abandonment in city and country, and are rejected and despised wherever they move.⁸ They are the incarcerated and warehoused of our time, those anywhere who know life amid struggle with structural and institutionalized violence.

From Crucified to Executed

To speak of Jesus as "executed" adds something distinctive. A crucifixion, of course, was an execution, a horrific one, involving public display of the victim in a slow and agonizing death. Over centuries of Christian theological interpretation and ritual worship, however, *crucified* has tended to signify largely Jesus' general experience of suffering and death, a redemptive death—a problematic interpretation to which I return later. Here I note that this is again that problem of de-politicized abstraction at work when Christians interpret Jesus' death. With this, the crucifixion of Jesus is often fitted into some larger theological schema, some overall plan of God for all the living and all the dead. The focus thus tends to shift away from his experience of one of Rome's most distinctive kinds of execution, to a supposedly more sublime plan of God. Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino also terms this an act of "abstraction" from the concrete world of Jesus of Nazareth.⁹ With this abstraction, the

7. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 9–12.

8. João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 35–45.

horror of crucifixion as a politically-loaded mode of state killing retreats into the background of Christian reflection and faith, and the politics and specifics of the torture-death of Jesus are themselves rarely given theological meaning.

The phrase *the executed God* reminds us that the God who was bound up with the life of Jesus of Nazareth was exposed to material conditions so malignant that he was executed. Jesus did not die accidentally. He did not expire in the culmination of a long disease. His death did not come when his life was full of years and maturity. Nor have historians been able to endorse the theologies that claim Jesus was possessed of a “will to die,” as many Christians put it, or that Jesus was “*intending to die for others.*”¹⁰ No, if he was crucified he was put to death. He was captured by armed agents; he was confined (however briefly on the way to a quick execution); he was ridiculed, whipped (perhaps also sexually abused and assaulted¹¹), and driven on a forced march to his place of death. There, he was done in by executioners.

Comedian Dick Gregory once said that if Christians understood the meaning of Jesus’ cross, they would wear around their necks and hang from their earlobes little electric chairs. I think he’s right. The fact that his suggestion seems morbid and that many of us persist in hanging a silver or gilded cross from our bodies suggest we have lost touch with the ugly and terrorizing dimension of his crucifixion as torture-death.

It is time to take with *theological* seriousness the historical eventfulness of Jesus’ death as an execution: a state-sanctioned

9. Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 72. I treated this overall problem of “abstraction” in Christology in Mark Lewis Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), xv, 126–49, and passim.

10. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 332–33.

11. David Tombs, “Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 53, nos. 1–2 (1999): 89–109.

execution, one also supported by key religious officials. We should guard against interpreting “state-sanctioned” as meaning solely “judicial” and “official.” Indeed, it was that, but there was also an “extra-judicial” and populist dimension, even, at times, a mob action dimension. In the narratives about Jesus, this is apparent when the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, is said to have appealed to popular will when proceeding with Jesus’ execution. Because of the way that crucifixion combined judicial and extra-judicial actions and agents, theologian James H. Cone is certainly right in seeing the similarities between crucifixion and lynching, as in his 2012 book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. It is another sign of Christian abstraction of the cross from its context in a politics of terror that the similarity has almost never been mentioned by theologians. Concluding his analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr’s silence on the issue, James Cone writes, “During most of Niebuhr’s life lynching was the most brutal manifestation of white supremacy, and yet he said and did very little about it. Should we be surprised, then, that other white theologians, ministers and churches followed suit?”¹² The historical grounds for seeing the relations between Jesus’ cross and U.S. lynchings are strong. It is not only the mix of judicial and extra-judicial elements leading to Jesus’ crucifixion that creates a parallel with lynching. Perhaps more importantly, as I will show below, both crucifixion and lynching had the political function of consolidating rule: Roman domination in Palestine, and white supremacist social domination in the U.S., respectively. To neglect theological interpretations of the cross as lynching discloses the ways white entitlement and racism continue to infuse Christological readings of Jesus. In the first edition of this book I myself all-too-briefly mentioned this connection of crucifixion to lynching. Indeed, I did embed my analysis of

12. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 45.

