

# Preface

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?

Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms: Reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience*<sup>1</sup>

1. Abu-Jamal was an award-winning journalist and revolutionary writer, before being wrongfully arrested and convicted in 1982 for the shooting death of Philadelphia police officer, Daniel Faulkner. He served over 29 years on death row. His death sentence was ruled unconstitutional in 2011, and finally vacated in 2012. He now serves a life sentence without possibility of parole in a Pennsylvania prison. Today, after more than thirty years in prison, his renown has only grown. He has authored thousands of audio and print essays, and eight books. He has become “the voice of the voiceless” for many repressed others across the nation and world. His humanity, courage, power of pen and mind, as well as the flagrant injustice of his own treatment during trial and appeals, have drawn human rights activists' attention. Amnesty International declared that his 1982 trial “clearly failed to meet minimum international standards safeguarding the fairness of legal procedures.” See Amnesty International, *The Case of Mumia Abu-Jamal: A Life in the Balance* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000), 55. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu demands he “be released immediately.” *Democracy Now!*, interview with Amy Goodman, December 8, 2011, [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/12/8/south\\_african\\_archbishop\\_desmond\\_tutu\\_calls](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/12/8/south_african_archbishop_desmond_tutu_calls), accessed June 30, 2015. For an introduction

This query about Christianity’s contradiction—“Isn’t it Odd?”—can be read as acerbic rhetoric, a deftly-crafted sarcasm, which exposes a key dynamic operating among Christians’ views of Jesus’ death. Taking the query as acerbic or sarcastic prompts a response: “Well, no, it isn’t odd at all.” It is not odd for Christians to have downplayed the political meanings of his death, to have strayed from revering a figure who, in fact, is best understood from the point of view of having suffered a politically motivated death in the Roman Empire, one that was more than a religious event. This is not odd, we might continue, if we recall that Christians often have regularly abstracted their preaching and teaching into a divine-plan rhetoric of forgiveness and salvation that strips the cross of the politics of terror that were essential to crucifixion’s historical meaning. The oddity that Abu-Jamal observes does not arise simply because Christians today often fail to be politically resistant in ways the narratives of Jesus show him to have been in his own imperial setting. That is a failing by Christians today, indeed a hypocrisy. It is rightly exposed here by Abu-Jamal. But the deeper problem is that many, if not most, Christians work out of core beliefs about the meaning of Jesus’ death that are abstracted from history. By “abstracted,” I mean Christians often pull the meanings of Jesus’ crucifixion up and away from crucifixion’s historical embeddedness in the state politics of terror in Jesus’ time.

This book, therefore, will weave together throughout its presentation both a constructive and a critical task. As *the constructive task* there emerges a reinterpretation of Jesus’ life as one that moved toward torture and death on the cross, being what I term his “way of the cross.” With this task I seek a positive and also feasible political theology for life in struggle and hope amid today’s Lockdown

to the writings and case of Abu-Jamal, see Johanna Fernández, ed., *Writing on the Wall: Selected Prison Writings of Mumia Abu-Jamal* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2015), xxi-xxxvi, 314-22.

America. Then there is *the critical task* that runs concurrent to the first one, throughout the book. This second task challenges Christians' frequent abstraction of their faith and practice into concerns with divine-plan scenarios that occur above, or outside, history's politics of state terror. The abstraction of Jesus' death from its historico-political context, from its being what John Dominic Crossan termed an "imperial execution,"<sup>2</sup> goes hand in glove with similar abstractions by Christians today, failing to make the connections between their Christian faith and a political challenge to current imperial state terror.

*The overall argument of the book will be that remembering the torture-death—the imperial execution—of Jesus, and enacting contemporary interpretations of Jesus' way of the cross, catalyzes Christian action as a key contributor to society-wide mobilizing of resistance and hope amid Lockdown America today.* This enables Christians to join others in resisting Lockdown America and in resisting those forms of Christendom that are complicit with it. I am using "Christendom" to refer to those institutionalized and all-too-prevalent Christian beliefs and assumptions that rationalize and reinforce the logics of statecraft at work in Lockdown America. In these ways, Christianity often functions as ideology, making an exploitative and deadly Lockdown America appear normal, necessary, and incapable of being challenged.

