relationship between faith and hope, consciousness and orthodoxy could be conflicted. When it was time publicly to repeat the Creed or renew the Covenant or sing the reception of "amazing grace," the sound of one's own voice uniting with others in song, prayer or public recitation confirmed the mystery represented by orthodoxy at least for the moment. Such people heard countless familiar and ritualistic sermons, whether read, expounded or chanted, that described the blood flowing from Redeemer's head, hands, side, and feet; they felt the terrible jolt against His searing wounds when the cross was plunged into the earth. They could not fail to have been impressed, as was the young Wilbur Cash, with the "primitive" feelings that would later allow him to understand the "blood sacrifice" as essential to the Mind of the South. The message of sin, guilt, and punishment, associated with the elemental and universal symbol of blood, was conveyed further by exhortations, prayers, hymns, recitations, scowls, maternal tears, and patriarchal condemnation. All worked to cry "guilt," to teach guilt, to instill guilt: to make the offending soul shudder at the enormity of his/her guilt. The feelings that sustained the credibility of this incredible doctrine had afflicted generations of white Southerners by the twentieth century. Even tepid or rebellious believers learned that religion was punishment: they endured or remembered or heard about the connection in church trials; they heard and felt the depth of divine wrath from angry preachers; they learned, too, from admonishing looks, raised eyebrows, whispered confidences, and the anguish of awakening sexuality the pervasiveness of sin and the necessity of retribution. All these things when contrasted with the righteousness of God taught children of conventional Christians that Someone had a Right, as Lillian Smith recalled, to punish them; it was God's Obligation to Himself.\(^\text{14}\) Christ was the symbol of God's love, to be sure; but first He was the Lamb of God sacrificed for human sin. Sin demanded punishment. Punishment meant death!

\(^{14}\text{One socialized within the alternative vision of liberal Christianity and educated by the masters of neo-orthodoxy almost instinctively senses the rage and violence of the orthodox myth; and the recent work of René Girard helps one understand the violence inherent in it. See especially The Girard Reader 9-29. See also Job 10-13, 34, 122-23, 140. For further interpretation, see Williams, Bible, Violence, and the Sacred, vii-ix, 1-20, 25-31.}\)
The source of this penal theory of atonement was presumably the Bible; everyone who accepted it believed as much; but they were wrong. As the great Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen pointed out long ago, a thousand years had actually lapsed between the crucifixion and the first mature statement of the theory. During that time various understandings had circulated within the Church, and some of these played upon the motif, which Aulen thought best expressed atonement in the phrase, Christus Victor. Conceding elements of sacrifice but pointing out that these neither emphasized punishment nor employed legal metaphors, Aulen argued that the message of Paul, the early Church, and Patriarchs was of a Christ Who broke human bondage to the Law and the forces of evil as the victorious and Incarnate Lord (Aulen 22-26, 31-35, 43, 47-60, 66-80). References to sacrifice came out of Old Testament texts from a cultus that maintained the holiness of community through spilling blood (the “containing life force”) of slain animals that substituted for the offenses of the people. Evil was channeled into an animal whose expiatory death became a “saving event” (Gorriné 38-40). The vicariousness of such rites is clear for the Day of Atonement [Leviticus 16]: in one ritual a goat is sacrificed for the sins of the people; in another, a goat [scapegoat] is laden with the sins of the people through prayer, driven into the wilderness, and thus charged with banishing violence and guilt.

