

Lines of Tension, Rays of Light: An Autotheography

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Education is what stirs the soul.

— Cornel West¹

Cor ad cor loquitur.

— John Henry Newman²

My *abuelito*, Andrés Rocha, was born in 1914 on a horse ranch in San Isidro, Texas, forty miles northeast of the Rio Grande River. His was the last generation of Texican *vaqueros*. His father, Crecencio Rocha, died from a head injury sustained while breaking horses, leaving a teenage Andrés to look after his mother, eight brothers, and three sisters. He met my *abuelita*, Elida Vela, from a nearby ranch, at a weekend dance. They married soon thereafter. When the lease on the land where his family worked and lived for at least two generations was terminated, the young couple moved from San Isidro to Pharr, Texas, a town about fifty miles to the south, ten miles away from Reynosa, Mexico. They bought a plot of land — a *solar* — on what had been an orange orchard and began to build their home next to brothers and sisters who had already moved into town. More family followed thereafter. Both of my grandparents worked at the local *bodega*, packing vegetables, and traveled seasonally to pick crops around the United States. Unable to have children, they legally adopted my father, who was born in their home. They also unofficially adopted a number of homeless boys, like my *Tío*, Juan.

The winter before my *abuelito* died, I phoned him from Columbus, Ohio, to wish him a merry Christmas. I tried to explain why I was absent. I wanted to describe what I was doing — writing my dissertation — so I told him I was writing a book and how time-consuming it was. I didn't want to talk about money because he didn't have any, and I didn't want him to feel bad about it. I felt guilty, but he understood. As distant as our worlds had become, he made sense of it all somehow and gave me his blessing in the final words I would ever hear him speak in person: “*No le aflojes mijo.*”

For days, he would guide his horse through mesquite and *nopales* to check on cattle ranging in the *monte*. He carried basic supplies: a 30-30 caliber Winchester saddle rifle, disinfectant ointment, water, neatly coiled rope. He counted cattle, looking especially for cows and calves; he healed the sick from flesh wounds or venereal diseases. He and two of his brothers once chased down and roped a feral longhorn bull — a story for the ages along with a rack of horns that became family folklore. His right hand, missing the middle fingertip from a machinery accident, cradled an imaginary rope in its palm. His strong, weathered arm with an effortlessly bulging bicep covered by loose wrinkled skin — a testament to a life of hard work — swung around, slowly, looping above his head as he spoke with soft nostalgia and light in his eyes. It told stories, a lasso thrown from horseback, one end tied to the saddle

horn as the horse dug in its heels, flanks flexing with sinew and muscle; then he dismounted to chase the taut line towards the animal, wrestling it to the ground as quickly as possible and getting to work, as the horse applied the proper tension.

“*No le aflojes*” is a cautionary ranch-hand, *vaquero* folk expression that means “don’t leave any slack in your rope, apply the right amount of tension, work hard, struggle, *echarle ganas*, keep your line taut”: be attuned like a guitar — increasing or decreasing the tension of the string threaded through a hole at the base of the instrument running upwards across the body and neck through the grooves in the nut at the top of the neck, strung and wound into the tuning mechanism, secured. Tuning is pressure applied, pressure relieved, by turning the knobs of the tuners clockwise or counterclockwise, listening to the note ring relative to a master pitch, many times as a harmonic. The gauge of the string will impact its tension, and together with the action — the height of the string in relation to the fretboard — and the neck, will determine the tone of the guitar’s sound and will also establish the muscular rigor and dexterity required to play it with facility and grace.