The book has a (perhaps) startling culmination. By its end, I call on Christians to work with all faiths and people of conscience to demilitarize the police function as we know it, to terminate U.S. dependency on mass incarceration, and to end the practice of capital punishment, which means ending various modes of the U.S. killing state. Many of the organizations I point to also prefigure a new

2. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 14.

socialist future as alternative to the capitalist–carceral state today. This is a mode of socialism I too embrace, and I explore it as “abolition–democracy,” a notion that Angela Y. Davis and Mumia Abu–Jamal develop with the aid of W. E. B. Du Bois, George Lipsitz, and others.<sup>3</sup>

I am *not* proposing that Christianity, or discourse about Jesus, has a premium on the thinking and practice necessary for transformation amid Lockdown America. Quite to the contrary, Christians will need to work interdependently with communities of conscience that are interfaith *and* secular. If this book gives nearly exclusive attention to reinterpreting Jesus, his way of the cross, and many Christian resources, this is because I am seeking to move my own tradition into a closer and more effective solidarity with multiple interfaith and secular organizing already underway. Muslims, Jews, engaged Buddhists, the Yoruba, traditions of Caribbean cultures, secular activists, and well as many others abroad and in the U.S.—all must be engaged to take on Lockdown America.

A further special reason for focus on Christianity is that challenging complicit Christian formations and re–envisioning alternative practical logics of resistance for Jesus followers helps to foment Christians’ subversion of their own hegemony in the United States. Christianity still holds a status in the U.S. as “the legitimate religion,” often providing, in Judith Butler’s terms, “the cultural preconditions of the public,” identifying even for secular minds “whose symbols circulate freely within the public” as distinct from others assumed “to threaten the foundation of secular life, whose symbols . . . are considered ostentatious or threatening to democracy itself.”<sup>4</sup> Christians who are able to subvert their own public

3. Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 77–104.

4. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness as a Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 115.

hegemony of Christianity are able to aid in the dismantling of Lockdown America because that hegemony unleashes many ideological reflexes that often sustain today's capitalist-carceral state.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, this subversion of Christianity's hegemony also can serve to revive the spirit and ideals of the church.

The title of this book, *The Executed God*, is a phrase naming a complex symbol that both expresses and catalyzes a much needed force for reorienting Christians in the United States. I will elaborate below, especially in the Introduction, on the power of this symbol, "the executed God." Here, it is important to note that "the executed God" does not refer simply to the executed figure Jesus of Nazareth, as readers might first think when reading this book's title. No, the executed God names a whole life force that we can trace in suffering and resisting imperial, state-sanctioned violence. It is a whole life force, a greater power, if you will, lively and creative in three dimensions of Jesus' "way of the cross": (1) being politically adversarial to religiously supported imperial power, (2) performing creative and dramatic practices of resistance to imperial power, and (3) organizing movements that can continue resistance and flourishing amid and against Lockdown America, even in the face of state violence working at multiple levels. The executed God is a force of life that is greater than the assemblage of imperial powers and foments necessary resistance and hope for people today.

The executed Jesus of Nazareth, as remembered and haunting later history through oral and written, often fragmentary, traditions, provides a way to talk about this life force. I suggest that the force of this communal remembering is resilient enough to endure, resist, and flourish amid the *Pax Americana* of today as it did during the *Pax Romana* of old. But to understand this power as effective one

5. Mark Lewis Taylor, "Christianity and U.S. Prison Abolition: Rupturing a Hegemonic Christian Ideology," in *Socialism and Democracy* 28, no. 3 (November 2014): 172-88.

must again resist abstracting from the executed Jesus' experience of the state politics of terror. Jesus did not just experience a "death in general," one that then might be interpreted for a number of Christian theological projects—the one most often developed by Christians are projects that highlight a person's deliverance from guilt and sin (redemption or salvation), perhaps also a person's renewal for exemplifying sacrificial love, and so on. No, Jesus on the cross is best understood as suffering, again, an imperial execution.<sup>6</sup> When interpreted as that kind of death—a torture-death—the narrated stories of Jesus become ones about vulnerability amidst and challenge to the powers that visit imperial terror on subjugated peoples.