Lockdown America in the U.S. history of both slavery and lynching, but in a way that elided the direct affinities between lynching and crucifixion.¹³ In this edition, I emphasize the connections more prominently, since the legacy of lynching is at work in the U.S. state's racist pattern of official executions, where those executed are still more than half black, and even more frequently, executed for killing white victims. In the 35 executions of 2014, no white person was executed for killing a black man or woman. Lynching's legacy, though, is also evident today in law enforcement's freedom from accountability in the shooting of black and other youth of color, thus displaying a *de facto*, and often actual, legalization of white supremacist killing of black life.¹⁴

In sum, Christianity, defined by this executed and “lynched” Jesus, is not just about a crucified one who faced the threat of human death in general. No, against all pious abstractions—whether these come in the form of beliefs held by Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals, or liberals—the executed Jesus challenges Christian thinkers to enter the world of the politics of terror at work in Jesus' imperial execution. Christians who confess that the presence or reign of God was uniquely given, in some mode, with Jesus' presence, are confronted with the need to do a political theology of state terror at the very heart of their Christology and at the heart of their discourse. By Christianity's own traditional logic, we are compelled to face and to meditate on a figure who entered into Rome's and Palestine's state-sanctioned theatrics of terror. We are challenged to say how it is that from within such a theater of state violence, new life was born for Jesus and his followers, and for other crucified peoples who suffer the terrors of imperial force.

13. Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 38, 45, 114, and 172.

14. On lynching and current carceral violence, see Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 29–33, 36–40, 53–57.

Jesus of Nazareth and the Executed God

In a mode that follows the beliefs of many Christians, I have already been using the words “Jesus” and “the executed Jesus” in relation to “God.” This is, of course, consistent with a long classical tradition in Christianity that confessed Jesus of Nazareth to be God, to be in some sense “divine.” The conjoining of Jesus’ execution with God, is of course suggested in the very title of this book, *The Executed God*. Even if I have promised to avoid many of the Christological discourses (metaphysical, philosophical, doctrinal) holding this Jesus to be God, I do need to say more about how this term, “God,” functions in this book.

I must confess to a certain personal reticence in using the term *God* at all. God-talk has often served as a reservoir of easy answers and stock solutions. It often has anchored an interest in “transcendence” that underwrites the very abstraction from history and politics I have already named and thereby masks the politics of the cross and state terror.¹⁵ Theologian though I be, and writing this book abounding in God-talk, I feel the human situation—the mass death sentence we all live under, worked by terrorizing systems of slavery, white supremacy, hegemonic masculinity, genocide, and holocaust—and I often hearken more to the counsel of an Albert Camus than to the belief systems of many churches and their easy God-talk. Camus counseled not so much atheism as a good healthy blasphemy, one marked by “denouncing God as the father of death and as the supreme outrage.”¹⁶ In this section and throughout the Introduction, therefore, I do not presume God-talk as an obviously positive discourse. This does not mean that I simply jettison the discourse.

15. On issues of “transcendence,” and the “God symbol,” see Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 49-51 and *passim*.

16. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1991 [1951]), 24.

It *does* mean that I must clarify a sense in which some helpful work is done by the term, “God.” We also may need to set aside certain other uses of the term that are less helpful, that only compound the “outrage” of which Camus spoke.

Paradoxically, to some, I consider this very fundamental suspicion of God-talk to be a service for Christian communities today, especially for those that are intentional about engaging the structural violence of this era. It can be a form of personal and political therapy to meditate deeply on the Baldwin quotation that leads off this Introduction: “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.”¹⁷ The remainder of this Introduction can be seen as a meditation on the notion of God in the spirit of Baldwin.

To begin with, it is still necessary (though, perhaps, by now tedious and obvious to many) to note that God is not a kingly and whiskered fellow ruling over the universe. We risk the tedious and obvious in pointing this out because the critique of such anthropomorphic thinking has long been made. Oft-cited “classical” theologians have underscored this point. Recall Thomas Aquinas’ notion that “God is . . . being itself.”¹⁸ Other aspects of various Christian traditions, especially “apophatic” currents in Christian thought, have stressed the elusiveness of God, of the notion’s defiance of all categorization by human concepts and knowing, indeed, its being *beyond* being itself.¹⁹ Contemporary liberation theologians have stressed the point too, most notably perhaps the womanist and

17. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 61.

18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pt. 1, ques. 44, art. 1, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 1:427.

19. See Deirdre Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena*, Great Medieval Thinkers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36. See also Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

feminist ones among them, and novelists funding those theologies. “I believe God is everything,” says Alice Walker’s character Shug, for example, in the novel *The Color Purple*. “And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it.”²⁰ Interpreters of popular science fiction works have adapted ideas of God to notions of “the force” (as in *Star Wars* scenarios), or to other modes of a sensed “sacred presence” in nature, in intense communal bonding, and so on.

