

Redeeming Profane Bodies: Abolition, Theology & Empire

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I wrote this paper in the context of delegating to Waterloo Regional Council about their budget. There were many issues up for discussion but the one that delegate after delegate repeated is the need to follow through with ReAllocateWR's five calls to action:

1. Develop an Indigenous Community Hub at the Charles Street Terminal in relationship with Indigenous community
2. Reject the WRPS budget increase proposal and demand a 0% increase in the WRPS budget
3. Immediately fulfill its commitment of \$250,000 to facilitate community conversations and subsequent action plans for a police-free community care model
4. Allot the equivalent of the maximum WRPS budget increase request (\$10-12 million) to a community-led homelessness and housing affordability strategy including the immediate development and/or procurement of housing stock and shelter space.
5. Commit \$1 million towards funding mental health and neurodevelopmental resources & services for IBPOC, 2SLGBTQIA, persons living with disabilities and other communities impacted by the trauma of police violence.¹

ReAllocateWR is a local grassroots organization that is advancing abolitionism in the region. In the world of theology, abolitionism is still largely confined to discourse around slavery. However, abolitionists in the secular community have expanded their field of vision to include slavery, the death penalty, prisons, police, ICE and other institutions of violence.² On this expansion, Angela Davis says that "Abolitionist approaches ask us to enlarge our field of vision so that rather than focusing myopically on the problematic institution and asking what needs to be changed about that institution, we raise radical questions about the organization of the larger society"³

As I listened to racialized community members confess their traumatic encounters with police in an attempt to win empathy from the all-white Regional Council, I wondered where is

¹ "Unpolicing the Regional Budget." ReAllocate WR. <https://reallocatewr.ca/>.

² Angela Y. Davis. "Why Arguments against Abolition Inevitably Fail." Medium. LEVEL, October 6, 2020. <https://level.medium.com/why-arguments-against-abolition-inevitably-fail-991342b8d042>.

³ Angela Y. Davis. "Why Arguments against Abolition Inevitably Fail." Medium. LEVEL, October 6, 2020. <https://level.medium.com/why-arguments-against-abolition-inevitably-fail-991342b8d042>.

the Church in this conversation? What does an expanded abolitionist call mean for theology? If God were to delegate, what would they say? Abolitionist, Jason Lydon feels that “the modern abolitionist movement has not created for itself the necessary resources, at this point, to create a theology to help shape the movement. What is the role of the divine in the struggle?”⁴

While a cohesive abolition theology is still in development there are several pieces that are coming together. Central to these is a discussion of redemption and how that intersects with empire. Racialized theologians have identified how baked into our understanding of law are bodies that have been made profane (or abject) and that must be redeemed through the rituals of the justice system. However, as several authors in this study note, redemption can never be fully realized without undermining the sacredness of those that benefit from empire. Abolition then becomes an eschatological project of redeeming the world so that all are sacred in soul and body.

To illustrate what this ritualized redemptive process looks like, let us turn to Zahir

Kolia’s account of policing as confession:

“But I didn’t do anything ... I was already guilty.” I have been stopped for years around my neighborhood and what is salient about each of the encounters with police as well as the advice I get from others is the connection to a powerful event: the confessional. By confessional, I mean that I have had to continually abandon myself to the power of law and express, in both verbal and somatic form, the “truth” of a pre-determined ontological suspicion inscribed upon my racialized body”.⁵

By comparing being repeatedly carded by the police to the confessional, Kolia is trying to make visible the theological dimension of the law. Police carding is a ritual in that it is a regular event that calls racialized people to reaffirm the sovereignty of the police over them. “With the tiny pieces of pavement embedded within the flesh of my face, the police forced the confession of my ontological guilt through the total submission of my body”.⁶ Like Catholic confessional,

⁴ Jason Lydon. “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement.” *Peace review (Palo Alto, Calif.)* 23, no. 3 (2011): 297.

⁵ Zahir Kolia. “I’m Making the Streets Safer Ma’am’: Race, Coloniality, and the Redemptive Theologies of Pastoral Police Power.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (October 2017): 2.