Against such references, however, we may cite others that subvert the importance of sacrifice. I Samuel 15:22, Amos 5:22ff., and Micah 6:7-8, for example, repudiate sacrifice. Such contradictions in a complexity of books, laws, and ritual acts suggest why it is tendentious to write of a “biblical theology of sacrifice” (Gorriné 50-53, 57). Yet Jewish discourse when Saul of Tarsus was a student included the redemptive qualities of suffering and a sacrificial death. Indeed, some thinkers fused the scapegoat mechanism and expiatory sacrifice. When he became Paul the Apostle, Saul labored to explain to a hostile Jewish community how an executed criminal broken on a Roman “gallows” could be the Messiah. His was not an easy task. He presented Christ Jesus as a “sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith” (Romans 3:25), a claim which might have appealed to some Jews then engaged in thinking about sacrificial death, but his major emphasis was on participation in Christ. Paul was absolutely clear in his critique of the Jewish law and insisted that by dying under it, Christ had placed human life above it. This act
was supposed to bring Jews and Gentiles together into a new community in which all were reconciled to each other and to God by their becoming living sacrifices (Gorringe 71-82). Because the Biblical texts were ambiguous, however, no single theory dominated interpretation of the Cross for a thousand years.

Then came Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), who introduced a new metaphor to explain the work of Christ: satisfaction. He did so within the context of a society that was highly stratified and in which legal metaphors ruled. An elaborate code of “honor” sustained social solidarity. Offences against those of high rank demanded punishment or, in its place, satisfaction relative to the nature of the insult and the rank of the one offended lest the social order be unbalanced. The same could be said of the relation between sinful humans and God, observed the Archbishop of Canterbury in answering the question: *Cur Deus Homo? (Why the God-man?)* Since we already owe God everything it is impossible for us to pay satisfaction for our sins. Worse, because to dishonor God is to dishonor Infinite Being, only an infinite satisfaction is appropriate. Therefore, Deus Homo must pay satisfaction in humanity’s place. Anselm came to this conclusion within the context of a church system of penance and of a society in which crime denied the “bonds of mutual trust and concern on which the community depends for its existence” (Gorringe 99, 85-99). In such a culture, retribution in the payment of a debt “restores that fair balance of benefits and burdens” disturbed by crime, writes a student of punishment. The same was true of sin and divine retribution. Whereas the work of Christ was once conceived as victory over the power of evil [Satan], now it was conceived as payment to God to satisfy the debt owed by mankind for its sin. Once the devil had held mankind ransom, but now it was God; the God who Paul believed had liberated Christians from bondage to the law had become law itself (Gorringe 99, 101-03).

Over the next few hundred years, this theme shaped the medieval mentality that became “saturated with the concepts of Christ and the cross.” Satisfaction, punishment, and suffering became the dominant themes of salvation. The focus on law and satisfaction lay not merely in religious sensibility and theological formulation but also in the rise of the state with its mechanisms for bringing order out of chaos and law out of custom through the power to punish (Gorringe 104-25). With the Reformation, Jean Calvin adapted Anselm’s theory and improved upon
it within the continuing context of political and judicial development. But whereas Anselm developed his theory within the church's system of penance and thought of satisfaction as the payment of debt, Calvin relied on the metaphors and analogies of criminal law; for Anselm, Christ "pays our debts; in Calvin he bears our punishment" (Gorringe 139). Even Wesleyans who were not enamored of Calvinist theology spoke the language of satisfaction and punishment, as we have seen. Thomas Ralston's abridgement of Richard Watson's Institutes labored to distinguish Methodism from Calvinism, but if he disagreed with Calvinists on the constituency of atonement, he agreed with the Genevan on its punitive model. For Southerners, who, like medieval knights, lived in a culture of honor, the clearest statement of the theory was made by Dabney, whose desire to distinguish clearly between faith and faithlessness made him an ideal spokesman for Christians in the region. He basked in the language of punishment. All of life's calamities, he wrote, are "penal," they have "moral significance" as "God's displeasure with men's sins" (Christ 32). He wrote easily of God's "punitive providence," of a justice that demanded punishment, and of a Christ who "suffered legally and righteously for the guilt of sin imputed to him" (38, 64). Furious with soft-hearted "dreamers" who did not understand that the "guilt of sin must be avenged by the just penalty," he condemned the self-indulgent who ignored the axiom that "punishment of every sin is inevitable." The cosmic reality within which the Christian life was to be lived, according to Dabney, was the punishment that Christ had taken upon himself and which "satisfied the divine perfection outraged by our sins" ("Vindicatory Justice Essential to God" I: 469-72). Killing solves the intractable problem of evil.