Although both classically theological and popular imaginations show these tendencies to hold very fluid God-concepts, it is still necessary to point out the limitations of the kingly, whiskered fellow. Males with authority (usually heads of white families, their presidents, and generals) are still influential as ready-to-hand images (especially in children’s eyes) for forging visions of God. This occurs not only among churches of the still powerful Christian Right. It is also found throughout Western Christianity wherever there is a failure to question pervasive male bias in gender, sexual, and family relationships. There often is lacking a failure to theologically challenge the figure of God that flourishes in our minds as some kind of male authority figure writ large.²¹

This book’s notion of the executed God presupposes readers’ understanding of the term “God” as symbol, certainly not identifiable with a specifiable male authority figure. To take God as symbolic is not some lamentable abstraction. It enables us to assess the work that the notion of “God” does. British philosopher of religion Ian Ramsey’s claim is still helpful. The three-letter word “God,” he claims, is a rather astounding integrator word, a performative

20. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), 190.

21. For excellent investigative journalism on “The Cult of Masculinity” in the U.S. Christian Right, see Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 73–94. For a fine theoretical discussion of how and why gender and sex matter in thinking about God, see Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 27–58, 254–58.

term—indeed the “supreme integrator,” functioning linguistically and conceptually for “cosmic mapping” of experience.²² It brings together many of our thoughts, affects, and perceptions, especially when we push the limits of our lives, developing insights about the world by stretching language and awareness to the furthest horizons of our experience. Since those horizons often defy focus, or can only be dreamed and imagined, our language about them will usually be “odd”—not the ordinary vernacular but a language in which we embrace myth, legend, fiction, and stories in order to grapple with what is most important to us.²³ Even when practices of religious faith are disruptive and revolutionary, the God-concept can function in such practices to integrate and mobilize the language and symbols necessary for the kind of comprehensive “radical imagination” sought by social movements.²⁴

In post-World War I Germany’s revolutionary period, for example, theologian and religious socialist Paul Tillich challenged his audiences to think of God as a symbol for the new, for “the unconditioned,” as something referring to future “expectation,” the latter, for him, being a symbol he saw as crucial to a much-needed “religious socialism.”²⁵ Elsewhere, acknowledging that the word “God” might not have much meaning for his politically decimated German listeners between the wars, he suggested to them another way to approach the term “God:” “Translate it and speak of the depth

22. Ian Ramsey, *Prospects for Metaphysics: Essays of Metaphysical Exploration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), 174. For further discussion of the term and Ramsey’s analysis, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 150–51.

23. On the nature of God-language and its relations to “limits” and as “odd,” see Paul Ricoeur, “The Specificity of Religious Language,” *Semeia* (1975): 107, 131, and 142. See also Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

24. Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 114–17. Compare Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

25. Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Frank Sherman (New York: Harper & Row), 19–20, 101–6.

of your life and the source of your ultimate concern and of what you take seriously without reservation.” In one’s ultimate concern, he noted, God is “the name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being.”²⁶

In this book, when I embrace approvingly the word “God,” it will be in this sense as a term that names the often elusive source of what is ultimately significant to us. The term “God” is a way to name that which is ultimately important; here, in this book especially, that which we discern and experience as a countervailing power amid structural violence for creating communities and institutions of justice, love and dignity, for finding meaning and hope in our time and context.

In this book I will speak of God for such counter-vailing power, often as “greater” power: greater than all the forces of executing, lynching, and imprisoning authorities; greater than all the powers coalescing in corporately-driven Lockdown America; indeed, greater than all those arrayed in the global, mega-state empire catalyzed by U.S. military power and the international geopolitics of *Pax Americana*.²⁷ This is part of an act of radical imagination, and, when cultivated with care and knowledge, it gives substance to many activists assertion: “another world is possible.”²⁸

In subsequent chapters I will give still greater analytic texture to the notion of God as “greater power,” in two ways, explaining it first as “deeper power” and then second as also “wider” power. These notions of depth and breadth of power are no mere supplements to the idea of greatness; rather, the greatness of the power of God for

26. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner’s, 1948), 57.

27. For an early discussion of the notion of *Pax Americana*, see Ronald Steel, *Pax Americana: The Cold War Empire the United States Acquired by Accident – and How It Led from Isolation to Global Intervention* (New York: Viking, 1967). Steel is insufficiently critical of U.S. imperial formations, viewing them as “accidental” and “benign.”