⁶ Ibid.19.

carding highlights the ‘sinfulness’ of the person being stopped and their need for redemption from a higher power. Kolia sees the confessional as one of the central rituals of producing truth in the West saying: “the confession emerged through the conditions of both moral cleansing as well as moral discipline. In effect, it functions to atone and to control”.⁷

Theologians often frame confession as a process of “acknowledging our wrongdoing, making amends through repentance, and humbly agreeing to conciliation of changed ways with the expectation that we have another chance to reintegrate anew in right relationship with our triune God, who loves us and seeks justice for us all”⁸ However, the context of the police confessional does not apply to everyone. Of the 1.2 million instances of carding in Toronto that took place between 2008-2013, Black people comprised 24.1% despite being only 8.1% of the population.⁹ Kolia describes the confessional as targeting bodies already marked as guilty:

“Passage through the dispersed and delocalized police checkpoint has the effect of further polluting the subject with suspect status and thereby guilt. As a result, guilt is not relieved by the passage allowed, but instead is instantiated in the checkpoint. The subject is not purified, but instead is called forward as an already marked subject of guilt, of law”.¹⁰

Participating in the police confessional does not offer redemption. It is instead a ritual of affirming guilt, that some people must be seen as irredeemable. Marked guilty by who? Why is this ritual even necessary? Kolia sees this process as being tied to the formation of empire. “The police, in this case, operate as the hermeneutic function of one’s confession in relation to the imagined nation, community, and neighborhood”.¹¹ In order to build a sense of self, the nation state uses ‘guilty bodies’ to exist in opposition to. Kolia expands by saying:

“It is the enforcement of the boundaries of the imagined neighborhood, through the bodies of those already recognized as being out of place – even if one resides there – that creates the conditions for the boundary to be

⁷ Ibid.15.

⁸ Valerie Miles-Tribble. “Restorative Justice as a Public Theology Imperative.” *Review and expositor (Berne)* 114, no. 3 (2017): 373.

⁹ Legal Aid Ontario. *Racialization of Carding and Street Checks*. Toronto: Legal Aid Ontario, 2015.

¹⁰ Zahir Kolia. “‘I’m Making the Streets Safer Ma’am’: Race, Coloniality, and the Redemptive Theologies of Pastoral Police Power.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (October 2017): 7.

¹¹ Ibid. 17.

erected and maintained. In other words, the neighborhood requires bodies marked with guilt, as not belonging, to produce itself as integrated, homogenous and sealed".¹²

Narratives of redemption then function primarily not for those marked guilty, but for those marked as members of the imagined community of empire. Redemption positions them in relation to these 'guilty bodies,' affirms their sacredness above them, and reminds them of the risk of being marked 'guilty.' 'Guilty bodies' must participate in police confession to reaffirm this model of redemption for the members of the imagined community so they can remain sacred.

Kolia outlines the futility of this redemption for 'guilty bodies':

"How can the body confess? The body must be transformed into a submissive site; this requires that I affirm my racialized guilt through subtle muscular contortions, through my entire muscular rhythm in proximity to the police. Consequently, the tilt of my head in relation to the sky as well as the delicate muscles in my eyes and brow ridge must renounce their tension; the positions of my hands as well as the calibration of my clinch must be precisely relaxed and made visible. My entire body must confess through a submissive corporeal logic – total obedience – to the truth of my predetermined guilt in hopes of "passing through" – albeit further marked.¹³

I can possibly redeem myself through lying upon the concrete and totally submitting, corporeally confessing, to the police officer. Reifying the "truth" of my guilt through my sprawled body also offers the neighborhood the ability to witness the redemption from the threat that I embody. Several officers arrive on scene to manage the threat that two young racialized men and an elderly mother pose to the imagined bounded neighborhood".¹⁴

Reading Kolia's account, it is clear the violence wrapped up in this experience. In attempting to deny participation in this ritual, the theological violence turned physical, and police assaulted both Kolia and their mother. Despite their broken bones, Kolia is far more troubled by the theological dimension of this violence: "While the materiality of police violence can be expressed through repressive procedures that can bruise flesh, break bones, and potentially kill; it also articulates itself to the benevolent desire to consolidate public safety through the appropriate use of pain and cruelty".¹⁵ Reformers may call for non-violent police approaches or for the removal of carding and the formal police confessional process. However, these layers of violence

¹² Ibid. 8.