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Riley B. King was already a fan of the country bluesmen Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonny Johnson. But when he heard the electric sound of Jefferson’s protégée, Texas bluesman T-Bone Walker, playing his rendition of “Stormy Monday,” he knew he had to get an electric guitar for himself.³ King’s first name shifted to “B.B.” after he hitchhiked to Memphis, Tennessee and found work as a club musician and disc jockey at WDIA. He got that name because he was once “the boy from Beale Street,” which was soon contracted to “Blues Boy” King, followed by “B.B.” Walker and a few others, like Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt, inspired his electric sound that became the modern standard for the electric guitar solo, a standard that remains intact to this day. Walker’s style of single-note playing concealed what King’s signature sound and approach revealed; he mimicked the sliding and wailing fretless fluidity of the slide guitar by moving and stretching the string vertically instead of horizontally, the traditional motion. In a 1972 interview with the BBC, King attributed this technique to his cousin, slide guitar player Bukka White.

The evolution from fretless to fretted style, from Walker to King, can be also seen in how each guitarist held his instrument. Walker often flipped his guitar so that the front of it faced directly upwards, in a position identical to the lap steel guitar. Walker’s bends were never severe; they were slight inflections that gave flavor and nuance to his notes and phrases; they rounded out and glued together the transitions from one thing to another. King revolutionized the electric guitar by borrowing this method, but he bent (and still bends) his notes in a more severe way, at different speeds and inflections, infusing them with a quick, expressive vibrato produced by shaking his hand. This creates vertical upward and downward movement in the finger placed over the string, microbending the note like horizontal classical vibrato, but more pronounced in technique and effect.

Physically and functionally speaking, the vertical stretch that produces the bent note is identical to tuning the instrument in real time. It changes the tension in the

string, producing notes that exceed the twelve-note scale and mimic the soulful vocal sounds, the wails and moans, of spirituals and the blues. King's now-standard style for electric guitar vibrato, is a duplicate of the risks involved in the steel slide guitar: both are hard to keep in tune because they are fluid and always in motion, like stray cattle. More fundamentally, to bend a note is to adjust the tension of the string, and to contort the attunement of the note is to exchange precision for expression. The blues were always a distinct form of expression, born in the hymnal tradition of spirituals in the Black church, and King knew the expression well. He grew up as a Gospel singer and lost his mother and grandmother by the age of fourteen. King lived the blues — of this there is no doubt — but the phenomenology of blues music is not a cliché and cannot be recounted here in full.⁴

Beyond the general reality of the Jim Crow South, one particular event left a tremendous impression on King: a lynching he witnessed as a boy in Lexington, Mississippi. The photographic evidence shows a graphic image of a Black victim hung from a tree by the neck with a chain. As the blueswoman Billie Holiday sang, "Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees."⁵ James Cone reads "Strange Fruit" as a theological correction of Reinhold Niebuhr's racially neutral theology of the Cross⁶ in his 2006 Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard Divinity School, entitled "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree." He claims, "The Gospel is the word of the Cross, a lynched word, hanging from a tree; the Gospel is a tortured word, a Black word in a world of White supremacy."⁷

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Cone is well aware of the incarnational implications of the ontogenetic prologue from the Gospel of John — "In the beginning was the Word."⁸ The passage is consummated by the announcement, a few verses below, that "the Word was made flesh."⁹ In the Christian tradition, the Word of God is most radically present in the flesh of Christ, and Christ's flesh is most graphically revealed on the Cross. Cone rightfully understands that a theology of the Cross stands at the center, not only of the Christian tradition, but also of the American experience of racism and White supremacy as a whole. He claims, "Unless the Cross and the lynching tree are seen together, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America and no healing of the racial divide in churches and seminaries as well as in the society as a whole."¹⁰

Raised in Bearden, Arkansas, Cone demands a foundation for systematic Christian theology that is neither anchored in a magisterium of Christian tradition nor in the decadence of theological abstraction. His theology is instead moored in the specific horror of broken, heated, mutilated, tortured, and murdered flesh — necks stretched beyond taut, breaking. This is indeed the broken body of Christ, and this phenomenological ecclesiology expresses a Eucharistic kinship between Black (Protestant) and Latin American (Roman Catholic) liberation theologies. Cone asserts, "No American Christian, white, black, or any other color, can understand correctly the full theological meaning of the American Christ without identifying his image with the re-crucified Black body hanging from a lynching tree."¹¹

