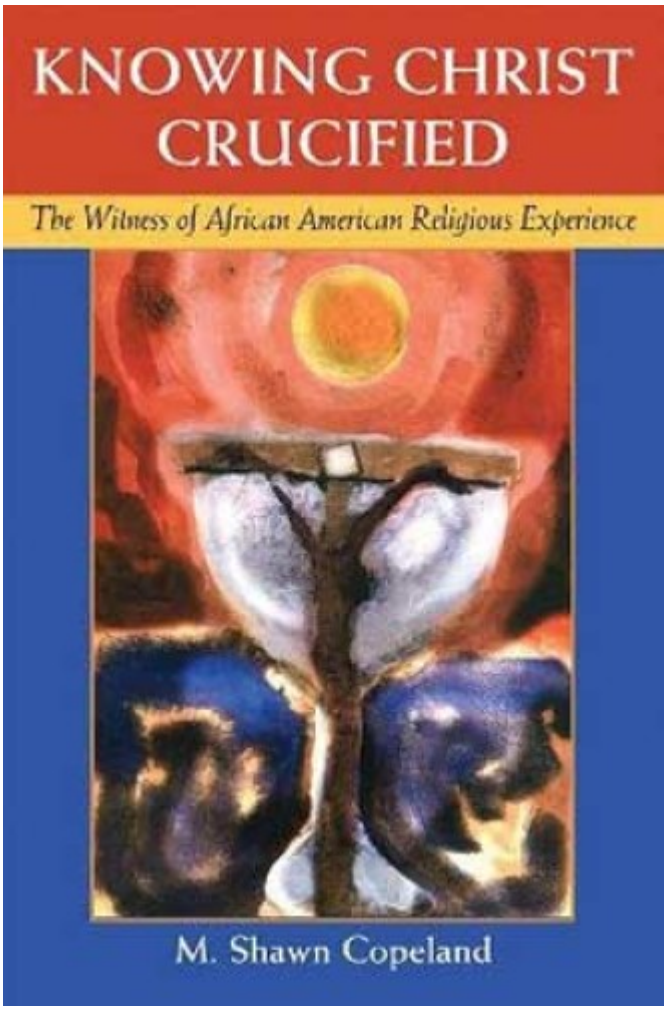
The suffering Jesus in Shawn Copeland’s theology

African American spirituality and God’s act of solidarity

by J. Scott Jackson in the November 20, 2019 issue

In Review



Knowing Christ Crucified

The Witness of African American Religious Experience

By M. Shawn Copeland
Orbis

The cross is a book, St. Francis of Assisi reportedly said. In seven provocative, incisive essays, M. Shawn Copeland “reads” the book of the cross across centuries of African American experience and culture. This is not a systematic treatise, but together these pieces sketch a bold constructive theology that integrates black liberationist commitments with contemporary critical theory, Roman Catholic spirituality, and post-Vatican II thought. Copeland retrieves and reenvisions Christology within a “practical-political theology” that names and directly confronts social suffering—especially that which has been spawned by white supremacy, slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial injustice. Though this is an erudite work of academic theology, ideal for use in seminary or college classrooms, pastors, lay people, and activists also will profit from it.

Copeland discerns a cruciform shape in African American slave narratives; she begins with the inception of race-based chattel slavery in the colonial Americas and ends with the hate crime and mass murder in Charleston and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. She explores the “dark wisdom” in these narratives, forged by a people ripped out of their ancestral lands, stripped of their cultural and religious traditions, rent from their family members at auction blocks, beaten, sexually abused, and terrorized; but she also uncovers a fervent and persistent faith in the God who raised the crucified Jewish Messiah from the dead. Echoing the political theologian Johann Metz, Copeland reckons these narratives as “dangerous memories, memories that challenge” us even today, as we seek to embrace a discipleship marked by cruciform praxis in solidarity with the dispossessed.