¹³ Ibid. 18.

¹⁴ Ibid. 19.

¹⁵ Ibid. 2.

are so embedded in policing that they self-perpetuate in other ritualized manifestations. “No matter how many warnings may be issued by superiors about limitations on the use of force, no matter how much talk about policing as a profession, police training continually reminds recruits that coercive power is a central feature of police life”.¹⁶

The theological underpinnings of irredeemable redemption lie deeper than any one ritual. When we look to the function of policing, we see that “to police is a transitive verb that links a subject who polices to an object that is policed”.¹⁷ This process inherently objectifies people and divides people into sacred and profane bodies.¹⁸ Paired with the white supremacist colonial legacy of empire, whiteness is simultaneously read as human and as sacred. To be sacred connotes not only a sense of belonging in the community and inherent worth, but also freedom from the violence of objectification.

In response, Sarah Bloesch says that “if the sacred is part of a racialized, gendered, sexual scheme, then so too are constructions of the profane”.¹⁹ From their perspective to be policeable cannot be separated from the systems of racialization tied to colonization and the systems of dehumanization tied to Christian redemption. This lines up with Kolia’s view where “the animal and the black body come to inhabit the same space, that is, the constitutive underside of the abstract, rational self-consciousness of the white body”.²⁰ Another example of this racialized dichotomy can be seen in the way Western nations treat Muslims. “As states distinguish between

¹⁶ Tobias L. Winright & Todd Whitmore. *Serve and Protect: Selected Essays on Just Policing* Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020: 19.

¹⁷ Jeffrey T. Martin. “Annual Review of Anthropology: Police and Policing.” *Annual review of anthropology* 47 (2018): 137.

¹⁸ Sarah J Bloesch. “Embodying the Sacred and Profane: How Temporal Empires, Narratives of Salvation, and the Prison Regime Value Bodies in the United States.” *Culture and Religion* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 117.

²⁰ Zahir Kolia. “‘I’m Making the Streets Safer Ma’am’: Race, Coloniality, and the Redemptive Theologies of Pastoral Police Power.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (October 2017): 12.

good and bad Muslims, they reproduce systemic Islamophobia at the same time they deny it”.²¹

The state needs ‘bad Muslims’ to set up a system of redemption where they are “to be redeemed in order to become acceptable and thus whitened”.²²

Connecting further to empire and the birth of the nation state we can see these dynamics baked into citizenship. Anthropologist Jeffrey Martin explains:

“Citizenship was defined by the attainment of persona, “legal personality, [i.e.,] the right-and-duty-bearing person, created by the law, which appears before the law.” One corollary of this metaphorical framing for politics was the existence of human beings without political personhood. Indeed, this lack of personhood was the dominant condition of human life, for citizenship was an elite status. Noncitizens belonged to the political community indirectly, by belonging to a citizen’s estate as kin or slave, and could “appear before the law” only through their sponsoring patriarch.”²³

Their study of citizenship shows the sacred status of personhood and how the law exists to reaffirm that. As the nation state expanded the “European man emerged as the primary sovereign ‘knowing subject’ endowed with the unique capacity of rational, abstract thought.” And as Kolia notes: “Accordingly, the non-European subject is constituted as unable to achieve pure individuated self-consciousness, and, hence, unable to remake the self into a rational individual who can fully actualize as a subject of civil political community”.²⁴ Another way of looking at this is Robinson’s model of social abjection “The notion of abjection is crucial for analyzing how the global order operates. The abject is that upon which the order depends, but which the order rejects, refuses, and renders disposable”.²⁵ Police were created to manage this order once personhood had been expanded beyond the scope of the patriarch. The sacredness of personhood also changed with the introduction of police as they had the powers to make profane

²¹ Mohamad Amer Meziane. “Introduction: On Police Violence and Systemic Islamophobia.” *Political Theology* 22, no. 2: 1.

²² Ibid. 4.

²³ Jeffrey T. Martin. “Annual Review of Anthropology: Police and Policing.” *Annual review of anthropology* 47 (2018): 134.