Such theology could not remain in "otherworldly" abstractions but effected the Christian's view of self and world. Dabney had defended his punitive theory of atonement by appealing to the horror felt by the virtuous, like himself, when criminals were not punished and he reminded Christians of the oft-expressed desire of Biblical writers for "proper retribution at the hand of God." The Christian, he insisted, should find pleasure in others' "suffering for sin"; Christians know, Dabney thundered, that criminals must suffer "penal retribution" because it was rational, just, and sacred. The Christian should realize that having participated "in the judicial triumphs of the Redeemer" through grace s/he was free to participate in righteous vengeance. To be sure,
Dabney warned full retribution would come only at the Final Judgment, but allowing saints to anticipate participating in that cosmic act granted permission to enjoy vengeance in the interim. Belief that “righteous retribution is one of the glories of the divine character” could easily become a belief that people benefitting from cosmic retribution were righteous in their own determination to punish. If the “godly man” in pursuing justice had remitted final “penal settlement to a perfect God” and arrested “his own forcible agency as soon as the purposes of mere self-defence are secured,” he was nonetheless justified in defending himself with godly “vengeance.” Believing this, and believing that all of his own life after 1865 was a defense against the ungodly, Yankees, religious liberals, African Americans, it is not surprising that Dabney should have devoted himself to perfecting a theology of vengeance (“Christian’s Duty” 706-21). He knew that he would be dismissed as one of those “stupid old fogies besotted in their bigotry” (“Christ” 15); he knew, too, that his view was condemned as a “brutal theology of ancient barbarians” (“Vindicatory Justice” 469); but he scorned such prissy “babbling.” Truth was hard; justice was hard; the cross was hard. His personality, which demanded order, aloofness, hierarchy, honor, certainty, and toughness found its justification in a religion driven not by grief at one’s own sin but the draconian punishment of others (Gorringe 140).

In this fashion, punishment was sacralized by the dominant religion of the American South. To be sure, as Dabney knew, there were Christians who contested this view. Centuries before, Anselm and Calvin had not prevented alternative views from Peter Abelard or Martin Luther, and by the end of the nineteenth century, a few Wesleyans were beginning to emphasize that the way of the cross revealed more of Love than of Justice. African Americans’ views of Christ’s work, too, were dramatically different; they had perceived that the one broken on the cross suffered with them, not for them. They believed that He had come not to justify punishment but to break its power, not to encourage humans to participate in God’s vengeance but to show that God was not enraged with them (Raboteau 22-39; Early; Thurman). One can imagine Robert Dabney’s infuriated contempt. He would not have been alone; indeed, as a few white Southerners began to shrink back from the punitiveness of a God who ruled in terroristic rage, one of their savants objected to such cowering. Poet John Crowe Ransom’s God was the
“stern and inscrutable God of Israel” rather than the “amiable and understandable God” Whom he believed liberals were then fabricating from the New Testament, modern science, and sentimental optimism (1-25, 49-51). Written in response to such sissified idolatry and the anti-Southern fall-out from the Scopes trial (Larson), Ransom’s book, God Without Thunder, was precisely what the subtitle said it was, An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy. The son of a Methodist missionary-minister and the brother of a woman who wrote Sunday school lessons, Ransom attacked the new religiosity for embracing the myths of science and naturalism rather than those of the oriental God who delighted in burnt offerings and crushed Job into the dust (10-11). The rage of such a God was magnificent. If Ransom eventually left both church and South, he had indeed captured the religious mood he had inherited in pleading with believers to “restore to God the thunder”—that is, the wrath and the penalty.