The phenomenological tenor of Cone's theology can also be found in his description of *The Spirituals and the Blues*.¹² Although spirituals are supposed to be sacred and blues secular, Cone reads them together as art that is incarnational in the sense that they indicate where there is life and death at stake. Black art in general — in this case music — is as political as it is theological for Cone. The neat White liberal divide between politics and theology cannot understand and will not appreciate this art any more than it can hear the prophetic voices of Cone, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Cornel West when they speak as the ordained preachers and ministers they are. Their religious identity preserves and enshrines the phenomenological experiences that root them in their particular communities and contexts. To ignore or mistake this identity as a secular liberation without theology indicates an aesthetic misrecognition of the spirituality of the blues. The prophetic voice does what the professor can no longer do in the constructivist classroom of today: profess. These homiletic professions do not *sing* rhetorically or give sterile instruction¹³ — they *sang*; and there is always sorrow in singing because it is born of the tragedy of love.¹⁴

Prophetic notes resist the empty sobriety of exact talk. Like incense and freedom, they rise, arise, and arouse a sober intoxication of the Spirit. The voice of the blues is spiritual, just as the spiritual is sung in blue notes that arc and bend, even scream, with distortion. Christ's tortured, nailed, hung, and strung body — arms outstretched across wood — becomes a blue proclamation of salvation. Not only is there atonement; there is attunement. And the wounds remain after resurrection and glory. Bend down close and look as Thomas did: after the resurrection, Christ wears the five wounds of his Crucifixion, the marks of nails and spear. These are not scars; they are open wounds. A wounded God is not only theological in this case. A real, historic Roman Empire — not abstract sin — inflicted physical wounds unto the body of Christ, inflecting theology with politics. The Passion is about power and empire. No wonder the social imaginary of Liberation Theology across the Americas — from Cone, King, and West to Paulo Freire, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Enrique Dussel — resonates and rings in the hearts of the people, even among those critical pedagogues who would secularize iconic eyes and faces into their own idolatrous images.

Despite the prophetic power of his voice, Cone's formal analysis suffers from some of this idolatry.¹⁵ While he interprets the spectacle of Black lynching as a theological limit case for a contextualized understanding of the Cross in the United States of America, his analysis is too loose. He allows the racial composition and political history of lynching to reify a Black-White racial binary, confined by borders that are tense and artificial. The problem is not, in the first place, a question of race, identity, or geopolitics; it is a simple but profound theological confusion. For Cone, the Cross and the lynching tree lack an iconic quality; to see the Cross is to merely witness, to see, a lynching. While the descriptive facts of the matter are compelling, and the prophetic voice of spirituals and the blues point us in a soulful direction, the line of sight is distorted through inversion.

When I sit in front of the idol, I gaze at the idol, and I infuse the idol with my sight so that the idol is transformed into my image. When I sit before the icon, the

icon gazes at me, and I am transformed in the light of God.¹⁶ Again, recall Thomas, the doubting apostle. It was not that he “witnessed” the wounds of Christ; this was not an empirical verification. Rather, the *wounds themselves* witnessed to Thomas. As Peter, quoting the prophet Isaiah, put it, “through his wounds you have been healed.”¹⁷ It is therefore a false and egocentric intentionality — in the traditional phenomenological sense that refers to “intentionality” as the object-directedness of consciousness — that inverts and suspends the tension between temporality and transcendence. It renders a voiceless victim, like the student who cannot study, the teacher who cannot teach, and the professor who cannot profess.