²⁴ Zahir Kolia. “‘I’m Making the Streets Safer Ma’am’: Race, Coloniality, and the Redemptive Theologies of Pastoral Police Power.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (October 2017): 12.

²⁵ Benjamin G. Robinson. “The Colonial (Dis)order and the (Im)possibility of Redemption: Jeong, Abolition, and Living from the ‘End of the World.’” *Political theology: The journal of Christian Socialism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 63.

through the narrative of redemption. Citizens internalized the redemption narrative becoming policeable and thereby civilized and sacred.²⁶

Police are not the only piece in this process of making sacred and profane. Prisons, especially in their configuration as the prison industrial complex are central to our current understanding of redemption. Like police, prisons segregate criminals from law-abiding citizens. As Chris Barbera observes “there is a belief that people in prison are ‘bad’ and people in society are ‘good’”.²⁷ What does that division mean when there are over two million in prison, and another 4.5 million on probation or parole?²⁸ Prisons are replicating the in-group’s need for redemptive reassurance on a massive scale.

Following the emergence of liberation theology, we have seen the development of prison theology. However, there is a divide with prison theologians regarding the liberation of the soul vs the liberation of the body. For example, Sadie Pounder defines five layers of liberation:

1. Freedom from inmate-ism (being made a number)
2. Freedom from oppressive conditions
3. Freedom from their criminal lifestyle
4. Freedom from the “they did it to themselves attitude”
5. Freedom from chronic rejection²⁹

The tension around personhood is present across these layers. Pounder reflects a desire to centre personhood by freeing prisoners from dehumanization, oppression, and rejection.

However, the profanity of prisoners and their need for redemption is still underlying Pounder’s approach. Prisoners have a ‘criminal lifestyle’ that they must confess in order to be redeemed. In Pounder’s own words:

²⁶ Jeffrey T. Martin. “Annual Review of Anthropology: Police and Policing.” *Annual review of anthropology* 47 (2018): 137.

²⁷ Chris Barbera. “Prison Theology: Toward a Christian Prison Theology [1].” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 128

²⁸ Sadie Pounder. “Prison Theology: A Theology of Liberation, Hope and Justice.” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 47, no. 3 (2008): 279.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 282.

“Liberation in prison theology means freedom from many things, but not, understandably, from the accountability and responsibility of a person fulfilling a fair and just sentence of law. Law, too, is a gracious gift of God in the service of life and God’s creation.”³⁰

There is a theological dimension to the law, which despite being drafted by humans belongs to God. Elizabeth Haysom, who is in prison for murder also holds the law sacred and reflects on need to differentiate between liberation of the soul and the body: “In a prison theology, in contrast (to liberation theology), the diocese... make up is a huge assortment of people who are not slated for economic, political, or cultural liberation”.³¹ What they are trying to describe is the diversity of people in prison, which includes a diversity of agendas, oppressions, and calls for accountability. While prisoners' perverse bodies may be diverse, their souls share the same redemptive capacity through Jesus. We can see similar thoughts echoed by Barbera:

“A liberating Christian education, we feel, teaches us to love, forgive and to think for ourselves, to be free in Christ and thereby to have become empowered and responsible for our actions. A person in prison who becomes accountable for their actions is no longer in bondage to their crimes. Becoming released from the bondage to a crime or past negative action frees the soul of punishment. A free soul is rehabilitated. A rehabilitated soul is less likely to commit crimes or return to prison”.³²

The focus of their liberation is on the soul of the prisoner. Through Jesus they become redeemed, even though their body is still marked profane. Pounders says prison theology is a theology of liberation, “which functions to reflect on and actualize the meaning of that liberation for the oppressed in prison and the entire criminal justice system, so they can know that their struggle for political, social, judicial and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ”.³³ Is prison theology liberative when intersected with the racialization of empire? How does this rehabilitative approach account for the over representation of racialized people in

³⁰ Ibid. 282.

³¹ Elizabeth Haysom. “Prison’s Door to Freedom.” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 134.

³² Chris Barbera. “Prison Theology: Toward a Christian Prison Theology [1].” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 129.