28. Susan George, *Another World Is Possible, If . . .* (New York: Verso Books, 2004).

counter-vailing practices emerges, especially in chapter four, in the ways that I render it both deep and wide.²⁹

As “deeper power,” I will develop a notion of greater power interpreted as emerging from the very nature of things. This power as greater than Lockdown America is a power breaking from within the deepest resources of life and earth’s vitality. But the political forces greater than Lockdown America are not marked by pointing simply to stronger powers or by making moral demands mightier than those of the carceral state. It is a matter more of discerning and attuning ourselves to the powers that already pulse in the universe, in all things, of the earth, and of bodies and matter themselves. There is, thus, an earthiness about the political power that enables our overcoming of Lockdown America. Life’s own vital forces—flowing through bodies, land, wind, and all creation—are resources for catalyzing political efforts. I will show how especially the resistance and arts of those who are incarcerated today often themselves see these earthen forces as veritable catalysts for personal endurance and political change.

As to “wider power,” this is a way to name and reimagine the greater power of God as cultivated and catalyzed within and by complex social and political movements of peoples. The greater power that is deep is also “wide” in this sense, marked by collective breadth of peoples together, especially when in coalitions they seek to form that “bloc from below” of coalescing movements necessary for resisting state sovereignty’s structures of domination.³⁰ Such wider power is at work in the full diaspora of world peoples hungering

29. On the hermeneutics of “depth” and “breadth” as being intrinsic to a prophetic consciousness, see Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 96-102.

30. The “bloc from below” is, as Dussel notes, built from below “through mutual information, dialogue, translation of proposals, and shared militant praxis . . .” Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 72.

for empowerment amid oppression. Here, God’s power is viewed as socio-personal, intersubjective, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic in its transformative working.

It is just such a greater power—deeper and wider in these senses—that the word “God” names across the pages of this book. It is this kind of force, or array of forces, that I will be invoking when presenting the way of the cross, the way of the executed Jesus.

Such an understanding of God means that the phrase “the executed God” cannot be identical with the discrete ego or historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. The greater (deeper and wider) forces named “God” are more appropriately ascribed to an entire way of the cross. This is a way taken by Jesus, exhibited in stories of his individual life and death, but the dynamics discerned in that way (political, religious, social, economic, sexual, and more) are of a complexity—featuring a greatness of depth and breadth—that they cannot be contained in Jesus’ life or in any one individual life.

Thus, the God who is “the executed God” referenced in this book corresponds less to Jesus’ individual body and life, his discrete figure, and more to an entire way of the cross—the existential, political, and historical realities in which Jesus participated. As the book’s title and subtitle show, “the executed God” is a phrase standing in apposition to “the way of the cross,” *not* in apposition to Jesus. God is not Jesus. God is the greater power—a deeper and wider power—for overcoming Lockdown America. This power is known amid practices having distinctive properties that I unfold in the book’s final chapters of Part Two.

Christology as a Politics of Remembrance

Professional theologians and also other readers may wonder: “what kind of Christology is this?” I have written above that Jesus’ individual life is not to be seen as God. I have suggested that God’s

“greater power” for overcoming amid and against Lockdown America is to be found in the deeper power and wider power at work in the way of the cross that Jesus catalyzed and that enveloped him.³¹ In this section, I discuss briefly the model of Christology at work in this book.

“Christology” in the most general sense is talk about Jesus who is acclaimed and believed to be “the Christ,” to be “Messianic,” in the sense of occasioning some expected, fulfilling event, person and/or process, usually in the context of some agony or alienation, some yearning or hunger. The Messianic, to which Jesus is connected, is usually thought to bring some needed transformation, some new intensification, emergence or resurgence of life. The ways of saying *how* Jesus was the Christ or *in what sense* he was the “Messiah” or “Messianic” have been numerous. I will not here rehearse all or even the major ways these issues have been addressed. But I wish to place my way of framing the entire Christological discussion in relation to what I see as two other dominant frames, or models in Christology. The model in this book I term a “politics of remembrance model.” The two contrasting models have a long tradition and still command a widespread contemporary resonance: the “dialectical philosophy model” and the “sacrifice model.”

The book’s *politics of remembrance* model is rooted in the dynamics of remembrance and memory, about which whole books have been written.³² This model is distinctive in its relating the necessarily complex discussions of remembrance—of memory but also of forgetting—to the historical event of Jesus’ death on the cross as

