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Righteous Redemption

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The Hate That Hate Produced

ROBERT LILLY

When I first entered prison as a juvenile, my opinions about race were naïve and undeveloped. That all changed quickly as I entered a world where the most important thing was the group with which you identified and in which you placed your loyalty. As a youth I was a good observer, and fear made me cautious. And so it was that every day in prison I learned new lessons that I thought would aid me in my survival as a young black man in the United States. Prison became the place where life would unfold, history would be revealed and truth would be found.

This is my story. It is a story not too dissimilar from the stories of many hundreds of thousands of young boys and girls over the last twenty-five years who have found themselves as castaways in our American criminal justice system. It is a story of a boy growing up in a land with a history of racism and hatred. I was ignorant but not unaware of my difference. Just below the surface of my life lies a monster that is looming in the darkness waiting to engulf me, ensnare me and entrap me in its clutches. For most of my adolescent years I was able to avoid its snares, however, avoiding doesn't mean that I was oblivious to those things that smelled foul in my environment. My nostrils flared from the filth of poverty and its accompanying odorous pitfalls—like police action against the poor, ghettos and the warehouses called penitentiaries.

I grew up in the South Bronx of New York City. It was a poor and blighted city through the early to mid-seventies. As a child I was resilient, and the decay and stench of poverty did not seem to have too much of an effect upon me. I did know that my family, just as so many others in my community, lacked what many people in the United States take for granted. I began to accept this as normal. Nevertheless, I did yearn for more possessions. My idea of possessions was a new set of clothes for school, a baseball glove for the summer months and ice cream when it got hot. I did not desire opulence, just survival and some comfort. To get these things I would do odd jobs. Downtown New York City was my favorite place to go hustle because it was a fast-paced jostle of people who wove in and out of one humongous building after another. This, to me, was always their world and I was a pedestrian, a traveler visiting temporarily only to return to my native land of impoverishment.

As the years passed my curiosity for things “beyond” would be satisfied through books, as it was too painful to enter into the world of the “other”—a white world from which I felt excluded for some reason that was hard to identify. My next place of exploration and inquiry became the library. I would peruse the shelves searching for books that would give me understanding of this world that I felt was mine. However, it was an elusive perception of ownership, one that would require a guide.

Looking over the shelves one day I spotted a book about the history of the Holocaust of the German Jews. This intrigued me as I had been introduced to the horrible event in school. I poured over the pages which were mostly filled with photos. These images would sear an indelible impression upon my memory and for years to come this experience undergirded the shaping of my notions about race, racial injustice and faith—three concepts that still influence my theology and personal walk with Christ.

When someone goes to prison in the United States, his or her social background doesn't matter. Race and racial tension will automatically become a factor in their lives. For me it was no different. Prison is a place where you learn to categorize and identify yourself and others by the group you are in or the group you are out of, depending on where you enter the system. My juvenile prison years were characterized by gang identification; one did not have any real significance if he did not belong to a gang. I did have contact with gangs before going to prison and even associated very closely with two members of the Crips organization. But prison became the factor that would tip me toward total engrossment with the subculture of gangs.

Fortunately for me, I had not yet joined a gang. This afforded me a sense of hesitancy in identifying openly as a gang member. Rather, I used my ability to write raps or rhymes, a skill forged in my early years in both New York City, the home of Hip Hop, and later in California where I became enthralled by the culture. Poetry became my visa or passport in and out of the various prison groups. So again I was able to be a pedestrian in this new, strange and dangerous world.

Having learned how to avoid the usual trouble of gangs gave me *carte blanche* access into many men's lives and personal stories. I was able to take a step back and see the world and others in it like I had never been able to see before. However, my perception was skewed because of my lack of knowledge and exposure to people outside of ghetto America. Of course having had such a limited experience with life before entering into the prison system, so governed by the ideas of race identity, I was bound to find myself confused and even more lost. This is exactly what happened. All around me men saw themselves as representatives of groups rather than as individuals with unique histories and personalities. I wrestled with my identity and soon began to question my authenticity. Eventually, as most men in prison without a clear sense of self, I gravitated toward options that appealed to me as a solution to this crisis.