³³ Sadie Pounder. “Prison Theology: A Theology of Liberation, Hope and Justice.” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 47, no. 3 (2008): 279.

prison? How does it respond to the Women’s Prison Association’s desire to “prevent potential mothers from passing down their profane-ness to the next generation?”³⁴

Bloesch has concerns with prison ministry, as the focus on liberating the soul can undermine efforts to liberate the body. They warn “how the experience of becoming a born-again Christian transforms individuals, eliminating the need for social programs focused on structural economic issues”.³⁵ They also see how the redemption heavy focus of prison theology participates in the colonial process of applying and denying person hood.

“The born again person plays a dual role within the larger social context of the whole prison regime. On the one hand, the prisoner is asked to be responsible for her or his own transformation, which supposedly keeps them out of trouble while in prison and prevents recidivism. On the other hand, the conversion experience re-establishes the prisoner’s place as ‘human.’ This reflects the targeted audience for prison conversion experiences”³⁶

Black prison theologians present a different approach to the liberation of the soul. Black Panther leader Huey Newton saw the prison beyond the four walls of the literal jail cell in the ‘carceral landscape’ of modern America.³⁷ “This system benefits a select few, typically the wealthy and powerful, at the expense of the majority who, lacking wealth and political influence, suffer without recourse.³⁸” They describe two types of prisoners: 1) the illegitimate capitalist prisoner, and 2) the political prisoner. The difference between the two is their allegiance to the false redemption capitalism promises. “In different yet interrelated ways, Newton argues, the illegitimate capitalist prisoner and the political prisoner are unable to be reformed: the one already tacitly accepts American values, while the other categorically rejects them”.³⁹ Newton builds on the Apostle Paul’s theology, implying that America law requires sin and death to

³⁴ Sarah J Bloesch. “Embodying the Sacred and Profane: How Temporal Empires, Narratives of Salvation, and the Prison Regime Value Bodies in the United States.” *Culture and Religion* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 120.

³⁵ Ibid. 123.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Brian P. Sowers. “Prison, Where Is Thy Victory? A Black Panther Theology of Mass Incarceration.” *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 1 (2020): 28.

³⁸ Ibid. 29.

³⁹ Ibid. 25.

sustain itself. The only antidote for that sinful system is “its outright rejection as illegitimate (unlawful)”.⁴⁰

Newton’s redemption through rejection leads us towards an abolitionist theology that includes not only prisons, but empire. Getek and Grimes argue that “prisons are not resisting violence but are violence”.⁴¹ They see abolition supported by scripture where Jesus’ call for liberty of the captives announces the fall of the prison.⁴² Building on Newton, if the prison and empire are intertwined then Jesus’ abolition runs deeper to the sacred/profane divide. At the more applied level “a theology that will serve prisoners, anti-prison organizers, and those most impacted by violence must problematize the dichotomy between ’good’ prisoners versus ’bad’ prisoners and ’violent’ versus ’nonviolent’ convictions”.⁴³ While prisoners may have diverse interests and experiences, they are all sacred in soul AND body.

“Prison abolition rejects the inevitability of prison. Abolition concludes that the institution of prison is so thoroughly flawed that it cannot be reformed. Indeed, abolitionists see the prison as incapable of addressing the root of the harms that call it into existence”.⁴⁴

The prison theologians that prioritize spiritual liberation have a crucial point for us to contend with. As Haysom describes “somehow freedom had to mean something other than exiting prison through the gate”.⁴⁵ There is spiritual healing and freedom that is needed. For

⁴⁰ Ibid. 40.

⁴¹ Kathryn Getek Soltis & Katie Walker Grimes. “Order, Reform, and Abolition: Changes in Catholic Theological Imagination on Prisons and Punishment.” *Theological studies (Baltimore)* 82, no. 1 (2021): 87.

⁴² Ibid. 111.

⁴³ Jason Lydon. “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement.” *Peace review (Palo Alto, Calif.)* 23, no. 3 (2011): 298.