Sacrificing Christ / Sacrificing Black Men

Conceiving of God as Supreme Hangman and the Christ as Divine Substitute who paid the penalty for human sin in blood sacrifice did not make white Christians lynch black people. The formula did, however, reflect a state of mind; it reflected the ways in which widely shared views of moral accountability and penalty could allow, when fused with whites’ racial antipathy, patriarchal prerogative, sexual apprehension, and economic tenuousness, public violence against a black man associated with a crime of rich symbolism. In such an event we are confronted with a myth as powerful as that of Christian atonement—a myth also of a specific kind of fall, a resulting collective disorder, and a punishment appropriate to the crime. The offense was defined by the myth of the “black beast rapist” intent on ravishing innocent white women (Hall 112, 129, 145-57); the myth inherent in the image became one of the most pervasive white Southern parables of sin, guilt, punishment, and salvation. Both myths coincided in the shared belief that punishment changes things in the community far beyond the mere effect of the act itself upon the “criminal.” There is a shared sense that the one upon whom the myth is centered, the Christ or the “rapist,” must die to relieve the discord (sin, anguish, conflict) so dangerous to community. Both Christ and rapist become a sacrifice that, as René
Girard points out, produces “the sacred” (*Things Hidden* 226). They do so by plunging all the meaning of community into one act of violence that resolves potential collective conflict and therefore “saves” the community; the subjects of sacrificial violence take upon themselves the sins of community as the scapegoat did in ancient Jewish ritual when consigned the community’s sins. The black man, like the scapegoat in the Old Testament, does not take on sin voluntarily. But voluntarily or not, he is sacralized by collective transference to him of sin and violence (*Things Hidden* 177). This violent transference is justified by appeal in both cases to the justice of God. With regard to Christian atonement, the sacrificial reading of Christ’s death lays responsibility for the victim’s death upon Divine Justice (230-31). Killing the black victim is also understood to be the “will of God,” that is, *just*. In both cases punishment is necessary to sustain sacred order, and in the case of the black victim, punishment may be a “sublimation of people’s self-assertive instincts and hostilities” (Gorringe 46).

White Southerners did not think of their executions of black men as similar to Christ’s sacrifice even if black Southerners did so (Schecter 297; Harris 103, 126, passim). Walter White, the author and secretary of the NAACP, did not quite make the connection invoked by literary figures and historians, but he did believe that the religion of white Southerners had created the “particular fanaticism” that led to lynching. He recounted a list of atrocities inflicted by white Christians against people unlike themselves from medieval pogroms through defenses of slavery to Belgian rule in the Congo; the list could have been much longer. He lashed the mentality that tried heretics and witches, preached “hell-fire” and racial superiority, and illuminated the night with fiery crosses. The “insane rage” he saw in posturing white ministers represented to him the emotional and ignorant people of the [white] “Christian South” (40-53, 40-44, 48, 52). Angry as he was at whites’ religion, he did not probe the internal punitiveness of a religion he

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15The power of the sacred, writes Girard, “derives from what it has said in real terms to human beings concerning what must and must not be done in a given cultural context, in order to preserve tolerable human relations within the community. The sacred is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis. [A “mimetic crisis” refers to a moment when violence is about to break out.] Far from being a leap into the irrational, the sacred constitutes the only hypothesis that makes sense for human beings as long as these transferences retain their power” (42).
identified with ignorance and fanaticism to think about the sacred nature of the violence he documented in his work. Given the brutality of lynching and the contempt with which its victims were treated, one might be excused some skepticism that in executing a black victim, whites were actually making him sacred. But such skepticism reflects a point of view that does not see in the ritual of lynching a communal transference to the subject of violence all of the violence implicit in community itself; or, if it sees the transference, does not understand its religious milieu and meanings. Yet reporters at both the lynching of Sam Hose in 1899 and of Leo Frank in 1915 wrote that in these ghastly events they observed that something “sacred” was happening (McLean 175; Williamson 185-89; [Sam Hose]). As Girard points out, from one point of view “there is . . . hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice” (Violence 1). Girard argues that the violence, which many scholars believe always has its reasons, will inexorably find its victim within community as long as the reality of violence in collective life is hidden from communal consciousness.