A striking biblical spirituality permeates these stories. Slaves typically were forbidden to congregate, worship, sing, and drum together. Still, in fleeting hours of leisure or in the dark of night, slaves would steal away into the woods to pray, an act of resistance. Copeland recounts the story of “Praying Jacob,” a devout Maryland slave who defiantly asserted—even when held at gunpoint!—his right to halt his tasks three times a day for prayer. “Praying Jacob disarmed slavery’s power over his body through committed Christian discipleship. Death had no power over him; he was a follower of Jesus of Nazareth in word and deed,” she writes.

The enslaved also were deprived of the right to read or even possess Bibles on pain of whipping, maiming, or even death, yet they crafted and handed on an aural and

oral biblical tradition—pruning scripture of proof texts used to legitimize slavery (like the curse of Ham) and affirming a God who promises freedom to the captives. This living text, encoded in prayer, lament, and song, ranged from the Exodus narratives, to Jesus' subversive Kingdom praxis, to bracing apocalyptic visions of the end of days.

Copeland warns against a voyeurism that reifies black bodies, appropriating the struggles of the past for mere edification. These were real individuals who suffered, hoped, and died; the devastating story of a Bermuda slave named Hetty, a pregnant woman beaten to the point she later miscarried and then died, offers no redemptive arc but elicits horror at the dehumanization slaves endured on a daily basis.

Still, the abiding human dignity of the slaves shines through these stories. Drawing upon Catholic thinker Bernard Lonergan, Copeland reads the black freedom struggle as manifesting the innate human drive toward transcendence, through creative and transgressive acts of cultural transformation.

Likewise, Copeland eschews the temptation of making the slave narratives grist for a theodicy that would render social suffering theoretically innocuous. God does not will evil in its myriad manifestations but opposes it, full stop. She shares feminist worries that atonement theologies are often used to condone, legitimize, and sanctify suffering as a good in itself. In her view, African American spirituality understands the cross as God's act of solidarity in, with, and for those who suffer. The slaves, Copeland writes, "knew Jesus as a *friend* with whom they could share their secrets, a *savior* to whom they could entrust their hopes and fears, a *companion* with whom they could walk through life's deep shadows, a *healer* who could make the wounded whole, a *fellow sufferer* who knew in his body the story of the lash, enduring with them what was their daily portion." Copeland names this "apophatic" wisdom, in the sense that it is a hope in a coming time of justice that was (and is) as yet unseen.

Copeland also reads the text of the crucified in that quintessential art form, the spirituals. These songs, as scholars have shown, served myriad functions, including giving coded, practical direction for those, say, seeking escape along the Underground Railroad. Copeland brings her own Catholic spiritual perspective to bear on these songs. Take, for example, these lyrics from one of the best-known spirituals: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder . . . Every round goes higher, higher." Copeland connects this Christ-centered pattern of ascent with the mystical teaching of Catherine of Siena, who taught that the body of the crucified serves as bridge and

staircase to God.

The spirituals unite individual and corporate experience. Though these songs rose up from the moans of slaves in specific contexts, they evince universal implications. “In the spirituals, a distinctive history of salvation takes place, and we are included in it,” Copeland writes. Traditional African worldviews, whose root paradigms continued to shape the lives of slaves, albeit covertly, interwove past, present, and future, ignoring the dichotomies of Westernized, linear time: *We were there* when they crucified the Lord; *we were there* when the angel proclaimed startling news to the women disciples.

One essay stands out uniquely. In it, Copeland reconstructs Christology to embrace the experiences of gay, lesbian, and transgender believers. I wish this chapter had been integrated more explicitly with the others. Still, its focus on Christ as liberator links it to the others in the book.

Pointedly wrestling with Roman Catholic social teaching, Copeland starkly asks: “Can Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, be an option for gay, lesbian, and transgender people?” Her constructive response remains rooted in an incarnational and eucharistic Catholic ecclesiology: as we are all extensions of the body of Christ, no one should be excluded from the common table. Amid the oppressions of empire (two millennia ago and also now), Jesus’ own preferential optional for the marginalized models a new, inclusive agenda for discipleship today, one which advocates for embracing the full diversity of identities and modes of erotic fulfillment. Such faithful praxis—in solidarity with *all* the marginalized—is the authentic path, she argues, to discerning the cross of Christ today.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Slavery and the cross.”