To the wounds themselves! The incarnational unity of the Cross and the lynching tree is not an idol; it is an icon. The incarnation is not generic dead flesh; it is flesh that gives light, that illuminates. This light, its circuitry and line of flight, is also embedded in John’s prologue, between ontogenesis and incarnation, as “the light that enlightens all men.”¹⁸ Cone’s provocative liberation theology and soulful prophetic voice is incomplete and out of tune without an illumination theology.¹⁹ This reversal, from idol to icon, from liberation to illumination, is also what attunes the closed racial and political composition of the dark light of the Cross to the lighter-skinned victims of lynching in the Americas.²⁰

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In “The Law of the Noose: A History of Latino Lynching,” Richard Delgado tells a largely forgotten story of approximately 517 Mexican men and women who were lynched along the U.S.–Mexican border. This happened during the period of time when lynching in the Jim Crow South was also a common practice.²¹ Although the lynching of Mexicans occurred in relatively smaller numbers — in the hundreds as opposed to thousands — Delgado argues that the crimes were equivalent in rate to Black lynching. More importantly, the equivalence between Black and Mexican lynching is one of quality, not quantity. After all, there are also documented cases of White lynching during this period, but the point that justifies Delgado and Cone’s *racial* analysis is the imperial presence of the institution of White supremacy. Delgado’s article is ultimately meant to oppose English-only laws and policies, but his recovery of this history of lynching also stretches our awareness of racially motivated violence from South to Southwest; it extends and sustains the political theology of liberation and illumination.

The most interesting aspects of Delgado’s article, for the purposes of this essay, are its historical sources. As is often the case in vigilante violence, the official records are sparse to nonexistent.²² While there are numerous journalistic sources, the only ones explicitly named in the body of the article are *corridos*, Mexican folk songs, in particular the ones of Juan Cortina and Gregorio Cortez. These songs, this genre of music, like the category of racial violence, also share a family resemblance to the Black folklore of the blues because they direct us to the icon, they take us to the foot of the Cross. They ask, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” When we arrive at the iconic light of the suffering, we discover an ecumenical solidarity of the wounded.

The *corrido* has a long, rich, and disputed history. It is a form of oral history, political activism, and good music to dance and get drunk to. Its content and form belongs to the people who have preserved and practiced it. The musical style is reminiscent of the blues in terms of both melodic and I-IV-V chord progression, and in its sentiment and range of expression, from sorrow to sorrows. It also shares an agrarian origin with the blues; it is the foundation for all forms of *música ranchera*, the music that originated in ranches, the music of my *abuelito*. Although the *corrido* has not created a musical legacy or popular footprint as the blues have done in the American songbook, the turbulent history of Mexico has given it a wide and wild variety of content. These *corridos* are still sung, and often quarreled over in terms of their historical accuracy and regional identity; yet they preserve their mythopoetic value by these distortions.

Many *corridos* tell stories of folk heroes who resisted American authority through violent resistance. The *corrido* is deeply attached to a species of populist cultural martyrdom that is engrained in a Mexican people who have seen very few, if any, geopolitical victories. These stories instill a revolutionary spirit in many Mexicans, and this spirit becomes even more complex and melancholic in those of us, like my *abuelito*, who have always lived north of the *frontera*, the borderline. What we find in these sung stories of futile and even suicidal resistance is directly related to the phenomenon of Mexican lynching. After all, as we have seen, the *corrido* preserved much of its memory. *Corridos* are also related to the political theology we find in Cone's aesthetic analysis. In this case, however, there is no distinction between spirituals and blues; *corridos* express a creative tension of sacred and secular, the Catholic Church and the Mexican and American nation-states, violence, love, betrayal, nostalgia, nostalgia for nostalgia.²³