It is important to remember that Girard thinks of sacrifice not in terms of a priest's appeasing of deity, but of the practice in ancient societies of selecting outsiders, persons of no status, to provide sites of violence that “solve” problems of collective unrest and implicit conflict because these persons may be killed without fear of vengeance (Violence 1). And, as Edward Ayers, among others, has pointed out, black men seized for lynching were often marginal to the communities in which they were sacrificed (156-58). Sacrifice is “an act of violence without risk of vengeance,” just as is legal execution within the judicial system; it exacts judicial punishment as a substitute for private vengeance that avoids a circle of violence that would otherwise never stop. Sacrificial rites are “essential” in “societies that lack a firm judicial system,” Girard writes; they take the place of revenge (Violence 14-18). It is also possible, however, to think of the American public’s vengeful participation through the media in such matters as jury trials, verdicts and executions as indicative of a sacrificial mentality. The accused subject is sacralized in that he (sometimes she) bears the burden of all implicit violence (and resentment at acts not punished) within community when attention is focused upon him or her. The violence of which one is accused becomes symbolic of all the violence inflicted upon
“the innocent” that becomes in collective perception “the community” which believes itself to have been victimized.

The scapegoat mechanism that allowed Christ to take on the sins of the world in a sacrificial reading of atonement also allowed Christians historically to transform Jews into scapegoats. During plagues in the fourteenth century, for example, Christians murdered Jews in order to stop the fatal consequences of the black death. These and other Christian persecutions of religious minorities were justified by the same scapegoating mechanism that applies, Girard points out, even if those accused are actually guilty of what they were charged with having done. Accusers still seek in the accused “individual the origin and cause of all that is harmful” (Reader 115, 97-117) in the community and perhaps even in the society beyond. Stereotyping transforms the accused into a symbol or representative of the evil deplored in the scapegoating process. If one is selected from a stereotyped, persecuted class of “others” as a lynching victim, it may be because he had not sustained in his own person or actions the differences by which the persecuting authority had insisted those whom he represented should have been distinguished (Reader 116-17, 211-21). And in fact, we know that black men who had stepped beyond places assigned African Americans by law and tradition, and especially if they had been known as renegades or had appeared as strangers without significant connections to the community, could in times of economic and social crisis be sacrificed to the communal expectation of obedience to the rubrics of kind, order, class, race, and gender. Moving out of place to be like white people instead of remaining “black” could be fatal (Ayers 139-46, 156-57; Williamson 128-33, 183-89, 289-90, 301-13). When such anomalous behavior could be associated with sex—even if the charge was not strictly speaking linked with any real “crime”—the juxtaposition of gender, sex, power, and disobedience in the minds of white people could make lynching seem appropriate. Horrified as many white Southern Christians probably were at the lynching of black men, they nonetheless blamed the latter for their own victimization with little guilt.

Even white men who thought of themselves as opposing lynching could sometimes be understood as justifying the very acts that they thought they were condemning. Both Methodist Bishop Atticus G. Haygood (Haygood; Mann; Rubin) and Baptist layman Governor William Northen publicly denounced lynching—but then surrendered
their moral high ground by observing that lynching would end when blacks no longer raped white women (Brundage 195-97, 201-02; Luker 91, 100; Williamson 287-91). Their reasoning reflected the common assumption that in certain universally understood encounters between blacks and whites, African Americans were always at fault simply by being black; and this made illegal lynching appear to be as legitimate as legal punishment. The abstraction, “justice,” was mystified by tradition, power, and gendered myths associated with relations between the races as interpreted by white men; it was sacralized by pious white people who believed that law demanded satisfaction from all who breached it. Even Christ had to have been broken upon the demands of the law that humanity might be saved. Each subject of every lynching, by virtue of his (her) having been seized by the mob, had both literally and symbolically broken the law, and “justice” demanded satisfaction. This is not to say that men and women went through a conscious process that linked a traditional white understanding of Christian atonement to the punishment of black men; but it is to suggest that even those who moralized their actions through Christian conversation could not move beyond the scapegoating mechanism inherent in attributing the source of violence, even violence against themselves, to black people.

