

**Crucified Bodies and Hope of Liberation:
*Re-viewing the Cross in Black and Dalit Contexts***

Joshua Samuel, Ph.D.
Union Theological Seminary, NYC.

Christian faith is founded and firmly rooted in the cross of Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus' life and message had a powerful influence on his followers—both during and after his time—there can be no doubt that his death on the cross made a significant difference. As Roger Haight rightly observes, Jesus' life would not have had the same effect if he had not been crucified.¹ In other words, there is something significant and critical about Jesus' death on the cross that it has had a profound presence and impact in history. Thus, the cross has not remained as a mere event in history, but has become *an experience*, an intimate, life-transforming experience, for many people. My objective in this paper is to offer some theological reflections on the relevance of the cross for our present times within the context of Blacks in the United States of America and Dalits in India.²

However, I am reminded that reflecting on the relevance of the cross today entails the necessity of bringing to mind the “crucified peoples”³ of this world. And given the communities that I am focusing on, viz. the Blacks and Dalits, I am particularly drawn towards the acts of violence against them. In the US, I recall the several state sponsored murders of Black people, including that of Michael Brown, Freddy Gray, Eric Garner and Deborah Danner. In India, I remember Ilavarasan, Muthukumar, Gokulraj and Sankar who were murdered by upper-castes. Of course, these incidents are clearly not similar and cannot be compared simplistically. I am all too aware that attempting to conflate and equate race and caste, and their dynamics of dehumanization is certainly problematic. Also, violence against Blacks and Dalits cannot be limited to assaults and killings. Violence against oppressed people is often not only physical and external, but also psychological and internal(ized). But nonetheless, I see that there is at least one major similarity between these acts of violence: these Blacks and Dalits were robbed of their lives primarily because of who they were—Black and Dalit. Their Blackness and Dalitness became the fundamental reason and cause for their deaths. It is amidst this reality that, as a Christian theologian, I am interested in raising the question: what could the cross of Jesus mean to the Black and Dalit communities? How can the cross of Jesus be (re-)interpreted in such a way that it could become a source of liberation for them?⁴

Keeping these questions in mind, I want to begin my work by looking at the cross of Jesus in its socio-political context. Secondly, I want to explore in brief the Black and

¹ Roger Haight, *Future of Christology* (New York & London: Continuum, 2007), 81, 88 – 89.

² Dalits, formerly called as untouchables (among other names), are communities who are discriminated as outcastes by the caste system.

³ C. S. Song, *Jesus, The Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 215 – 216.

⁴ Let me clarify here that though Ilavarasan and Muthukumar are not Christians, I choose to use a Christian symbol, viz. the cross, to interpret their experience because 1) the Dalit experience transcends religious affiliations, 2) religious hybridity is common among Dalits and 3) as a symbol of death and life, its use transcends religious boundaries.

Dalit theologians' interpretations of the cross. Finally, against this backdrop, I want to offer theological reflections on the meaning of the cross in contexts of marginalization.

The Cross and the Empire: *Understanding the Cross of Jesus (with)in its Context*

To begin with, we need to remember that the cross of Jesus was one of the many crosses in the Greco-Roman world. New Testament scholar, Brigitte Kahl notes that the cross and the “[C]rucifixion represented an inter-national event, ubiquitous among the vanquished nations under Roman rule, ...and was as universal as the Roman Empire itself.”⁵ Placing the cross along with the arena where gladiator games were held, and the Roman altar(s) where the imperial cult was performed, Kahl posits that together these religio-political symbols created and sustained a hierarchical way of life based on the Aristotelian binaries.⁶ This system, embodied and controlled by Roman imperialism, was *the* (imperial) *nomos* (law) or ‘order’ for the proper functioning of the world. Anyone who challenged it or even threatened to destabilize it, were accused of rebelling against the law of the gods of the empire, and therefore deserved to be crucified or thrown to wild animals. The cross was for the bad people, the outcasts—the rebels, revolutionaries, and the ‘terrorists’ of the Roman society.

However, the cross was also more than a punishment! In the words of Kahl,

...the core visual program of a crucifixion is quite stable. What needs to be shown is not just the execution of a criminal but the *elimination of a rebellious, transgressive other and the restoration of the proper order of the world*...it is not human cruelty played out but the sacred violence of divine retribution. A fundamental threat to the divine and human order of the world is eliminated, for everyone’s benefit.⁷

In other words, the cross was a *statement*. It was a statement of warning to either follow the ‘good’ hierarchical order and live, or question/transgress the order and face the consequence of brutal death. Further, the cross was also a statement of failure, the failure of the rebel who had tried to defeat the ‘peaceful’ Roman order.