The first group I drew from for my personal identity was a group called the Moorish Science Temple. This was a modern expression of an early twentieth century pseudo-political Muslim fraternity. The Moorish Science Temple was founded by Noble Drew Ali, who claimed all men had to have a national origin and culture in order to be viewed as civilized. And the so-called Negro race in America was poor and miserable because it had lost the knowledge of its original land of birth and Asiatic identity, as he referred to our origins.

The Moorish Science Temple taught us that we had to reclaim our rightful identity and by doing so we would gain the respect of other nations, especially the American white man. This notion of nationhood appealed to me as a youth because I could readily identify this spirit among my young classmates when I had gone to school. They sang the national anthem with pride, whereas I found it odd and uncomfortable to chime in on a song that honored a nation from which I felt alienated. This also applied to my views on the pledge of allegiance. I wondered how I could pledge allegiance to a country that had never pledged allegiance to me.

Islam thus became a viable substitute for the Christianity into which I was born and absentmindedly promoted the superiority of a white God and a white Jesus. I vividly recall sitting at the coffee table in our living room as a youth and pouring over the pages of the King James Version of the Bible, filled with one Caucasian image after another. God was white, Jesus was white, the angels were white and God's chosen people, the Jews, were white. I began to subconsciously think, "Where was I? Where were my people in this story of divine love and redeemed relationships?"

In prison, as I grew both older and more embittered about the shortage of information concerning my people and how we had come to be where we were in the United States, I grew fonder of the teachings of the Nation of Islam. This was another Islamic off-shoot from the original teachings of Prophet Muhammad of 1400 years ago. He was a man who came out of the desert with a message that primarily appealed to the sons of Abraham's other offspring, Ishmael. I read and learned many things that challenged what sketchy information I had on the history of the faith into which I was born—Christianity. Yes, I was born into a

household that attended church, but little more than that. We did not get an adequate diet of history, politics, culture, theology or economic teaching. Religion had nothing to do with these matters, or so it had appeared to me. In contrast, for the Muslims these issues were inseparable from faith in God. Observing every other group that demonstrated some semblance of cultural integrity, I felt naked and vulnerable.

In my early years of flirtation with Islam I recall a Christian minister coming into the lock-up section of the jail where I was doing my time. Early in my incarceration I had many anger issues that landed me in administrative segregation. This particular minister was white, and in retrospect I am sure he meant well coming into the prison and visiting this especially volatile area. Unfortunately, he was completely ignorant of the nuances of the black man's journey within American prisons and how it could be that a boy raised a Christian could one day decide to abandon what others might characterize as his birthright. But that is exactly what I had done. I left what to me was a modern day replication of bondage, only the chains were mental and not physical. Was Christianity the bondage? No, but how Christianity was dispensed, or rather wasn't dispensed, was. Christianity seemed to serve as a salve for a worldly-weary and beaten down people who simply wanted to leave this place and make it to the "sweet by and by."

This preacher spewed his biblical knowledge and cultural insensitivity. He taught a lesson on Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. The lesson was about a man who cheated on his wife and abandoned his son, who was conceived out of wedlock. If that weren't enough, to add insult to injury, the son would be cut off from his inheritance—the favor and promise of God. The minister, while giving his rendition of this old story, reached the crescendo of his talk and proclaimed that we Christians had no need for concern because, according to Paul, he said, we were not of the slave woman Hagar, but of the free woman Sarah. I was mortified, to say the least. I had learned enough about history to know that black people were descendants of slaves and whites were the offspring of slave masters.

In my naivety, I ventured to ask him a question about the true nature of slavery in the United States and how the Bible could possibly aid us in making sense of what had occurred in this country, and what steps were available to us for redress today. He stared at me blankly and proceeded to skirt my query. I tuned him and every other preacher of the gospel out for years to come. I needed someone who knew how to put the word into context for the group to whom he was speaking. This undoubtedly committed man of God was nonetheless, in my view, incapable of doing this for a young black man from the bowels of New York City. He was oblivious to the affront he produced. I went farther from the word as a result of his efforts, which he actually thought would be helpful to me and to others.