They could not understand that lynching resolved violence within the social system by attributing its source to African Americans and then punishing a representative of that class in order to achieve “peace.” They could not see that they were party to a ritual of human sacrifice in which the shedding of blood restores order, resolves violence, and fulfills the requirements of “justice.” They identified not with the victim of their violence but with the law—or the custom—that demanded and therefore justified punishment; it was in the very logic of the racialized universe. When in the 1890s, Ida B. Wells challenged the myth of the black-beast-rapist as based on the twin illusions of white women’s innocence and white men’s gallantry, whites’ fury suggested that she had committed more than lèse majesté and sacrilege. In her blasphemy, the outspoken African American journalist had profanely challenged one of the most cherished expressions of that “religious feeling [that] is the individual’s awareness of the group,” if Durkheim’s insight is conceded at even an elementary level (Hall 328-49; Schecter 292-317; Luker 91-114; Hamerton-Kelly 15). Sexuality, gender, and power were essential to the white individual’s awareness of community as expressed
in the practices and beliefs of a sacralized segregation; mentally fusing these three with the moral certainty that attributed innocence to some, assigned guilt to others and then demanded vivid punishment in a dramatic act was a religious process.

African American writers have understood this dynamic of community, guilt, and punishment. Trudier Harris is clear on this point in her book, *Exorcising Blackness*, which she begins by suggesting that lynching is a "Peculiarly American Ritual" and that it is very much like the scapegoating mechanism of ancient ritual that Sir James Frazer had discussed in *The Golden Bough*. Referring to the transfer of guilt from the community to the "scapegoat" in Frazer's understanding of ancient sacrificial rites, she deftly links it with the "cleansing" process explained by Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* through which groups project "their basest fears and desires onto other groups" and elevate themselves above those thus despised (Harris 1, 12, 17). Reluctant to concede that lynching had the cosmic implications suggested in this essay, Harris nonetheless analyzes the ways in which African American writers have engaged whites' obsession with black sexuality and the terrible consequences of that obsession for African Americans. Indeed, she argues that Richard Wright used "the lynching and burning ritual, and historical and social connotations surrounding it, to shape the basis of his aesthetic vision of the world" (95, 95-128). From the history of white violence, Wright displays the ritualistic care with which white executioners focus their torture and punishment on the black victim's sexuality which they carve out of him according to rubrics they seem instinctively to know. Each movement seems to call attention to the power of white men to punish blacks, the cutting and the burning seem to purify the crowd participating in this ghastly cleansing ritual, and the trophies taken from the body afterwards appear to be sacred relics taken to remind their beholders of action that is quite unlike the ordinary actions of common life. The task that black male writers assumed, Harris believes, was to "exorcise fear from racial memory" (195); but their function here is to remind us that if they focused primarily on the ways in which whites castrated blacks to remind African Americans of who the enemy was, they also understood that the violence against them was ritualized; it reflected whites' conception of the universe. And they did not understand, as Gwendolyn Brooks wrote, that "the loveliest lynchee was our Lord" (Harris 77; Brooks 87-89). They were blind to the insight
that identified victims of lynching with the Christ whose death (and resurrection) symbolized their faith. Unlike black Christians, their white co-religionists seemed to think of themselves as positioned with divine wrath (justice?) against the (even innocent) offender. If divine wrath demanded punitive death, whites believed that in imagining justice, they stood with the judge and not with the crucified.

