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## Introducing James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

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*Based on a talk delivered during the 2011 Annual Meeting, Dr. Nilson engages James Cone's recent book, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, which Cone describes as the culmination of his life's work. Nilson critiques this important contribution to black theological scholarship in an essay that is part review, part response to Cone's invitations to dialogue with white theologians.*

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August 5, 2011 was the official publication date of James H. Cone's long-awaited new book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, by Orbis Press. Over the past few years, Cone has given us glimpses of his developing thought in various public lectures (e.g., at Harvard) and interviews (e.g., with Bill Moyers on PBS). Now, in light of his well-deserved reputation as the father of U.S. Black theology and his own view that this new book represents the culmination of his work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (hereinafter TCLT) amply merits our attention.

At the outset of this particular essay, however, it is important to recall that Cone has repeatedly invited white theologians to dialogue with him about the ecclesial and theological implications of what he has rightly called

“America’s ‘original sin,’” racism/white supremacy. So, as a white theologian, I hope that this may be a respectful and grateful response to his overtures.

Since August 5, 2011, was also his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, it is not surprising that he describes TCLT as the culmination of his life’s work. It is that, of course, inasmuch as themes from his previous books reappear here, but this book is much more than a summation of his past work. In fact, it is no ordinary book.

TCLT is the result of a long struggle which began when Cone was still a child in Arkansas. Even though his lifelong question has been how to understand the truth of the Gospel in relationship to the realities of black suffering, he tells us that he had evaded the subject of lynching. It was just too painful. Yet finally he had to grapple with it: “I had to fight it before I could fully live” (xviii). Even so, he says that engaging lynching by doing the reading and writing and gazing at the photos of tortured black bodies became his “deepest challenge and the most painful experience I have had as a theologian” (xviii). Facing this challenge, however, became the gateway to his liberation. The cross enabled him to cope with lynching and lynching helped him to grasp the reality of Jesus’ crucifixion as he never had before. The experience convinced him that each must be seen in the light of the other.

Cone reminds us that the Church mothers and fathers of the Black Christian tradition, the enslaved blacks, did not come to faith through argument and academic theology, but, rather, through their imaginative appropriation of the Gospel

in the depths of their sufferings. "One has to have a powerful religious imagination to see redemption in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in tragedy" (157-158), says Cone. So TCLT provides the insights and images needed for his readers' imaginations to make these discoveries for themselves. With the God-given courage to absorb the hard theological truths, the pain-laden historical memories, and arresting poetic images which he sets before us, one may then hope to share something of that faith that finds joy in the midst of anguish, hope in the midst of despair, and the presence of God in midst of the sense of apparently utter abandonment. Cone is not so much arguing a case here but, rather, leading his readers into the initially forbidding but finally luminous heart of the Gospel as Black Christians have perceived it and as white Christians have largely evaded it.

Read rightly, then, TCLT offers the grace of conversion to readers willing to open themselves to the real pain of working through it. Turning the final page of the book, a reader can sense the truth of the mystery that cannot be comprehended or demonstrated. Thanks to Cone, readers can know for themselves the reality of the mystery that defies reason: God revealed not in privileged status and domination but in the agonizing death of the tortured Jesus and in his icons, the burnt black bodies hanging from Southern trees.

The cross and the lynching tree: each is needed to appropriate the other accurately. Lynching is a humiliating public spectacle of death inflicted by horrible tortures. If Jesus' crucifixion is not seen as a lynching, it becomes an abstract, bland event of the past, so unthreatening that bishops can wear golden crosses on their chests and other

people can wear them as jewelry without trembling at the enormity of what they are doing.

Yet, in the horror of the lynching we call the crucifixion was the presence of God, the revelation of God, a point made most dramatically in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and dies moments later. When the centurion saw how he died, according to Mark, he says, "Surely this man was the Son of God." (Mark 15.33-40) Without *this* crucifixion, lynching leads only to anguish and despair.

How then are we to see each in light of the other? This book is an answer to that question. Each chapter carefully builds on the previous ones to bring us to the bi-focal vision of the cross and the lynching tree.