Black nationalism, political consciousness informed by an Afro-centric philosophy, became my hallmark. I yearned for solutions to my dilemma as a young black man in the United States. I sought it wherever it could be found. Unfortunately, the message I heard again and again from the pulpit was that Jesus loved me but it appeared he had no practical plan for my physical salvation. And those whites, who seemed to claim a personal relationship with him, had no desire to change the world that to me had fallen away from God's plan for mankind. According to all the white ministers I'd heard in prison, God was not as concerned about my earthly dwelling place, the place where he had put me. In all fairness to the white preachers, I must add that the black preachers were no more capable of answering my questions than the white ones. Those few black ministers that did dare to show their faces in prison were so ill-informed about the gospel that we ran circles around them, and their response to us was to denounce us as heretics and blasphemers. We, in turn called them fools and Toms. Thus the cycle of anger and resentment continued.

I saw in later years that it wasn't only the black man who was faced with this type of internal drama. Whites also, were wrestling with unusual concepts. Prominent in my mind were the Wiccans, a group of worshipers who began to form around the old Celtic beliefs of pagan worship and witchcraft. Also, there was what was known as the Identity Christians, those who saw themselves as the ancestors of the Aryan race, denouncing miscegenation and race mixing. Next, there was the Aryan Brotherhood—they were strictly a prison gang who rivaled other prison gangs for supremacy, not for their race, as their literature states, but

for the drugs and sex trade of America's prisons. This was the world into which I was thrown and forced to fend for myself and learn my purpose in life. These tasks, though not impossible, were made even more complicated because there were so few people to whom I could turn for answers, feedback and a critical sounding board for my ideas.

Everyday, all over America, someone just like me, in their formative years, is languishing in prison. He is being made less human because of the paucity of options to select from and the lies he has to wade through in order to obtain even a semblance of truth. And where are we as believers? Where are our hearts and minds as they relate to such subjects? Do we even concern ourselves with those matters that folks wrestle over who come from backgrounds dissimilar to ours? If we answer "no" to such questions then we are part of the problem. What can we do?

What I suggest is that we learn to be honest with our past as a nation, a people and a church. We have not come into being in a vacuum. We have an origin, and the more equipped we are to address our spotted past, then the more directly we can answer the legitimate and not-so-legitimate challenges these other faith concepts pose to us. If we refuse to open our minds and continue to uphold the traditional manner of conducting our affairs, then we can expect to continue to lose generations of people to both the physical prisons that encase the body and the psychological bars that ensnare the mind. We will answer for our complacency. We have a charge to address the needs of every generation. If we decide that it is not within our job description to respond to these needs, I fear we will qualify ourselves for the contempt of God, just as those men in Jesus' parable who were given talents to use in the service of the king. Shall we answer as the final servant answered? "I buried my talent because I knew you were a hard master" (Matt 25.24). Let us not bury our talents as they relate to the potential we possess to aid others in their time of need, or their time of ignorance.

I have since escaped those early years of confusion and now I am using this experience to help others navigate the rough terrain of life. I am especially concerned with the issues of those who are poor and weak in our American milieu. I believe that this is what Jesus would have me to do were he here in the flesh. I am not comfortable in a padded pew, waiting in the air conditioning for Jesus to return. I want to go outside the gates of the city and to struggle alongside Jesus in his work of redemption and salvation.

We as a church have so much unused potential. We can very easily impact the countless men and women who find themselves in prison at one point or another; however, we are too myopic. We would much rather count baptisms than address issues in the world that surrounds us. We forget that our master is the very one who said, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2.27). Religion was made for man and not man for religion. Regrettably we have come to the point where we are servants to religion, not to God the author and finisher of both the church and our lives. In order for us to get to where we must be as saviors of humankind and ambassadors of Christ, we must abandon this attitude, roll up our sleeves and go back to the basics. Love thy neighbor as thyself, and remember the prisoners.

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