Certainly Haygood and Northen had not been able literally to see the victimization of black men. The self-righteousness that blinded whites to the ways in which their own protestations of innocence victimized black people needed to be challenged; the Christ had to be understood as suffering with the victims of white violence and the myth of the black-beast-rapist that incorporated the myth of the immaculate protection for white womanhood had to be exposed. Such alchemy was not easy; but by 1905 there were some changes. Then, a strange and compelling little book appeared, written by the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Newport News, Virginia, Edwin Talliaferro Wellford. In *The Lynching of Jesus*, Wellford did not confront either the ancient or the modern myth directly; he merely told a familiar story with a radically different emphasis. His first chapter suggested his purpose. In “The Slaughter of the Innocents” he pointed out that lynching could not be justified by appeal to the myth of immaculate protection; he excoriated mob law as the lynching of both the victim and the law. He thought that the “savage spirit of barbarity” aroused with every lynching constituted a “Reign of Terror” and he pleaded for a “full exposure of the crime” and those who committed it. He refused to concede whites’ innocence. Then he made an abrupt but sophisticated transition to an even greater barbarity, as he called it. “The lynching of Jesus excels in brutality and in the slaughter of the innocent, all succeeding offences,” he observed to a white Christian audience. “So long as the twentieth century looks on with unstirred sympathy and passes by the mobbing of Jesus with unconcern and apathy, so long will similar deeds be repeated, in any land with impunity. If the public conscience does not resent the greatest it will not take cognizance of the less” (18-19). That is, as a well-educated Presbyterian clergyman, Wellford knew the connection between white Christians’ view of punishment (atonement) and lynching and he denied that the justice of God demanded lynching of Christ.
By putting the matter as he did, Wellford was not diminishing the
evil of lynching black men; he was doing the exact opposite. He was
subtly attempting to change the focus of his white Christian readers’
attention when they thought of lynching. He wanted them to make a
connection between what Christ’s executioners did to Him and what
white people did to the black men they murdered. Robert Lewis Dabney
had written fiercely of “God in his punitive providence having punished
Christ legally and righteously for the guilt of sin imputed to him” (Christ
32); Wellford now attacked this interpretation. God had not “punished
Christ legally and righteously” so far as Wellford was concerned. He was
trying to shift responsibility from the black victim of white violence to
the white perpetrators themselves; lynching was to be seen not as the
understandable illegal punishment of guilty black men, but as the
modern recapitulation of deicide. Christ’s death was not to be
understood as just punishment. In challenging one of the principal
interpretations of dogma deriving from “Jesus Christ and Him crucified,”
he was thinking of the atonement in a new light. Rather than
emphasizing the justice of Christ’s sacrifice, he emphasized its profound
injustice; he also seemed to be trying to transfer empathy for the
murdered Christ to modern lynch victims by insisting that Jesus had
been “lynched.” He understood that the doctrine of substitutionary
atonement had allowed white Christians to ignore the meaning of the
crucifixion and of lynching. Wellford did not attack the theology but
instead emphasized the illegality, that is, the injustice of each step in the
process that led to Christ’s death, and in doing so, he was weakening the
theology received by tradition as he hoped to weaken white people’s
inability to confront the evil they seemed to approve. Leading the reader
by the hand through proof texts step by step along the maze through
which Jewish and Roman authorities went as they short-circuited the
judicial system and avoided due process, the author stripped away all
pretense to justice. And he insisted that all participants—Sanhedrin,
chief priests, Pontius Pilate, and the mob—knew that the young rabbi
was innocent. “Law,” wrote Wellford, “was never so debauched, nor
‘man’s inhumanity to man’ so apparent” (88). What had murdered the
Christ? Hatred, calumny, secrecy, conspiracy, the “insatiate passion of a
misguided multitude!” “Innocence,” Wellborn observed, “has often been
victimized by personal interest, political pull, sordid bribery, or frenzied
passion.” But, he insisted, the Nazarene would judge in His time all those
who have oppressed and murdered, for he knew “the merit of right, and has felt the oppression of wrong.” The clergyman then ended by linking the reader with the Christ and the latter, in turn, with victims of injustice; there was no doubt that lynching was the instrument of oppression. In 1905 such a conclusion among Southern whites was rare (89-91).