Relating the above observations to Jesus, one can infer that his cross was a statement of warning to anyone who dared to envision an alternative egalitarian society called the kingdom of (another?) God and act likewise. And his cross was also surely a failure, a failure of a rebel who had tried to challenge divisive epistemic and social structures. And yet, the story of Jesus’ cross did not end with his death. As the gospels and the epistles spell it out, the cross was followed by resurrection. In fact, without the accounts of resurrection, the cross of Jesus would have lost its significance in the myriad of other Roman crosses. However, Roger Haight warns us that Jesus’ resurrection should never be seen apart from his death i.e. as a separate event. Rather, it should be perceived as an expression of the proof that God will not allow an innocent person like Jesus to die

⁵ Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 159.

⁶ These binary notions of the cosmos juxtaposed the self against/over the other, with the self denoting the male/divine/soul/master as opposed to the other which included the female/evil/body/slave categories of the society. Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined*, 18–19 & 156–164.

⁷ Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, 158. Emphasis mine.

or allow his life to go in vain.⁸ This is clearly and strongly asserted by the Black liberation theologian James Cone when he argues that “[T]he cross is a paradoxical religious symbol because it inverts the world’s value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first shall be last.”⁹ Hearing Cone, I would assert that the cross stands as a living testimony to the fact that, for God, the suffering and death of an innocent person is so precious that he would (even) raise that person from the dead.

Crucifixions Today

Having seen the cross within the socio-political context of the Roman Empire, I return to the twenty-first century to see what the cross can mean today in relation to Black and Dalit suffering. Firstly, as noted earlier, the violence against and deaths of Blacks and Dalits cannot be seen as isolated events. Their murders were conducted within the (constructed) social structures of race and caste in their respective societies. These people were victims of white and caste supremacy that assumes that their black and untouchable bodies are too transgressive or threatening to be alive. Take the case of Michael Brown. The (six foot) white officer who killed Brown described himself as a “five-year old” in contrast to Brown who for him appeared like “Hulk Hogan” and a “demon” with menacing (black) body.¹⁰ Brown was a ‘threat’ to his killer. In the case of Sankar, a young educated and well-to-do Dalit, he was considered as a threat to the social system, because he wanted to marry someone from a higher caste. His good education and secure job did not convince the upper-caste girl’s family to accept him.¹¹ In their eyes, he was a demon, a demon who had transgressed his boundaries and defied the sacred caste rules laid down by the gods and ancestors.¹²

Considering these two incidents together, I see the social constructs of casteism and racism as the life-regulating (and life-negating) *nomos* of our times in their respective contexts. These social constructs have birthed false notions of superiority in the oppressors viz. white supremacy and caste supremacy, allowing them to exert dominion over the Black and Dalit bodies respectively. The fact that these social ‘systems’—as internalized by individuals and communities, while being supported, perpetuated and performed by the nation-state(s)—control our attitudes and actions should remind us that we cannot under-estimate their power. It is in this sense that I believe that these deaths to be similar to the Roman crucifixions in the time of Jesus. That is, their deaths (like that of Jesus) are statements of threat and intimidation made by invisible but ever-active socio-political structures to re-in-state hierarchy and hegemony. Therefore, in Christian theological language, I believe we can say that Blacks and Dalits who were killed by

⁸ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 147, 149–150.

⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012), 2.

¹⁰ www.nytimes.com dated 08.10.2014, 08.17.2014 & 11.25.2014 (Accessed on 09. 27. 2017).

¹¹ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/dalit-youth-killed-for-marrying-caste-hindu-girl/article8350431.ece>. (Accessed 09. 28. 2017). This murder was even captured on video by CCTV cameras.

¹² The Brahmanic scriptures within Hinduism assert that human beings are born into four classes that are hierarchically placed: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudras. The offspring of those who transgress this structure are the untouchable outcastes. Shrirama, “Untouchability and Stratification in Indian Civilisation” in S. M. Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar, 1999), 39–67.

white and caste supremacists were indeed ‘crucified’ by the racist and casteist power structures.

Black and Dalit Interpretations of the Cross

Drawing parallels between the violence meted out to Blacks and Dalits, and the crucifixion of Jesus, is certainly not new. In fact, identifying Black and Dalit suffering with the suffering of Jesus goes (back) to the heart of Black and Dalit liberation theology. As James Cone explains, Blacks, in contrast to white/western Christians and theologians¹³ were able to readily grasp the deeper meaning of the cross through the sufferings that they endured in enslavement, lynching and segregation. He writes,

... blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. Christ crucified manifested God’s loving and liberating presence *in* the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that *ultimately*, in God’s eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the “troubles of this world”, no matter how great and painful their suffering.¹⁴