A prime historical example of this can be seen in the *Cristiada*, the Cristero War that lasted from 1926 to 1929, one of the last conflicts following the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The political and theological threads of this conflict are not easy to unravel. On the one hand, the Cristeros were ostensibly fighting on behalf of the Catholic Church against the government of Plutarco Elias Calles, which represented the secular objectives of the revolution. However, when we consult the original revolution, the War of Independence, we find that it began in 1810 with the *Grito de Dolores*, led by Catholic priest, Miguel Hidalgo de Costilla, along with a militia of mestizo and indigenous peasants. The memory of these origins, even after a century, motivated the Cristeros to believe that they were the true revolutionaries. The flag of Hidalgo was a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the apparition of the Virgin Mary who spoke Nahuatl to the *indigena*, and now beatified Roman Catholic saint, Juan Diego. The Cristero flag added the icon of Guadalupe to the mythic Aztec *aguila*, and their battle cry was “¡Viva Cristo Rey, Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!” (“Long live Christ the King, Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe!”).

The equivalent of B.B. King for Mexican folk music, Vicente Fernandez, the “King of Ranchera Music” popularized a song — “El Martes Me Fusilan” (“On Tuesday They Will Shoot Me”) — that captures the populist sentiment of the *Cristiada*:

“El Martes me fusilan / A las seis de la mañana / Por creer en Dios eterno / Y en la gran Guadalupana” (“On Tuesday they will shoot me / At six in the morning / For believing in God eternal / And the great Guadalupana.”). Later the *corrido* makes reference to the Cross: “Yo les digo a mis verdugos / Que quiero me crucifiquen / Y una vez crucificado / Entonces usen sus rifles” (“I tell my executioners / I want them to crucify me / And once crucified / Then use your rifles.”). In this *corrido*, we find a passage similar in content and tone to that of Ignatius of Antioch’s *Letter to the Romans*. Ignatius was a Syrian Early Church Father and martyr of the first century, one of the earliest who made reference to the Gospel of John. His letters anticipate his martyrdom at the hand of the Roman Empire, longing to be publicly killed, tortured by lions, for Christ. “My eros,” he said, “is crucified.”²⁴

The version of the *Cristiada* sung by Fernandez, as with most accounts of martyrdom, is romanticized and oversimplified. It overlooks the fact that the sacred and secular division between the Cristeros and the Calles administration was anxious and not entirely clear before the war. This didn’t prevent either side from brutally killing each other during and even after the war. Thousands of peasants and hundreds of priests were killed by secular state violence. In the 1930s, hundreds of Mexican state teachers were victims of religious violence, many times at the hands of former members or supporters of the Cristero movement, because of the secular educational policies of Calles that remained. Some of these teachers were lynched — the same methods of mob violence we have recently seen with Ayotzinapa and employed against Mexicans and Blacks at the hands of Whites in the South and Southwestern United States: strange fruit indeed, hanging and swinging from trees and gallows, buried away from sight, memory, and light.²⁵

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Walking out of St. Anne’s parish, a block away from the *solar* he bought in the 1930s, we carried the body of my *abuelito* to the hearse: my father and my *Tío* Juan, my cousin Juanito, my brother and I, plus one of the adopted homeless boys, now a man with sunglasses, whom I never met until that day. None of us were related to this man by blood; only three of us carried his last name. But we mourned his loss together, a family of unrelated relatives. I played guitar at his rosary wake

Con mucho cariño
para Samuelito
y muy orgullosos
de él
sus Abuelitas
Andrea y Elida
Rocha

and funeral; it was hard to control the sorrow in order to keep the *cantitos* — close cousins of the *corrido* — together and in tune.

He would gather all the cousins, all six or seven of us, make us stand in line, and give us money when “*el cheque*” — the social security check — would come. Two dollars apiece. We would thank and kiss him and *abuelita* on the cheek. That final Christmas, he somehow managed to send me twenty dollars with a handwritten note, written with a shaking, dying hand. Only glimmers of his ornate cursive penmanship remained in the stressed lines that showed an intense struggle to write sixteen words in the formal Spanish of his third grade schooling: “*Con mucho cariño para Samuelito y muy orgullosos de el sus abuelitos Andrés y Elida Rocha.*” (“With much love for Sammy and very proud of him his grandparents Andrés and Elida Rocha.”)

