

James H. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2011. 202 pages. \$25.

At first, the cross and the lynching tree may not seem related to each other; they are separated by two thousand years and different socio-political contexts. Although both of these reflect death, the cross has been interpreted as the message of hope and salvation in Christianity and the lynching tree as the symbol of racism and injustice. While many preachers and theologians have missed the link between them, James Cone creatively brings them together because he believes “the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us to see Jesus in America in a new light, and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice” (xix). Although the cross seems to lose its significance these days, Cone attempts to place it on the center of Christianity in America because it theologically reflects much black suffering today.

In the first chapter, “Nobody Knows De Trouble I See,” Cone describes how lynching came to be pervasive in North America as a means to keep the country white, especially after the Civil War. Although black people could not actively protest for their dignity and rights, Cone argues that blues music enabled them to affirm their humanity and religion to find hope in God (18). In the second chapter, “The Terrible Beauty of the Cross,” Cone critically engages Reinhold Niebuhr for his silence on black suffering and lynching in his theology of the cross. Although Niebuhr grounds his ethics and theology on “realism: facts of experience,” Cone believes that he lacks empathy for the black experience, which leads to his conservatism regarding white supremacy and racism (48).

In the third chapter, “Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree,” Cone reflects on Martin Luther King, Jr. who, unlike Niebuhr, interprets the cross through black suffering. Although the cross invokes humiliation, fear, and death, King sees it as “a source of strength and courage, the ultimate expression of God’s love for humanity” (85). In the fourth chapter, “The Crucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination,” Cone argues that while preachers and theologians were silent about lynching, it was writers, poets, and artists who expressed the reality of black suffering through works on lynching. In the final chapter, “O Mary, Don’t You Weep,” Cone argues that black women have actively confronted lynching and racism, sustained by the cross that offers hope and resistance.

While this book is about the cross and black suffering in lynching, Cone notices that they are not such popular topics for feminist, womanist, and some progressive theologians (92). He especially distances himself from Delores Williams, who argues that there is no such a thing as redemptive suffering since it perpetuates the sacrifices of black women as somehow glorious and necessary. Therefore, Williams claims that Jesus “came to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relationship” (149). Cone rejects her rejection of the cross because it is the “burden we must bear in order to attain freedom” (151). It is interesting that while Cone criticizes Niebuhr for failing to integrate black suffering into his theology, he seems to make the same mistake by approaching black women’s suffering in a paternalistic voice.

Nevertheless, as his last published book before his death in 2018, Cone’s work still penetrates the minds and hearts of many readers as we witness the resurgence of white supremacy in the march of neo-Nazis and white supremacists in Charlottesville, VA, in 2017, the killings of black people by police, the mass incarceration of black men, and, worst of all, the silence of many Christians and churches about racial injustice and black suffering. For homileticians and preachers, the cross and lynching tree that portray death and despair also

threaten their jobs, privileges, and security. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). If we are following Christ, are we also willing to follow him to the cross where we take the suffering of others as our own, even if it means persecution and death? Cone challenges us with his final words, “Humanity’s salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst” (160).

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