



3-2012

Review of The Cross and the Lynching Tree

Jon Nilson

Loyola University Chicago, jnilson@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/theology_facpubs



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nilson, Jon. "The Cross and the Lynching Tree." *Theological Studies* 73, no. 1 (2012): 219-221.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© Theological Studies, Inc., 2012.

idiom may be found to convince the stronger party in the difference about the truthfulness of the weaker party.

Derrida, a close student of Husserl, opposes Husserl's notion of presence. For Derrida, presence can only appear against the background of nonpresence. S. painstakingly parses for us Derrida's notions of *trace*, *différence*, and *khora* (borrowed from the *Timaeus*). *Khora* is a kind of atemporal anteriority, a womb that receives but also serves as a source for admonition. Again, like Lyotard, Derrida evokes Jewish notions of the unnamable yet honors the claim that we must act and speak. He also evokes a kind of messianism.

In these two dense philosophers, what is a theologian to find? S. treats the debates between Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion on negative theology. He also shows how both thinkers transpose what were originally quasitheological notions in the apophatic mystical tradition or Jewish concepts to ground their ethics. Theirs is an atheological use of their Jewish heritage. In the end, any theologian would surely want to dialogue with philosophers who speak of absolute gift, justice, and forgiveness and honor the particular.

St. Ignatius Parish, San Francisco

JOHN A. COLEMAN, S.J.

THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE. James H. Cone. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011. Pp. xix + 202. \$28.

"Salvation through the cross," says Cone, "is a mystery and can only be apprehended through faith, repentance, and humility" (158). But to apprehend the cross rightly in America, he argues, we must see it as a lynching, a public spectacle of death inflicted by horrible tortures. Without lynching, the crucifixion easily becomes an abstract, unthreatening event of the distant past. But in the lynchings that scar this nation's history, there is only anguished despair unless we see them in light of the crucifixion. How can we learn to see each in light of the other?

C. points out that the founders of the black Christian tradition, the enslaved blacks, came to faith not through argument or learned preaching, but through their imaginative appropriation of the gospel in the depths of suffering. So "one has to have a powerful religious imagination to see redemption in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in tragedy" (157-58).

Readers of *Theological Studies* will recall Christopher Pramuk's stunning appeal to the white Catholic imagination in his "Strange Fruit: Black Suffering/White Revelation" (*TS* 67 [2006] 345-78). Now C. offers this carefully plotted set of insights and images also to awaken his readers' moral imaginations. At its end, one may share in the faith of the victims,

sensing the truth of God in the death of the tortured Jesus and in his icons, burnt black bodies hanging from Southern trees.

C. first focuses on lynching itself, describing the agonies of the thousands of lynching's victims, as well as the terror of every Southern black person vulnerable to the same fate. Why were white religious leaders silent about "Christians" who carried out these atrocities?

C. looks to Reinhold Niebuhr, the most influential Christian theologian of his times. Why did Niebuhr not oppose lynching with passion? His theological pessimism was a factor. Ultimately, however, he accepted the unacceptable because he failed to dialogue with white supremacy's victims. How might U.S. history have been different if Niebuhr had challenged the churches' complacency about lynching? Yet the real aim of C.'s treatment here is to hold up a mirror to today's white theologians: "Do you see yourself in the Niebuhr I have described? If so, what will you do?"

C. then juxtaposes Martin Luther King Jr. to Niebuhr. King was not limited by theological pessimism, but driven by God's desire for humanity, the "Beloved Community." So there are no a priori boundaries to hope and no limits on efforts to cooperate with God in building that community, even if it meant death. Yet King was perhaps not clear enough about the why and how of the value of redemptive suffering. Only when the cross and the lynching tree are seen together does the truth of redemptive suffering become apparent.

But few ministers and theologians, black or white, have perceived, much less taught, this linkage (93). So C. turns to the black poets and artists who saw Christ recrucified in the horrors of lynching. In Countee Cullen, W. E. B. DuBois, H. B. Hayden, Charles Evans Hughes, William Leo Hansberry, and others, C. finds ways to penetrate beneath conscious resistance and analytical minds to unveil Jesus' presence in lynching's victims.

Then C. engages the womanist theologians who critique the value of redemptive suffering. Learning from great black women, like Ida B. Wells, Billie Holiday (in her classic song about lynching, "Strange Fruit"), and Fannie Lou Hamer, he shows how the cross, rightly understood, does not mean passive acceptance of victimhood, but active resistance to evil and victory over death (150-51).

Finally, C. argues, lynching is not a thing of the past. "Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today? The lynching of black America is taking place in the criminal justice system" (163) and draws on Michelle Alexander's cogent indictment of this "new Jim Crow." When lynching past and present is repressed (by both blacks and whites—for different reasons, of course), it distorts our sense of ourselves and falsifies our national identity. To face up to lynching is the price of authentic Christianity in the United States and of the renewal of the nation itself.

Thus C. draws his readers into the forbidding but finally luminous heart of the gospel as black Christians have perceived it, and as white Christians

have largely evaded it. There the cry of "Why, O Lord?" cannot crush trust in God on account of Jesus who accompanies us to the end.

We urgently need a second edition of this book because "what is invisible to white Christians *and their theologians* is inescapable to black people" (159, emphasis added). Today's lynchings are still too invisible to many. A second edition could make them more visible by detailing the mechanisms of poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, and life expectancy in the black community. It would be an even more compelling call to the "faith, repentance, and humility" (158) we need.

Loyola University Chicago

JON NILSON

MARTYRDOM AND IDENTITY: THE SELF ON TRIAL. By Michael P. Jensen. London: Continuum, 2010. Pp. x + 214. \$130.

The question of martyrdom haunts our present age. Few communities in the world today have not been affected in some way by the violent actions of individuals claiming to have sacrificed their lives in the name of religious ideology. Indeed, one could argue that the very term now connotes fear and terror as much as faith and devotion. Moreover, the use of the term to justify the actions of terrorists has provided ample fodder for those who wish to characterize all religious belief in terms of the irrational zealotry exemplified by the suicide bomber. It is against this loaded background that we must view Michael Jensen's effort to answer the question: "What kind of self is the Christian, as it is to be discovered in Christian martyrdom?" (2).

In fact, the title of J.'s text is a bit misleading, for it really explores only Christian martyrdom. However, J. clearly wants to do more than simply distinguish the Christian martyr from other religious martyrs. He wants to argue that martyrdom is a "possibility latent in the Christian identity" (6). In other words, because the fundamental demand of the Christian is to witness to the truth of the risen Christ, there is always the possibility that one might be called on to pay the ultimate price for that witness. Thus, martyrdom is not simply some archaic remnant of the early church to be used as a heuristic device for understanding the challenges of faith. Indeed, J. argues, martyrdom is critical to understanding the very nature of Christian identity.

To make his argument, J. uses the narrative model of identity established by Paul Ricoeur, Alisdair MacIntyre, and others to assert that the self can be understood only in relation to the unfolding of time. "Narrative applies a causal and teleological form to events as we experience them" (9), allowing the individual not only to evaluate the lived life but also to apply some overall meaning to one's existence. In this way, J. is able to connect the story of the individual (and the self-sacrifice of the martyr) to the larger historical drama of salvation outlined by Christianity. The result is a distinct

Copyright of Theological Studies is the property of Theological Studies and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.