Chapter One is "'Nobody Knows de Trouble I see:' *The Cross and the Lynching Tree in the Black Experience.*" This first chapter focuses on lynching itself, its frequency and its intensity. It re-presents the facts of that history that America would like to keep repressed and forgotten. Going beyond the bare facts, Cone portrays its horrors vividly. The reader is immersed not only in the agonies of the thousands of victims but also in the terror of every Southern black person who knew that the same threat hung over them at every moment, too. In a later chapter, Cone tells us that when he was a small boy and his father's return home from work was delayed, he would wait fearfully, knowing that whites could abduct his father and torture him to death with impunity at any time. (This was not a memory recounted in his autobiography, *My Soul Looks Back.*)

He shows how any attempt at violent black resistance would have been not merely futile, but suicidal. For most blacks, then, the blues and religion became their chief means of survival.

"I got to keep movin, I got to keep movin,/Blues fallin' like hail/And the day keeps on worryin' me, There's a hellhound on my trail." (12)

"Nobody knows the trouble I see,/Nobody knows but Jesus./Nobody knows the trouble I see, Glory Hallelujah." (21)

He ends this first chapter with the question, what did white religious leaders say about "Christians" who permitted and carried out these atrocities that were so frequent and widespread in America?

Chapter Two is "'The Terrible Beauty of the Cross' and the Tragedy of the Lynching Tree: *A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr.*" No white religious leader in the U.S. was more influential than Niebuhr from the 1930's through the 1960's – and he is still studied today. Cone himself admires Niebuhr and still teaches his classic works. He even quotes a letter from Niebuhr to the President of Union with its laudatory comment on Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*. Yet, why, Cone asks, did Niebuhr never engage and oppose lynching with passion and determination? What accounts for his strange silence, his apparent tolerance?

One reason was Niebuhr's theological sense of the limits of what we may realistically hope to achieve as a society:

“proximate justice,’ . . . a balance of power between powerful collectives” (71). Yet, Cone says, “It has always been difficult for white people to empathize fully with the experience of black people. *But it has never been impossible*” (41; emphasis mine). Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to Harlem when he was a student at Union. Niebuhr did not. Why not? Ultimately, Niebuhr’s acceptance of the unacceptable was rooted in his failure to look out the windows of his Union Theological Seminary rooms a few blocks north into Harlem. His failure to dialogue with white supremacy’s victims led to a moral defect. He could see black suffering, as it were, but did not feel it “as his own” (41). Even a radio conversation late in his career with a fiery James Baldwin did not shake Niebuhr’s stance. How, Cone wonders, might the history of this nation have been different if the great Niebuhr had challenged the churches’ terrible complacency about lynching?

Yet the main point of this chapter is not simply to criticize Niebuhr and and it is certainly not to diminish his reputation. Rather, Cone is asking his white theological colleagues, “Are you also the sort of moderate who tolerates the intolerable, even if it means that your theology distorts the Gospel? Do you see yourself, at least a little, in the Niebuhr I have described here? And if you do, what are you going to do about it?”

Chapter Three juxtaposes Martin Luther King, Jr., to Niebuhr. Its title is “Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree: *Martin Luther King Jr’s Struggle to Redeem the Soul of America.*” He traces the pathways of black thought and feeling from Emmett Till through Rosa Parks to the young Dr. King, observing in a footnote (181) that he could not find

a single white theologian who discussed the horror of Emmett Till's lynching at that time.

King's preaching and activism were not limited by a sense of "proximate justice," but expanded by faith in God's desire for humanity, the "Beloved Community." Thus, for King, there were no *a priori* boundaries to hope. So there could be no limits on Christians' efforts to cooperate with God in building that community, even if it meant their death. Cone points out that King lived with the certainty of his own assassination throughout his years of leadership, from January 1956 to April 1968. As he lived in trust of the God who assured him, "I will be with you," on that January night in 1956, he experienced the divine presence more and more surely. For Cone, King's trust was grounded concretely in the cross, revealing both the price of following Jesus and the promise of God never to abandon him.

Cone ends this chapter by recalling that King proclaimed the value of redemptive suffering, but was perhaps not clear and persuasive enough about the why and the how of such suffering. The conviction that grounds this book is that only when the cross and the lynching tree are seen together will the truth of King's preaching be apparent.