⁴⁴ Kathryn Getek Soltis & Katie Walker Grimes. “Order, Reform, and Abolition: Changes in Catholic Theological Imagination on Prisons and Punishment.” *Theological studies (Baltimore)* 82, no. 1 (2021): 110.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Haysom. “Prison’s Door to Freedom.” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 38.

that to arise we need to shift our focus to redeeming redemption. But how can we do that when “the nation mobilizes the possibilities of redemption in order to rule”?⁴⁶ Untangling redemption from empire and its control on personhood can help lay the path forward for its redemption.

One layer of redemption that we need to preserve is accountability. “A person who becomes accountable for their actions is no longer in bondage to their crimes. Becoming released from the bondage to a crime or past negative action frees the soul of punishment. A free soul is rehabilitated”.⁴⁷ Accountability is trying to accommodate the broken relations as well as for the internal traumas that led to that break in the first place. Accountability is different than atonement which Lydon says “will not bring us closer to the universal community, but distract us from the possibility of doing things differently”.⁴⁸ Keeping the focus on the universal community puts accountability in perspective. traditional models of redemption require that “particular prisoners also have to bear the burden of carrying all of our society’s sins and being disciplined or crucified for our communal redemption”.⁴⁹ Liberative redemption is a communal project, where accountability is holding bodies both sacred and profane to this task.

Remember that from Newton’s perspective we are all prisoners. In their view accountability focuses on the “the incorporeal half of a person—that half entirely unaffected by prison (and how it) ultimately reveals how a person interprets society and participates within it”.⁵⁰ Are we interpreting society through the eyes of empire or are we striving towards a universal community that resists the process of dehumanization altogether? Newton thinks we

⁴⁶ Zahir Kolia. “‘I’m Making the Streets Safer Ma’am’: Race, Coloniality, and the Redemptive Theologies of Pastoral Police Power.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (October 2017): 16.

⁴⁷ Sadie Pounder. “Prison Theology: A Theology of Liberation, Hope and Justice.” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 47, no. 3 (2008): 283.

⁴⁸ Jason Lydon. “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement.” *Peace review (Palo Alto, Calif.)* 23, no. 3 (2011): 299.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 298.

⁵⁰ Brian P. Sowers. “Prison, Where Is Thy Victory? A Black Panther Theology of Mass Incarceration.” *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 1 (2020): 31.

can all “attain a higher (eternal) reality by rejecting the underlying assumptions of the dominant capitalist system”.⁵¹ This universal community requires us to make all sacred by recognizing the abject as a profound part of our psyche. Benjamin Robinson says that “the possibility for identity formation beyond violence begins with the recognition that the abject is a part of the configuration of the dominant “we,” as that refused”.⁵²

In practice accountability through abolition looks like restorative justice. “A restorative justice framework reveals ethical values or principles useful in praxis models involving public encounters between victims and offenders to focus mutually on repair with intent to change unjust issues and reduce repetitive infractions”.⁵³ Through this model we can see the focus not on redemption of individuals but on redemption of relationships. Holding the sacredness of victim and offender simultaneously forces them to mutually repair the damage done. Robinson sees Christianity as uniquely positioned to champion this work:

“Colonialism is a Christian project. If it is possible to imagine Christianity differently, to imagine redemption differently, then it seems to me anti-colonial struggle must inform attempts to think Christianity against itself”.⁵⁴

As the vessel of empires control through redemption, Christianity has the power to transform and undermine the sovereignty of the law by reaffirming gods universal love. Christians must redeem redemption as an eschatological project. “To say, therefore, that the colonial order must be destroyed is to announce its redemption, a new humanity through the end of the old (in)humanity”.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid. 32.

⁵² Benjamin G. Robinson. “The Colonial (Dis)order and the (Im)possibility of Redemption: Jeong, Abolition, and Living from the ‘End of the World.’” *Political theology: The journal of Christian Socialism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 64.

⁵³ Valerie Miles-Tribble. “Restorative Justice as a Public Theology Imperative.” *Review and expositor (Berne)* 114, no. 3 (2017): 376.

⁵⁴ Benjamin G. Robinson. “The Colonial (Dis)order and the (Im)possibility of Redemption: Jeong, Abolition, and Living from the ‘End of the World.’” *Political theology: The journal of Christian Socialism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 67.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 74.

