

THE CROSS
and
THE LYNCHING TREE

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INTRODUCTION

What was it that made me conscious of possibilities? From where in the Southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom? Why was it that I was able to act upon vaguely felt emotions? . . . It had been through books . . . that I had managed to keep myself alive . . . [and that] had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities.

—Richard Wright¹

Themes for Negro writers will emerge when they have begun to feel the meaning of the history of the race as though they in one lifetime had lived it themselves throughout all of the long centuries.

—Richard Wright²

The cross and the lynching tree are separated by nearly 2,000 years. One is the universal symbol of Christian faith; the other is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. Though both are symbols of death, one represents a message of hope and salvation, while the other signifies the negation of that message by white supremacy. Despite the obvious similarities between Jesus' death on a cross and the death of thousands of black men and women strung up to die on a lamppost or tree, relatively few people, apart from black poets, novelists, and other reality-seeing artists, have explored the symbolic connections. Yet, I believe this is a challenge we must face. What is at stake is the credibility and promise of the Christian gospel and the hope

that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches and our society.

In its heyday, the lynching of black Americans was no secret. It was a public spectacle, often announced in advance in newspapers and over radios, attracting crowds of up to twenty thousand people. An unspeakable crime, it is a memory that most white Americans would prefer to forget. For African Americans the memory of disfigured black bodies “swinging in the southern breeze” is so painful that they, too, try to keep these horrors buried deep down in their consciousness, until, like a dormant volcano, they erupt uncontrollably, causing profound agony and pain. But as with the evils of chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation, blacks and whites and other Americans who want to understand the true meaning of the American experience need to remember lynching. To forget this atrocity leaves us with a fraudulent perspective of this society and of the meaning of the Christian gospel for this nation.

While the lynching tree is seldom discussed or depicted, the cross is one of the most visible symbols of America’s Christian origins. Many Christians embrace the conviction that Jesus died on the cross to redeem humankind from sin. Taking our place, Jesus suffered on the cross and gave “his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). We are “now justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith” (Rom 3:24-25). The cross is the great symbol of the Christian narrative of salvation.

Unfortunately, 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 Ignacio 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. Rather than reminding us of the “cost

of discipleship," it has become a form of "cheap grace,"³ an easy way to salvation that doesn't force us to confront the power of Christ's message and mission. Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, 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.

I was born in Arkansas, a lynching state. During my childhood, white supremacy ruled supreme. White people were virtually free to do anything to blacks with impunity. The violent crosses of the Ku Klux Klan were a familiar reality, and white racists preached a dehumanizing segregated gospel in the name of Jesus' cross every Sunday. And yet in rural black churches I heard a different message, as preachers proclaimed the message of the suffering Jesus and the salvation accomplished in his death on the cross. I noticed how the passion and energy of the preacher increased whenever he talked about the cross, and the congregation responded with outbursts of "Amen" and "Hallelujah" that equaled the intensity of the sermon oration. People shouted, clapped their hands, and stomped their feet, as if a powerful, living reality of God's Spirit had transformed them from nobodies in white society to somebodies in the black church. This black religious experience, with all its tragedy and hope, was the reality in which I was born and raised. Its paradoxes and incongruities have shaped everything I have said and done. If I have anything to say to the Christian community in America and around the world, it is rooted in the tragic and hopeful reality that sustains and empowers black people to resist the forces that seem designed to destroy every ounce of dignity in their souls and bodies.

This work is a continuation and culmination of all my previous books, each of them, in different ways, motivated by a central question: how to reconcile the gospel message of liberation

with the reality of black oppression. But in many ways this book is particularly personal. Its subject brings me back to my first memories of hearing the gospel, as well as back to primal memories of terror and violence that were part of the reality of growing up in the Jim Crow South. As a child, I watched my mother and father deal with segregation and the threats of lynching and was deeply affected by their examples, and by the sacrifices they made to keep their children safe.

Through the black religious experience I caught a vision of my possibility, entered the Christian ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, made my way to college and seminary, and received a Ph.D. in theology at Garrett Biblical Institute (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) and Northwestern University in 1965. My journey was long and hard, but I was determined to be more than what America had intended for me. Just as books kept Richard Wright alive and gave him “vague glimpses of life’s possibilities,” the black church and theological texts kept me wrestling with life and faith, trying to find meaning in a society and an intellectual discourse that did not even acknowledge that I existed. How could I find meaning in a world that ignored black people? I decided that I had to say something about that contradiction.