But few ministers and theologians, black or white, have perceived, much less taught, this linkage (93).<sup>1</sup> So, in the fourth chapter, "The Recrucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination," Cone turns to the black poets and artists who

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<sup>1</sup> An important exception is Christopher Pramuk's stunning appeal to the White Catholic imagination in "'Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation" in *Theological Studies* 67.2 (June 2006), 345-378.



have seen Christ re-crucified in the horrors of lynching. With ample quotations from Countee Cullen, W.E.B. DuBois, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and others, Cone provides the words and images that can penetrate beneath conscious resistance and analytical minds to unveil Jesus's real presence in the victims of lynching.

Here, for instance, is Countee Cullen: "How Calvary in Palestine,/Extending down to me and mine,/Was but the first leaf in a line/Of trees on which a Man should swing/World without end, in suffering/for all men's healing, let me sing" (p 95-96).

And here is Walter Everette Hawkins: "And so this Christian mob did turn/From prayer to rob, to lynch and burn./A victim helplessly he fell/To tortures truly kin to hell" (96).

Womanist theologians, like Delores Williams, however, have challenged the notion of redemptive suffering and so Cone takes up their challenge in the fifth chapter, "O Mary, Don't You Weep." In so doing, he celebrates the work of great women, like Ida B. Wells in her anti-lynching struggles, Billie Holiday in her performances of the classic song "Strange Fruit," Fannie Lou Hamer in her risking death to secure black voting rights, and many others. These women and many others have taught him that the cross *rightly understood* does not lead to a passive acceptance of suffering but active, enduring resistance to it. In the end, Cone sides with M. Shawn Copeland on this issue, agreeing that the enslaved Africans sang of the cross because they saw in it victory over death and the conquest of the evils in this world (150-51).

In his final chapter, Cone maintains that lynching is not a thing of the past. When lynching is repressed from American memories (as it is by both blacks and whites; for different reasons, of course), it distorts our sense of ourselves and falsifies our national identity. Today it takes new forms and here Cone draws on Michelle Alexander's analysis in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.<sup>2</sup> To face up to lynching fully is the price we must pay for the renewal of Christianity in the U.S. and the renewal of the nation itself.

As important as this book is, there is still an urgent need for a second edition. The reason is the bitter truth that Cone declares: "What is invisible to white Christians and their theologians is inescapable to black people" (159). He asks, "Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today?" He answers, "The lynching of black America is taking place in the criminal justice system . . ." and, as noted above, he summarizes Alexander's indictment of our "new Jim Crow." Yet, as persuasive as her book is, more painful details about contemporary forms of lynching are needed to struggle against white ignorance and evasion.

Lynching may not be a thing of the past, but residential segregation created by urban poverty makes it invisible to too many. A new edition of *TCLT* might, therefore, tell the human stories of black suffering that lie behind the bare statistics found in the annual reports of the Urban League. What happens to children in black families when the unemployment rate in the black community is consistently

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<sup>2</sup> New York: New Press, 2010.

double that of whites? How does lowered black life expectancy impact black consciousness on a daily basis? Would TCLT not be enriched by Bryan Massingale's masterful analysis of Hurricane Katrina, where he shows how the advance planning for such a disaster made no provision for the black poor. Their lives were not considered worth saving.<sup>3</sup> Peggy McIntosh's classic "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"<sup>4</sup> can still raise whites' awareness, sometime dramatically; her work might well find a place here. Recall, too, Anthony's Walton's "Dear Jack: A Letter Across the Racial Divide"<sup>5</sup> which enables his white Notre Dame roommate and good friend Jack finally to glimpse something of the day to day griefs that being black can entail.

Authentic Christianity places the cross at its center. But "Salvation through the cross," says Cone, "is a mystery and can only be apprehended through faith, repentance, and humility" (158). It is out of that faith, repentance, and humility that TCLT has been born. Into that faith, repentance, and humility TCLT invites us.

May we have the courage to respond.

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Massingale. "About Katrina: Catastrophe Exposes U.S. Race Reality." *National Catholic Reporter* 43:18. (March 3, 2007) 10-13.

<sup>4</sup> Peggy McIntosh. "Unpacking the White Privilege Knapsack." <http://nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf> (accessed December 21, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Walton. "Dear Jack: A Letter Across the Racial Divide." <http://salt.claretianpubs.org/issues/racism/walton.html> (accessed December 21, 2011).

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