

BOOK REVIEW

THE EXECUTED GOD: *THE WAY OF THE CROSS IN LOCKDOWN AMERICA*

By Mark Lewis Taylor, Fortress Press, 208 pages, \$17.

Reviewed by Rich Heffern

Jesus' crucifixion was a public execution. When this fact is fitted into a wider theology, the horrors of execution then retreat to the background of Christian reflection and faith, Mel Gibson's recent film notwithstanding.

Mark Lewis Taylor's purpose in this book is to bring the fact of that execution to the forefront and then proceed further.

Taylor is professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. His is an ambitious book that delves into important areas of both theology and public life that are seldom examined.

Taylor points out first that in Jesus of Nazareth, "God suffered not just death but a state-sanctioned execution supported by religious officials.... Jesus' life, as bound up with God's life, receives its distinctive stamp because of the way he suffered state-sanctioned killing." By our own tradition's logic, he says, we must "come face to face in Jesus with the executed God."

If we seriously embrace this executed deity, Taylor believes we thereby lose some long-standing modes of belief in God. We lose the God of Political Domination and the God of Religious Respectability, among others. What's more, revering and respecting this executed God forces us to look unflinchingly and deeply at what the author calls "lockdown America." Currently prisons are growing in numbers held within and have become big business, a growth industry. Over two million are in prison now, while another three million are doing time under care of the court system. Small towns facing an economic slump commonly seek recovery by organizing to host a prison.

Over 70 percent of the prison population are minorities. One out of ten black men are now in prison. One-third of all African American men aged 18 to 34 are under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

Taylor outlines the many ways in which lockdown America is a force of terrorism. The threat of the death penalty, long stretches of excruciating boredom spent "doing time," a culture of prison rape, and paramilitary policing all conspire to reinforce the terror.

Lockdown America is a threat to us all, the author contends. "To my mind, the two million in U. S. prisons, the epidemic of police brutality, and the burgeoning of death rows are a massive scar on any public compassion, any fellow feeling we might share with all our contemporaries. From this standpoint,

lockdown America is a threat because it destroys that whole fabric of fellow feeling. It disrupts and divides the unity we want to feel and build, with our neighbors and with all humanity.”

He states an important truth: “I cannot really breathe freely, if my life and security are a function of a boot planted on the throat of someone else.”

The author urges us followers of the Jesus of Golgotha to find organized, forceful ways to act out our faith, using adversarial politics, dramatic actions and organizing people’s movements. In this way we can become a force to counter the terrorism of lockdown America.

He asks, though, is Christian living only a “complex practice of negation, of nay-saying, only a practice of continually positioning ourselves against things?” Resistance and rebellion, he says, “especially pursued along the way of the cross, reveals its good from within the process of resistance ... Resistance as struggle amid the institutionalized evil of our time is a point of suffering that is dialectically related to the good. Resistance, when embraced fully, is a practice of negation that yet expresses, embodies and gives rise to practices of affirmation and celebration.”

In the end, Taylor asks us to embrace the mystery of struggle, affirmed and supported by the Jesus who triumphed in his own struggle.

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