My first theological cry burst forth with the publication of *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969. I found my voice in the social, political, religious, and cultural context of the civil rights and black power movements in the 1960s. The Newark and Detroit riots in July 1967 and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 were the events that shook me out of my theological complacency, forcing me to realize the bankruptcy of any theology in America that did not engage the religious meaning of the African American struggle for justice. What I studied in graduate school ignored white supremacy and black resistance against it, as if they had nothing to do with the Christian gospel and the discipline of theology. Silence on both white supremacy

and the black struggle against racial segregation made me angry with a fiery rage that had to find expression. How could any theologian explain the meaning of Christian identity in America and fail to engage white supremacy, its primary negation?

I concluded that it was my responsibility to address the great contradiction white supremacy poses for Christianity in America. Published three months before I arrived at Union Theological Seminary in New York, *Black Theology and Black Power* was followed by *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). In my next work, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (1991), I returned explicitly to the two figures whose influence had combined implicitly to shape the theme and style of black liberation theology. Most people rejected one and embraced the other—seeing Martin and Malcolm as rivals, nemeses, representing oppositional categories of Christian and black, integration and separation, nonviolence and violence, love and hate. I embraced them both because I saw them advocating different methods that corrected and complemented each other, as they worked for the same goal—the *liberation* of black people from white supremacy. Just as I could not separate Martin from Malcolm, neither could I separate my Christian identity from my blackness. I was *black* before I was Christian. My initial challenge was to develop a liberation theology that could be both *black* and *Christian*—at the same time and in one voice. That was not easy because even in the black community the public meaning of Christianity was *white*. Martin King and Malcolm X gave me intellectual resources and the spiritual courage to attack white supremacy.

In earlier reflections on the Christian faith and white supremacy, I had focused on the social evils of slavery and segregation. How could whites confess and live the Christian faith and also impose three-and-a-half centuries of slavery and segregation upon black people? Self-interest and power corrupted their

understanding of the Christian gospel. How could powerless blacks endure and resist the brutality of white supremacy in nearly every aspect of their lives and still keep their sanity? I concluded that an immanent presence of a transcendent revelation, confirming for blacks that they were more than what whites said about them, gave them an inner spiritual strength to cope with anything that came their way. I wrote because words were my weapons to resist, to affirm black humanity, and to defend it.

And yet through all this time I avoided dealing directly with the reality of lynching. As a southern black, the subject brought back such painful feelings. But finally I had no choice. The subject chose me. This symbol of white supremacy was like a wild beast that had seized me by the neck, trying to kill me, and I had to fight it before I could fully live. Reading and writing about the lynching nightmare, looking at many images of tortured black bodies, has been my deepest challenge and the most *painful* experience I have had as a theologian. At times it was almost too heavy for me to bear. The more I read about and looked at what whites did to powerless blacks, the angrier I became. Paradoxically, anger soon gave way to a profound feeling of liberation. Being able to write about lynching liberated me from being confined by it. The cross helped me to deal with the brutal legacy of the lynching tree, and the lynching tree helped me to understand the tragic meaning of the cross.

In writing this book, my primary concern is to give voice to black victims, to let them and their families and communities speak to us, exploring the question: how did ordinary blacks, like my mother and father, survive the lynching atrocity and still keep together their families, their communities, and not lose their sanity? How could they live meaningful lives, knowing that they could be lynched for any small violation of what Richard Wright called "the ethics of living Jim Crow"?⁴ I wrestle with questions about black dignity in a world of white supremacy because I believe that the cultural and religious resources in the

black experience could help all Americans cope with the legacy of white supremacy and also deal more effectively with what is called “the war on terror.” If white Americans could look at the terror they inflicted on their own black population—slavery, segregation, and lynching—then they might be able to understand what is coming at them from others. Black people know something about terror because we have been dealing with legal and extralegal white terror for several centuries. Nothing was more terrifying than the lynching tree.

I do not write this book as the last word about the cross and the lynching tree. I write it in order to start a conversation so we can explore the many ways to heal the deep wounds lynching has inflicted upon us. The cross can heal and hurt; it can be empowering and liberating but also enslaving and oppressive. There is no one way in which the cross can be interpreted. I offer my reflections because I believe that 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.