Achieving this new humanity requires addressing one final pillar of this system, the sovereignty of the law itself. “State sovereignty, as the ultimate locus of a collective political will, operates like a secularized Abrahamic deity: a singular node of transcendent moral authority that defines the community of the saved and consolidates it through the political project of achieving their own salvation”.⁵⁶ To justify its existence the state leans heavily on theology to borrow models of sovereignty. But the law has no sovereignty – it is groundless and thus requires the constant reenactment of its imagined authority”.⁵⁷ Part of this reenactment is performing a monopoly on force as “the monopoly on the legitimate use of force is the essence of the nation-state”.⁵⁸ Another element of maintaining sovereignty is controlling religion. We see this in Mohamed Meziane’s account of Islam’s subjugation in France, where it is simultaneously made governable and made other:

“The secularity of the French state requires a constant interaction between the government and the different religious organized communities. The secular state is still explicitly willing to recognize and organize Islam as a *culte*, namely as a centralized, vertical, and thus governable institution. In this sense, it is comparable to what the French colonial administration in Algeria used to call a *consistoire musulman*, an institution that was supposed to control the practices of colonized Muslims by controlling Islamic authoritative discourse”.⁵⁹

This co-optive approach began in Christianity. As Getek and Grimes observe:

“For most of its history, Catholic theology has envisioned God as a righteous judge who punishes mortal sinners with eternal torment in hell. Catholic ethics has envisioned the social order similarly: there is a moral and political order and the government’s role is to enforce and promote it”.⁶⁰

Through the process of colonization this framing of sovereignty was exported and enforced. This can be seen in Taiwan where the Chinese word for sovereignty “was coined in

⁵⁶ Jeffrey T. Martin. “Weak Police, Strong Democracy Civic Ritual and Performative Peace in Contemporary Taiwan.” *Current anthropology* 61, no. 6 (2020): 666.

⁵⁷ Zahir Kolia. “‘I’m Making the Streets Safer Ma’am’: Race, Coloniality, and the Redemptive Theologies of Pastoral Police Power.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (October 2017). 4.

⁵⁸ Tobias L. Winright & Todd Whitmore. *Serve and Protect: Selected Essays on Just Policing* Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020: 20.

⁵⁹ Mohamad Amer Meziane. “Introduction: On Police Violence and Systemic Islamophobia.” *Political Theology* 22, no. 2: 3.

⁶⁰ Kathryn Getek Soltis & Katie Walker Grimes. “Order, Reform, and Abolition: Changes in Catholic Theological Imagination on Prisons and Punishment.” *Theological studies (Baltimore)* 82, no. 1 (2021): 95.

1864 by an American missionary commissioned to translate Wheaton's Elements of International Law".⁶¹ Prior to this imposition there were indigenous conceptions of sovereignty that were heterogenous and relational. Robinson sees the erasure of this heterogeneity as rooted in a desire to erase death. "Colonial (in)humanity seeks to banish death from life and does so by consigning the colonized to death. The threat of death is deferred onto racial and colonial others, rather than being known as a grace".⁶²

Grace is one of the prominent tools in the pastor's toolkit. Clearly there is a place for Christians in the abolishment of empire. However, the sovereignty of the state and the need for punitive redemption have been deeply internalized by the Church. For example, after my delegation, my father told me that my abolitionist statements make me an unsafe person to minister and mediate. My reading of this, is that he was trying to express the fear of me being marked as a profane body and the potential violence that would expose me to. If I became marked as profane, what would that mean for those associated with me? What does this mean in the role of pastor or mediator? As we have seen for those marked 'sacred' the presence of the profane risks exposing them to becoming profane themselves so the impulse to fear, resist and police abolitionist ideas is deeply engrained.

Pastors need to be mindful when introducing abolitionist ideas to their Churches. Scripture gives us tools to navigate this tension. As Barbera notes "Jesus was judged guilty and punished with prison, put on death row and executed by the state. Many of the disciples were the least of your brothers. Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples".⁶³ Being

⁶¹ Jeffrey T. Martin. "Weak Police, Strong Democracy Civic Ritual and Performative Peace in Contemporary Taiwan." *Current anthropology* 61, no. 6 (2020): 677.

