

## TWIL (*The Word Is Life*): The Black Flesh of Jesus Crucified

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With the current social climate in the United States around issues of race, I decided to read James Cone's award-winning book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011). Maya Angelou wrote in her poem "The Pulse of Morning," that "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived; but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." When it comes to racial tensions in the country, we need to know not just the recent history, such as the events in Charlottesville, but the long history of white supremacy and white privilege in America. We need to confront the persistent violence and injustice against our black brothers and sisters. Cone provides an opportunity to see this through the eyes of a black Christian scholar.

In St. Paul's letter, we read that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The black experience in America makes this link between slavery and the cross poignant. Focusing on the connection between the death Jesus suffered on a tree and the death of some 5,000 black Americans on trees throughout the land in the years from 1880-1940, Cone reminds us that the cross cannot be understood only in the past tense. If we are so comfortable that we are blind to the crosses our own brothers and sisters endure to this day, then we are blind to Christ in our midst. The recent apparent [attempt to hang an 8-year-old bi-racial boy in New Hampshire](#), as well as the resurgence of the KKK on the national scene, has made it imperative to study the lynching era and to know our history... so that we don't repeat it.

Concerning the cross, Cone writes powerful and prophetic words—and by prophetic here, I mean it in the Biblical sense of challenging us with the truth and the need to work for justice. "Unfortunately," he writes, "during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, this symbol of salvation has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings—those whom Ignatio Ellacuría, the Salvadoran martyr, called 'the crucified peoples of history.' The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks." Is it true for you as it is for me? I am far too comfortable with the cross. It doesn't provoke me. It doesn't jar my conscience. I am so used to seeing it that I almost forget the depth of the violence it represents; that is, unless I intentionally meditate on it. If I were to wear a noose around my neck, however, it would immediately provoke a visceral reaction. That is one reason why I think Cone does us a service to force us to think of the two symbols together.

"Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together," he writes, "until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy."<sup>[1]</sup> Healing the racial wounds in this

country and working towards equal justice under law requires us to confront this not-so-distant history and its ongoing legacy. The violence was nothing short of terrorism on our own shores.

These are very difficult words to read, and this is a painful history to examine. Our history textbooks rarely convey the extent of the horror. To feel it in your gut is to be a witness now to the crucifixion. And to witness the crucifixion is to learn to recognize the voice of Christ accusing us as He did St. Paul on the road to Damascus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). If not out of pure humanitarianism, white Christians at very least should recognize Christ in black flesh, and recognize that our history has been a lot of “looking out... for [our] own interests,” (I write here as a white, male Christian). It is long overdue that we listen to St. Paul, the Word of God, and our black brothers and sisters, all asking us to look out “not for [our] own interests, but also for those of others.”

[1] Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), pp. xiv-xv.

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