In other words, Blacks were able to comprehend the paradoxical meaning(s) of the cross and believe that in spite of their sufferings, they will not be defeated. Through the cross they believed that evil cannot and will not have the last word. Rather, it is the God of justice and life who is in solidarity with them that will triumph ultimately. Shawn Copeland points out that “[T]he cross was treasured” by the Blacks “because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them...” and in it “they saw the triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world.”¹⁵

In the Dalit context, the cross has been used to describe the Dalitness of Jesus. For them, through his death on the cross Jesus revealed himself as a Dalit in every sense of the word. Correlating the Dalit experience and the cross Arvind P. Nirmal writes,

... dalitness is best symbolized by the cross. On the cross, he was the broken the crushed, the split the torn, the driven asunder man—the dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term... “My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?” he cried aloud from the cross. The Son of God felt he is God-forsaken. That feeling of being God forsaken is at the heart of our dalit experience and Dalit consciousness in India. It is the dalitness of divinity and humanity that the cross of Jesus symbolizes.¹⁶

Thus Nirmal, noticing the parallels between the experiences of Jesus and the Dalits, believes in God’s solidarity with them in their suffering. But as we know, the gospel stories of the cross do not *end* with Jesus’ suffering and death. Taking this positive aspect seriously, M. E. Prabhakar believes that just like the Jesus’ dalitness on the cross culminated in his victorious resurrection, so will the sufferings of the Dalits be turned

¹³ Cone contrasts the participant approach of the Blacks with the “spectator approach of the Western theological tradition” in interpreting the cross. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 169.

¹⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2.

¹⁵ Cited by Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 151.

¹⁶ Arvind P. Nirmal, “Toward a Christian Dalit Theology” in Arvind P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1990), 69.

into liberation. He asserts, “in the Dalitness of Jesus they will be strengthened and upheld for victory against the forces that dehumanize them.”¹⁷ Thus, not dissimilar from the Black readings of the Cross, Dalits too believe that the cross, not only aptly portrays their suffering, but also gives them hope and strength to resist the powers that cause that suffering.

Recapitulating on the previous sections and the brief study of Black and Dalit theological interpretations of the cross, we can conclude that the cross indeed occupies a central place in Black and Dalit theologies, and that there is a logical identification of Blacks and Dalits as “the crucified people.”¹⁸ Further, Black and Dalit theologians also declare that the cross as a paradoxical symbol of suffering and liberation, affirms that their sufferings will not and cannot be in vain. In other words, just like the God of Jesus did not allow his beloved Son to rot in the grave, so will She not allow the sufferings of the oppressed to continue but intervene by suffering *with them* and *for* them.

Crucified and Risen: A Contextual Theological Reflection

Having argued that the likes of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Muthukumar and Sankar along with other such victims are the crucified peoples today, in the following section, let me try to offer some theological reflections of the cross within the framework of Black and Dalit liberation.

Cross as the Place of Divinization: Where Demons become Gods

One of the darkest moments of the cross is when Jesus cried out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27: 46; Mark 15: 34). These words powerfully capture the excruciating pain and the sense of abandonment that Jesus experienced on the cross. It is perhaps the moment when Jesus’ emotional and physical strength gave away and reached rock bottom. But Moltmann believes that it is (with)in this experience of abandonment that Jesus was able to ‘include’ the suffering of all those who suffer unjustly in history.¹⁹ Gutierrez, also commenting on this cry of Jesus, agrees with Moltmann by stating that, through his feeling of abandonment, Jesus is “the *cantus firmus*, the leading voice to which all the voices of those who suffer unjustly are joined.”²⁰ In other words, the suffering of Jesus becomes the meeting point of all the sufferings of the world. However, (as Moltmann is quick to point out) the cross does not symbolize just suffering but paradoxically embodies (within itself) the hope of resurrection as well.²¹ But this is not an abstract theoretical hope; rather, it is a hope that was *experienced* by the communities that believed in Jesus. These communities, by their faith in Jesus and empowered by the Spirit of God, believed experientially that despite his

¹⁷ M. E. Prabhakar, “Christology in Dalit Perspective” in V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 414.

¹⁸ Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 215–216.

¹⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 151–157.

²⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 101.

²¹ For Moltmann, resurrection is not about life in a separate realm or time. Rather, “[I]t is the power which enables *this* life to be reborn.” Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 242. Emphasis mine.

brutal death, Jesus was exalted by God as God's son and alive *in* God (Acts 2: 33). In other words, the communities that believed in Jesus, by their faith and with the help of God, made the resurrection of Jesus possible and real.