The Texas Cowboys Association sent horses to follow behind the hearse as it approached the cemetery, three riders and four horses. The fourth horse with no rider had a saddle mounted, boots with spurs attached held together with a lariat around the saddle horn, and a neatly coiled rope. The horses stood beside the burial rite, flinching and flexing in the South Texas heat, the animals that killed his father, the animals my *abuelito* knew and loved and gave up for a better life that never resulted in wealth, but created a home, a family, a future, and a witness. A crucifix was placed on his casket, followed by dirt, flowers, kisses, and tears. The nylon straps strained and quivered as they lowered his coffin into a deep grave. A thick cement slab was placed atop his encased body, awaiting his wife of seventy-two years. He was buried. His iconic light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.²⁶

1. Cornel West, quoted in Hillary Davis, “Cornel West tells crowd at NAU that education matters,” *Arizona Daily Sun*, February 3, 2012, accessed October 31, 2014 http://azdailysun.com/news/local/education/cornel-west-tells-crowd-at-nau-that-education-matters/article_80ff73e2-3247-5e1c-885a-297e465f43b3.html, quoted in the call for papers for the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference.

2. The motto of John Henry Newman, a Cardinal and saint in the Roman Catholic Church.

3. For all references to B.B. King’s life, including the 1972 BBC interview, see *B.B. King: The Life of Riley*. Film. Directed by Jon Brewer. 2012. Universal Music Group. July 2014. DVD.

4. See Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., *Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1958).

5. “Strange Fruit” was written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx, New York. See James Cone, “Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree,” in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies and Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010) and James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

6. Cone, *Cross and Tree*, 32.

7. James Cone, “Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree” (lecture, 2006 Ingersoll Lecture on, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, October 19, 2006), published on Harvard Divinity School YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZngcqqgQyzo>, June 2, 2010, 1:30:48, accessed on October 31, 2014.

8. John 1:1. Biblical passages are taken from Alexander Jones, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).

9. John 1:14.

10. Cone, “Strange Fruit,” 320, and “Strange Fruit,” Harvard Divinity School YouTube.

11. Cone, “Strange Fruit,” Harvard Divinity School YouTube.

12. James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992).
13. For more on the distinction between an instructional and a “hospitable” lecture, see: Ruitenberg, Claudia. “Hospitable Gestures in the University Lecture: Analysing Derrida’s Pedagogy,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48, no. 1 (February 2014): 149–164.
14. See Samuel D. Rocha, “The Blue Soul of Jazz: Teaching on Waves of Anguish,” in *Art’s Teaching, Teaching’s Art*, Tyson Lewis and Megan Laverty, eds. (Springer, forthcoming).
15. For more criticism of Cone (and John Milbank) see Brian Banthum, *Redeeming Mullato: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).
16. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and Alexander M. Sidorkin, “Idolaters, Iconoclasts, and Iconophiles: The Productive Ideal and Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 2013, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014): 302–310.
17. 1 Peter 2:24 (making reference to Isaiah 53:5).
18. John 1:9.
19. See Ewert Cousins, ed., *The Classics of Western Spirituality: Bonaventure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 51–116.
20. Cone does not exclusively refer to the lynching of Black men; he also spends five, “O Mary Don’t You Weep,” addressing the lynching and suffering of Black women. *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 120–151.
21. Richard Delgado, “The Law of the Noose: A History of Latino Lynching,” *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Law Review* 44: 297–312.
22. See Michael J. Pheipher, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
23. See Samuel D. Rocha, “Educación de Carne y Hueso, Education of Flesh and Bone: Variations on a Folk Melody,” *Lapiz: Journal of the Latin American Philosophy of Education Society* (2014): 66–77.
24. Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2002), 46.
25. John W. Sherman, *The Mexican Right: End of Revolutionary Reform, 1929 to 1940* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 43.
26. Alluding to John 1:5.

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