31. For more on Jesus’ relation to “God,” see Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza*, 150–93.

32. On memory and dictatorship for “archival thinking,” see Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3–31. Other book length treatments of history and memory include Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2000); and Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

an imperial execution (a state murder). In other words, this model does not abstract from, or forget, the historical *politics* of crucifixion, suffered by Jesus and by many others of his time who were deemed enemies of Rome or dispatched to death as inconvenient to its imperial rule. In fact, in the model at work in this book, the historical *and* political features of Jesus' crucifixion are constitutive of the event of Jesus the Christ and of that event's transformative features in imperial Roman contexts. To accent this point I might have named this model a "*counter-imperial* politics of remembrance model." Such a name would ably foreground the antagonism of the crucified one to imperial Rome, and I will sharpen up precisely that antagonism in chapter 3. Yet, such a naming risks suggesting, to many contemporary minds at least, that "it's all about empire" in the restricted sense of international geopolitics, forgetting the way the imperial cross in Jesus' time targeted also the racial/ethnic other, those deemed inferior by gender and sexuality, and also the poor. So I leave the name simply as "*politics* of remembrance," making clear below that this is a politics of remembrance amid and against all forms of historical domination and exploitation. In actuality, contemporary imperial formations also target this multiplicity of "others."³³ The crucial point is that Christology as a politics of remembrance starts with the concrete historical event of one executed/crucified by the religio-political state. The event of Jesus' crucifixion, by the way, is one of the few events—if not the only one—that scholars claim to know with considerable historical certainty to have taken place.³⁴

33. On the targets of imperial US projects of domination as sexualized and religious "others," see Jasbir K. Puar, "Abu Ghraib and US Sexual Exceptionalism," in her, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 79–113.

34. Paula Fredricksen, *Jesus of Nazareth/King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 8. On whether Jesus existed at all, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 142–73.

The model at work in this book sets the fundamental question of Christology in a way that differs from other models. That question is this: *how*, from amidst the terror and resilient brutality of the many forms of structural violence suffered by oppressed peoples, do you get anything that can convincingly be called *life-giving*? More particularly, how might anyone claim today that something *life-giving* emerged or emerges from the structural violence that Jesus suffered when undergoing execution and torture on the imperial cross of Rome?

It is in response to this question that this book presents a *politics of remembrance* model for explaining how life may be resurgent in the wake of the killing of Jesus. Most Christian traditions speak of resurgent life after the killing of Jesus in terms of a resurrected body of the individual Jesus. In some naturalist and rationalizing accounts, the individual rising has been portrayed as a kind of resuscitation or reanimation after apparent death (perhaps provoked by “cold temperature,” as some nineteenth century rationalists mused).³⁵ Jesus’ individual body allegedly underwent a kind of “swoon” provoked by suffering. Others will say, and more usually among Christians, that there was no resuscitation but an utterly new, reconstituted body of Jesus, interpreted by Christians, depending on their varied traditions, as a “heavenly body,” or perhaps the “social heavenly body,” or the church (“the body of Christ”). Many Christians understand resurrection as an act of supernatural power, trusting to divine miracle or divine intervention, and they rely on these beliefs to “ground” their conviction that the resurrection of Jesus’ body after crucifixion was that of a historical rising of the individual Jesus. Others take the resurrection narrative in a more symbolic sense,

35. On this “reanimation after apparent death” tendency, see the comments by Jack Verheyden in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 456-57, n. 60.

as in the liberal Christianities that treat resurrection narratives as a story signifying various ways that something life-giving and good—usually confessed as worked by “divine” agency—derives from the death of Jesus. But again, whether resurrection is thought to be a literal, historical event or “merely” symbolic, the fundamental question persists: how can we think the relation between resurgent life, on the one hand, and Jesus’ death of *execution by crucifixion in and by Rome’s leaders and supporters*, on the other?

A politics of remembrance model makes no such claims to reanimation, or to any faith claims that Jesus’ individual body was “raised,” reconstituted in some heavenly individual form. To be sure, I will propose that liberating social movements emerge and are sustained by a politics of remembrance of Jesus’ torture and death, but these movements are not forms of social life that I will name the “the body of Jesus” or “the “body of Christ,” as Christians have often spoken of the church. What the politics of remembrance of Jesus’ torture and death yields is a mode of remembering and living after Jesus’ death that takes place, indeed, in social and political practices but in arenas of life that may or may not include members of the church. It is the social sites of these practices of re-membering of Jesus that generate new life and emancipatory power for change. The book will provide examples of such new life forged in the wake of Jesus’ death and within social movements today. In this book we continually ask how a resurgence of life can occur in the wake of the brutal end Jesus suffered? How is life reconstituted when, as several scholars have noted, Jesus’ body could well have been thrown into a lime-pit or mass grave, or left to birds and beasts of prey—these being frequent ends of most of the crucified?³⁶ These are some of the key questions in a Christology as politics of remembrance.

36. For examples, see Kathleen E. Corley, *Maranatha: Women’s Funerary Rituals and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 118, 131; and the fuller summary of scholarly analyses of