Wellford’s pamphlet was scarcely the first robin before a spring of racial justice or theological mutation. But his homiletic insight that Jesus, too, was lynched, when understood within the conservative ethos of Southern whites’ religion, suggests that a change was possible in the assumptions of white innocence when it came to the myth of lynching. Eventually that change would be accelerated by white Southern women as they attacked the myth of immaculate protection. Jacquelyn Hall has explained how in the 1920s white women from within the Wesleyan tradition together with African American women began to work for racial justice as uneasy allies in coalition with men of the Commission on Inter-racial Cooperation (CIC). All of these constituencies emphasized that the myth of white innocence and justification for lynching were lies told to buttress a racial order based on lies. Disciplined by the scheming arrogance of men who controlled the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, these white women were part of a vanguard who expanded the claims of religion beyond the confines of manmade walls with the help of the new discipline of sociology and the urgency of a new social gospel. Under the leadership of Jessie Daniel Ames, who enticed them into the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), these activists attacked the myth of immaculate protection. By joining the antilynching movement already begun by Ida Wells-Barnett (the Anti-Lynching Crusaders), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the CIC, the white women of ASWPL insisted that they were threatened not by black rapists but by white Lynchers. Their actions impressed indelibly upon the public mind the meaning of their words. At the local level they worked with and sometimes against law enforcement officers to prevent lynchings; if they still feared assault by black men, they nonetheless acted in such a way as to put their faith in law instead of in extemporaneous illegal community violence (Hall, Revolt passim; Hall, “The Mind”). In belying myths based on innocent and helpless white women, activists had not
stopped lynching but they had begun to disenchant one of the South’s most sacred myths.

Religion permeated communal lynching because the act occurred within the context of a sacred order. Holiness demands purity, and purity was sustained in the segregated South by avoidance, margins, distances, aloofness, strict classification and racial contempt in law and custom. To be sure, economic benefits flowed from whites’ attempts to control black people, but these were hidden even from white people themselves who fabricated sexualized myths of otherness about African Americans. Essential to these myths by the late 1880s was the image of the white woman whose innocence justified whatever violence white men might find “necessary” for her protection against the “black-beast-rapist.” When myth brought violence, deadly rituals that stripped the black victim of his sexuality were grisly evidence of a transfer to the black body of the violence, guilt, and shame in the white community; the transfer reenacted ancient scapegoating rituals and resonated with the formal religion of Christian Southerners who had centered “sacrifice” as a means of salvation. The cross symbolized a salvation effected by Christ’s paying just satisfaction for the sins of humanity; focus was on the justice of punishment. Even God had had to pay the price for human sin. That African Americans could see lynching as a sacrificial act in which they identified with the victim meant that existentially at least they understood an alternative view to the orthodox (white) emphasis on penal sacrifice. A few whites could begin to see that Christ, too, had been lynched and to challenge theology implicitly and white conceptions of justice explicitly. Because the myth of God’s just vengeance permitted whites’ obsession with punishment to rule their relations with blacks there was no restriction within the core myth of Christian identity to the racism that clouded their vision. It was possible for the rare white Christian to sense that atonement demanded empathy with sacrificial victims so that there might be no more “victims”; but this insight remained hidden from most Southern whites for the moment. They could not see, as black Christians did, that in a sacrifice celebrated in such dramatic and public fashion, the Christ had become black. The full meaning of that insight for understanding religion, punishment, and justice in America was still to be realized; lynching was but one way of using death to solve problems of violence and justice.
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