The executed God, then, can be understood as that life force that catalyzes people's actions to resist Lockdown America, to build anew beyond it, *and* to celebrate communal living. People today are lifting up their cries and forging new actions from an oppressive regime in our day. At the start of the twenty-first century, even the normally cautious human rights organization Amnesty International began to charge the United States with violating its own citizens' human rights with a pattern of unchecked police brutality.<sup>7</sup> Today police violence continues, and the nation's ready use of the prisons is barely abating, if it is at all. Laws have been altered and practices shifted to give police officers greater discretion in their work.<sup>8</sup> That discretion is extended to citizens who use guns to lethal effect in racial encounters, with "Stand Your Ground" laws in some states and similar provisions elsewhere. Yet, police killings are often felt by officials to be of such little consequence that they rarely maintain statistics on the numbers of shooting deaths they inflict annually.<sup>9</sup>

6. For more on "the imperial execution of Jesus," see Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 411–14.

7. Amnesty International, *The United States of America: Rights for All* (London: Amnesty International, 1998), 1–2, 17–26.

8. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 62–63, 89, 104.

If Christians do not act on a solidarity with criminalized populations, locked-down communities, and with others suffering extrajudicial and judicial violence, they themselves, along with many other citizens who think themselves free from the criminal justice system's negative effects, may find themselves easily caught up in the indignities of today's punishment regime, if they are not already.

Please do not mistake this book's critique of Christendom, or its call for ending Lockdown America's theatrics of state terror, as a mere rhetoric of denunciation and doom. I do, indeed, seek to expose a systematic exploitation, a deadly destruction, evident in U.S. mass incarceration, police violence, and the keeping of some 3,000 on U.S. death rows. This, however is a call to resistance, to practices of a "counter-theatrics to state terror"—and thus to hope and life. The symbol of the executed God, and the thought and practice to which it gives rise, is solely a gruesome notion if we forget what it means. Its meaning is that a God of life endures and somehow surprisingly continues to mobilize an effective and comprehensive resistance to executing state powers and its structural violence. What I mean by "God" will be explicated in the Introduction. But note the logic here: I refuse to make sacred any execution—that of Jesus or of anyone else. Nevertheless, along the way of Jesus' life toward execution, we can learn of a way of living that guards life, beginning with the materially dispossessed, and that resists, challenges, and flourishes against the terror of the state's structural violence.

No, this work is no rhetoric of doom and denunciation. It may be, instead, more than we usually dare to hope, a way of finding

9. For a citizen-initiated effort to keep careful accounting of the numbers of those killed by police, see the online site *Fatal Encounters*, offered as "a step toward creating an impartial, comprehensive and searchable national data base on people killed during interaction with law enforcement," <http://www.fatalencounters.org/>, accessed June 20, 2015. See also Arlene Eisen, *Operation Ghetto Storm*, updated April 4, 2013 (New York: The Malcolm X Grassroots Project, 2013), which has a comprehensive photo-listing of victims killed by police, <http://www.operationghettostorm.org/>, accessed June 20, 2015.

hope for peoples, places, and practices long neglected by churches. The way of the cross in today's theatrics of state terror, in Lockdown America, is a way *through* the terrorizing powers of the day toward a restored humanity and a liberating of communities in the U.S. My theological approach is different from Tolstoy's, but in the spirit of the passage from his book *Resurrection*, which I have placed on this volume's facing-page, I seek to connect the gruesome torture-death of crucifixion "with liberation." This is not because the cross that ended Jesus' life in itself liberates. Nor is it because his sacrificial torture-death was or is a necessary cause of liberation. It is more due to today's communities, those that Ignacio Ellacuría termed "crucified peoples", which foreground liberating action when remembering the torture and death of Jesus at the hands of imperial powers. It is through such lived modes of identification, along the way of what this book terms "the way of the cross," that there can be an undermining of the powers of state terror that is Lockdown America today.