⁶² Benjamin G. Robinson. "The Colonial (Dis)order and the (Im)possibility of Redemption: Jeong, Abolition, and Living from the 'End of the World.'" *Political theology: The journal of Christian Socialism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 72.

⁶³ Chris Barbera. "Prison Theology: Toward a Christian Prison Theology [1]." *Dialog: A journal of theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 129

profane or made abject is a Christian task. Robinson sees the cross as both a symbol of abjection and a call against it. “Jesus’ death cannot be unambiguously claimed by empire. The cross is not merely the passive demonstration of imperial power, but incites resistance, and opens space for creative relational praxis in the midst of the crucifying powers”.⁶⁴

Here we can see Jesus’ solidarity with the abject as a call for ‘creative relational praxis’. Lydon expands that “theology must play a role in any movement to abolish the prison–industrial complex as it can feed communities of resistance, as well as offer alternatives to the normative practices of political and religious leadership who are complacent in the face of such a violent system”.⁶⁵ What this looks like for pastors can be teaching congregants about restorative justice and modelling it through church discipline. Pastors can show their solidarity with the abject and profane by showing up to their struggle and being in restoring relationship with them. Pastoral care on themes of restoration can help heal the wounds of the soul. But pastoral redemption should emphasize the need to redeem “both individual and social sins”.⁶⁶

Abolitionist pastors can become educators for their congregation on the systemic need for transformation. Leaning on Newton, this education should make visible the ways in which the system of empire imprisons all and makes all trapped in a system of irredeemable redemption:

“As a system predicated on economic oppression and exploitation, beginning with slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples, American capitalism breeds a populace addicted to material profit, indifferent to the harm caused either to themselves or to others. Such consumerists are, in effect, prisoners of their materialist greed even if they have never spent time behind bars”.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Benjamin G. Robinson. “The Colonial (Dis)order and the (Im)possibility of Redemption: Jeong, Abolition, and Living from the ‘End of the World.’” *Political theology: The journal of Christian Socialism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 65.

⁶⁵ Jason Lydon. “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement.” *Peace review (Palo Alto, Calif.)* 23, no. 3 (2011): 298.

⁶⁶ Chris Barbera. “Prison Theology: Toward a Christian Prison Theology [1].” *Dialog: a journal of theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 128

⁶⁷ Brian P. Sowers. “Prison, Where Is Thy Victory? A Black Panther Theology of Mass Incarceration.” *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 1 (2020): 43.

When it comes to abolition, many struggle to imagine the alternatives. Martin sees this as a consequence of capitalism replacing noncommodified modes of caretaking. Such a shift “erodes the traditions of mutualism that once embedded a horizontal mode of quasi-policing in routines of intimate life”.⁶⁸ Unearthing those models of caretaking and embodying in them Church can help heal the theological violence that empire has imprisoned us under. Solidarity with the profane can be one of the most meaningful acts of care a pastor can embody. “Today, people exiled in Empire need committed secular and spiritual change-agent leaders to voice offenses and attest to justice needs by joining with the already marginalized who exhibit inspired courage authentically to challenge unjust public power”.⁶⁹

Ultimately pastors will do well to embody Lydon’s theology of privilege. “The theology for those in power, in the context of liberation, is to recognize the humble act of giving up power and becoming a traitor to the systems of privilege”.⁷⁰ Pastors can model being a traitor by being servants not only to their congregations but to the abject of the world. This paper has shown how much of the systems of law, policing and prisons, exist to instill fear and obedience in the privileged at the expense of those deemed profane. For the sovereignty of empire to be upheld, it needs the unwavering allegiance of those with power. By being Christ-like and humbly becoming profane, pastors as wielders of power become gateways for new models of community, accountability, and healing.

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⁶⁹ Valerie Miles-Tribble. “Restorative Justice as a Public Theology Imperative.” *Review and expositor (Berne)* 114, no. 3 (2017): 376.

⁷⁰ Jason Lydon. “A Theology for the Penal Abolition Movement.” *Peace review (Palo Alto, Calif.)* 23, no. 3 (2011): 302.

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