If this is the case with Jesus, isn't it possible that the other crucified people are also exalted by God as Her children and alive (with)in their communities? If God of/in Jesus is in solidarity with them, are they not by virtue of their innocent suffering resurrected by God into *theosis* like Jesus? If God, not wishing the death of his beloved, raises him to be in union with him, would he not do the same for his other crucified children? In that sense, I believe we can indeed assert that God who is in solidarity with the oppressed in his gratuitous love²² receives the life of innocent sufferers into himself. The cross according to me is therefore, not just a place of God's solidarity with his people but is a place of subversion where the wretched of the earth who are often humiliated as "demons" by imperial/white/caste supremacy, are now exalted as the divine children of God.

Cross as the Place of Victory: Where Losers become Victors

Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossian Church, writes that Jesus, on his cross "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2: 15). Who are these rulers and authorities? In the previous verse, Paul says that they are the powers who *controlled* the lives of people through legal demands, specifically, if we recall the context of the cross, the imperial powers of the Roman empire. And it is these powers that had sent Jesus and many others to their crosses, a symbol of defeat. But in the case of Jesus, Paul believes, this scheme backfired. According to Paul, Jesus took the cross—a tool of imperialistic capital punishment—and nailed those imperial powers on that same cross, and publically shamed them. Rene Girard elucidates this climax as follows:

By nailing Christ to the Cross, the powers believed they were doing what they ordinarily did in unleashing the single victim mechanism. They thought they were avoiding the danger of disclosure. They did not suspect that in the end they would be doing just the opposite: they would be contributing to their own annihilation, nailing themselves to the Cross, so to speak. They did not and could not suspect the revelatory power of the Cross.²³

In other words, Jesus used, and quite successfully one may add, the "master's tools to dismantle the master's house." However, again it is important to note that Jesus, the supposed-to-be loser *became* the victor over powers of divisive imperialism, only in terms of his resurrection *within* his community. To put it differently, the community of believers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit of God ensured that the purposes of the imperial powers would be thwarted and Jesus would be victorious.

Now, as the crucified people, I believe that the cross(es) experienced by the likes of Michael Brown and Sankar also carry this message of victory. Their sufferings and

²² As Gustavo Gutierrez says, "God has a preferential option for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will." Gutierrez, *On Job*, 94.

²³ Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 142.

death were intended by the powers of white and caste supremacy to become symbols of failure. But, these defeats have been turned into symbols of hope of victory and life by various communities of solidarity, through their resistance marked by protests and rallies. Obscure Black and Dalit bodies have become the seeds of powerful movements that shake the powers of white and caste supremacy.²⁴ Of course, the victory is not yet fully achieved. Nevertheless, the fact that the powers of white and caste supremacy are being publicly paraded and humiliated is a victory in itself. White supremacy tried to nail Michael Brown on its cross by demonizing him and killing him; but unexpectedly, Brown in his death (and through his community) has nailed white supremacy on the cross! And the same may be said of protests seeking justice for Dalits like Ilavarasan. It is in this sense that I believe that we can claim the cross to be the place where losers turn the tables around and become victors.

Cross as the Place of Reconciliation: Where Enemies become Family

Finally, I see that the cross can be seen as a place of reconciliation. Once again, turning to Paul, God reconciles divided people together “through the cross, thus putting to death... hostility” (Ephesians 2: 16). A new humanity of peace is realized *through* the cross. In other words, for Paul, no reconciliation between human communities is possible without the cross, and therefore, can never by-pass the cross. Isn’t this yet another paradox about the cross? The Roman imperial cross which was the symbol of hierarchical divisions was toppled by Jesus and made into a symbol of reconciliation.²⁵

In a sense, this is precisely what we see in the protests for the crucified people of our time which have brought divided communities together for the sake of justice. I don’t see the protests for Brown or Garner or Ilavarasan or Gokulraj as protests about *individuals*. It is about bringing justice to their communities that have been unjustly oppressed for many centuries. But at an even deeper level, I see them as protests for the well-being of all humanity and the earth. I see them as dreams for a reconciled, new world that would not be divided on the basis of skin color or race or caste or gender. It would be a community where the oppressor and the oppressed will dwell together in justice. Isn’t this what Jesus dreamed and spoke of as the kingdom of God/heaven? However, this also reminds us that the kingdom of God would have to begin at the cross, the cross of the crucified people. Unless we begin with the unjust suffering of the Blacks we cannot talk about God’s kingdom in the American context. Similarly, unless we acknowledge and respond to the suffering of the Dalits, we cannot talk about God’s kingdom in the Indian context. Indeed, reconciliation begins at the cross, the place where Black and Dalit bodies have been crucified.

²⁴ Strong protests followed the shootings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in the US, and the murders of Ilavarasan and Gokulraj in India and led to the consolidation of movements like Black Lives Matter.

²⁵ However, I am aware how the cross has been misused by the church to divide people. I see this as a gross misinterpretation of the cross.