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Review — James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*

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***Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody.* James H. Cone. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018. 186 pp. \$19.75. Hardback. ISBN 978-1-62698-302-1.**

Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody, the final work of James H. Cone, internationally known as 'the father of black liberation theology,' is a memoir, the personal testimony of a Black man discovering and finding his true vocation and prophetic voice. It is a story of how black liberation theology found James H. Cone and how he, finding himself, and finding his voice, discovered and embraced God's purpose for his life.

The title, a traditional gospel hymn, offers a frame for telling Cone's story, one he resisted writing but was compelled to do. Each title of the seven chapters is a phrase from the song that identifies a particular aspect of his life's testimony, the subtitles describe the human dilemma explored, the obstacles overcome, or the life lesson learned in the process of developing a theology accountable to the black struggle for dignity.

The first half of the book describes Cone's personal struggle that led to the writing of his theological works. His wrestling with the suffering of black people and how to respond, forced him to find a new starting point, a new context, for doing and writing theology. Trusting his experience, Cone began "writing in a new language from the underside of American history" (58). He "had to deconstruct white theologies to destroy their effects on his mind so that he would be opened to listen to the black voices from slavery, emerging from the ashes of the black holocaust" (41). He was searching for the meaning of black life in America from a black theological perspective, starting from the point of black suffering, the black condition. This is where Cone found the Christ event to be (46). Cone "wanted to construct a theology that would be black like [Malcolm X] and Christian like [Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr]" (60).

It was the "cry of black blood" during the Detroit riots in 1968 that compelled Cone to write his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969); to "speak, not so much about [himself], as about black theology and how it found [him] and gave [him] voice" (xv). He wrote "trying to create new language about God that derived from the black experience and the struggle for justice and dignity . . . not simply the flip side of Western theology" (87).

Cone wrote *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972) and *God of the Oppressed* (1975), encouraged by what he calls his worthy critics and Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, who had paved the way before him. Later, Cone found inspiration in the voices of activists like Ida B. Wells and Fannie Lou Hamer and writers like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Richard Wright in writing *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011). This final work before his 2018 memoir is an “invocation to God on behalf of black people in the hope that their nearly four centuries of suffering will be redemptive . . . revealing to them the beauty in their tragic past, and thereby empowering them to fight the violence of white supremacy” (143). The cry of black blood and the struggle to answer life’s questions in black theological language compelled Cone to the end.

The second half of the book identifies the compelling voices and sources of influence in his writing and thinking through the complexities of black liberation theology: learning from his critics; learning from his students; learning from James Baldwin. Among his critics, Charles Long, J. Deotis Roberts, and Gayraud Wilmore; among his students, black women student scholars like Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas and Katie Cannon. Also, Cone reveals how Baldwin helped him bring together the tragedy and the beauty in black suffering and its redeeming value’ (165)—singing the spirituals and the blues in his writing.

This is an informative read for every reader, popular and professional, as well as the casual unaware, unsuspecting, and historically blind reader. Cone answers the questions, what is a black theologian and how do you become one? The process includes how the new discipline, black liberation theology, came to be. In addition, Cone reveals the importance of mentoring the next generation of black theological scholars.

This work also offers encouragement to U. S. Black Catholic theologians to write their personal memoirs of U.S. Black Catholic theology, a story of black Catholic theologians becoming and claiming a long history that begins on the continent of Africa. Like James H. Cone, we too need to have a conversion from ‘said I wasn’t gonna tell nobody’ to we must write the story and tell everybody.

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