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Suffering As Glory In Hans Urs Von Balthasar And James Cone

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Based on the paper delivered during the 2012 Annual Meeting, Flipper and Leamy elaborate the implications of the respective reflections on the crucifixion of Christ and his descent into hell in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar and James H. Cone. They conclude that, together, Balthasar and Cone supply a theological justification for seeing the oppressed and rejected as the privileged media of God's glorious revelation.

Frederick Flemister (1917-1976) captured a synoptic understanding of the cross and lynching in his painting *The Mourners* (ca. 1940).¹ In *The Mourners*, a black man stripped of his clothes lies on the ground, surrounded by people in mourning. The man's head and upper body are supported by a woman in a representation of Michelangelo's Pietà. A tree with a rope dangling from the branch is in the foreground. In the background stand vague silhouettes of riders on horseback, presumably silhouettes of the murderers. A female figure at the center of the painting lifts both arms to the sky, in a posture reflective of mourning or praise. A striking feature of the painting is its lack of partition between the religious subject and the secular. It is unclear whether it is a

¹ Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 146.

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depiction of lynching with religious allusions or a depiction of Christ with allusions to lynching. Moreover, it is indeterminate whether this death is a tragedy or a victory, or both.

The same indeterminacy and lack of partition marks the reflections of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) and James H. Cone (1938-present?) on the death of Christ. Both Balthasar and Cone follow the Gospel of John insofar as they present a paradoxical vision of Christ who is simultaneously abandoned on the cross and glorified by the Father.² Both Balthasar and Cone have embraced the Johannine identification of suffering with glory in Christ and its implications for human beings by envisioning the bodies of the abandoned, rejected, and murdered as the sites of God's glorious revelation.

We argue that Balthasar and Cone supply a needed eschatological optic for the transformation of suffering and the redemption of inescapable evil. First, Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent into hell articulates a vision of Christ's glorification as his total solidarity with human beings who experience the isolation of hell. Second, Cone's recent work *The Cross and the*

² The Gospel of John presents a paradoxical vision of Jesus' identity. Jesus simultaneously shares in the glory of the Father before the foundation of the world, and is abandoned, cursed, and dying on a cross. In him we see the Father's judgment upon the world and God's love for the world—even sinners. The gospel narrative shifts between perspective of glorification and suffering, always pointing ahead to the hour in which the fullness of glory will be revealed, when Jesus will be lifted up and his identity as Son of Man will be clarified. The clarification however, plunges us into a much deeper mystery: It is on the cross that the glory of God is revealed, and "the Way to the Father" opened for humanity. In the Johannine vision, the cross is not a mere gateway to glory. Nor is Jesus' suffering a cosmic payoff to the Father that gets humanity out of trouble. It is the absolute obedient self-abandonment itself that constitutes glory and life. This Johannine theology of the cross presents a strange and challenging optic in which the glory of God is revealed in abandonment, rejection, and suffering. By extension, the human share in this glorious life can be found in suffering abandonment, rejection, and even death.

Lynching Tree (2011), drawing from the religious imagination of the black church, argues that the lynched body existentially participates in the cross of Christ. We argue that Cone and Balthasar's shared ethical and theological insight lends a Christological meaning to the inescapable reality of suffering experienced by human beings and suggests the lynched body as the privileged place for encountering God's glorious revelation.³

II. Christ in Hell: Balthasar's Theology of the Descent

Balthasar first published *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* in 1970 under the German title *Theologie der Drie Tage* [*Theology of the Three Days*] as a theological meditation on the three days that Jesus spent in the grave.⁴ Provocatively, Balthasar argued against a longstanding theological assumption about those three days. It had become conventional to think that the suffering of Christ ended with his death. In this account, Christ victoriously descended to Sheol, the realm of the Old Testament saints, to free them from death. In contrast, Balthasar posited that Christ descended into the experience of hell itself in the form of total abandonment by God. Taking literally the axiom "what is not assumed is not saved," Balthasar argues that Jesus assumed the existential condition of a humanity entirely cut off from relation with God. However, because he assumes this rejection of relation or depersonalization as God's absolute "yes" to relation, Jesus

³ Christopher Pramuk develops a similar eschatological reflection on suffering and revelation. He approaches the topic of suffering from the lens of the communion with the dead, indicating that the "dangerous memory of Black suffering function[s] somehow as a source of White revelation." Christopher Pramuk, "'Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 347. While Pramuk elaborates a process of conversion of whites resulting in revelation, we seek to elaborate how Christ's solidarity with the dead makes the victim of oppression and violence the privileged medium of God's revelation.

⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

opens the rejection, isolation, and abandonment of hell to the possibility of relation, to the glory of God.

How is it possible that God's glory is revealed in Christ's suffering on the cross and descent into hell? Balthasar takes seriously the notion that Jesus is God's Word about himself, the clearest articulation of divine glory. As a result, Jesus' experience—the suffering, death, and descent into hell—expresses this glory just as much as the concepts of divine blessedness and power. In fact, Christ's powerlessness in the grave is the definitive revelation of divine power, glory, and the blessedness of the Triune life. So, how does Balthasar deal with the apparent contradiction between the suffering experienced in powerlessness and death and the glory of God's almighty power and the blessedness of heaven?

We must briefly delve into Balthasar's Trinitarian theology to show how Balthasar holds these concepts together. Put simply, the glory of heaven consists in the eternal self-giving of the Divine persons in relation. Divine personhood, in a sense, is constituted by the eternal *kenosis* (self-emptying) that takes place between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This claim avoids a false distinction between God's essence and the persons of the Trinity.⁵ God's essence *is* the divine relations, that is, what the divine persons do. The scriptures give us the key.

⁵ We cannot become trapped in a false distinction between God's essence and the Divine Persons, where essence seems to be an impersonal set of properties such as immutability and omnipotence rather than relation. Within this paradigm the glory of the Divine essence would in fact preclude the possibility of god-abandonedness constituting the Divine Persons. Instead, Balthasar claims that the divine essence is precisely the relation between the persons. Christ's death on the cross and descent into hell is not just an economic aberration in the divine life, but rather a window into the eternal relation between the divine persons that is the life of God.

Glory and Kenosis

The Philippians Christ Hymn states that the Son emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Phil. 2:7). This self-emptying—*kenosis*—in becoming human is the revelation of an eternal Triune *kenosis*.⁶ Self-emptying love *is* who God is eternally. Christ's emptying of himself on the cross is thus the revelation of the eternal glory, a revelation expressed fully in the cross and the descent to hell. To put it bluntly, Balthasar is saying that the suffering, god-abandoned man who dies on a tree reveals the eternal Triune life of God. If this is true, then our previous concepts of the life, freedom, and power of God must be nailed to the cross. Our understanding of the essence of God or divine properties like immutability and omnipotence must be nailed to the cross. Now, the cross is the only place to find God.

A difficult paradox arises from Balthasar's Trinitarian theology. The life of God entails such an absolute self-offering as to be a kind of death. God's freedom entails loving obedience. God's power is the capacity to say "thy will, not mine" rather than "my will, not thine." The very same surrender of Christ to death is the power that conquers sin and death. As a result, the cross reveals God's glory; God's glory shines in the broken body given to us. The cross also reveals humanity's path to sharing in the glory of God. Balthasar's reflection on the cross is not novel. It draws from the

⁶ It is important to note here that Balthasar's Trinitarian theology does not imply that the creaturely suffering that Christ undergoes somehow constitutes divine suffering or completes the divine *kenosis*. Rather Christ's suffering and descent into hell reveal an eternal immanent Triune reality. The eternal relation of blessedness that constitutes the Divine persons is a dynamic relation of self-emptying love. Each Person is an act of self-offering to the others. This concept—Divine personhood as an eternal relation of kenotic love—allows Balthasar to say that the immutable glory of God is revealed in the cry of a man who does not come down from the cross, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt. 27:46).

Gospel of John in which Jesus announces both the glorification of the Son (being “lifted up”) and the suffering of the Messiah. John culminates in a scandalous conclusion: through the lens of God’s love, glory and suffering are one and the same.

Balthasar’s theological reflection moves from Holy Friday to Holy Saturday, from a meditation on the cross to a meditation on the descent to the grave. Balthasar’s understanding of Christ’s descent is shaped by two interrelated reflections: first, hell is, in essence, the loss of communion taken to its logical conclusion; second, the solidarity of Christ with humanity requires that he experiences this loss of communion.

Christ in Hell

Martin Luther, following Augustine, characterizes the sinful soul as *incurvatus in se*, curved in on itself.⁷ We might say a self entirely consumed by self-absorption. For Balthasar, sin makes one “curved upon oneself” precisely by cutting off the relationships that make one a “person.” Hell, in effect, is the sacrament of sin. It is the total absence of communion made real through death, impossible to escape. A cinematic version of this idea was presented in *What Dreams May Come* (1998), in which the character played by Robin Williams searches for his wife in the afterlife. In mourning for her husband, she commits suicide. Her experience of hell is the endless cycle of self-blame and suicide. There is nothing but the self to blame and nothing but the self to experience.

What Dreams May Come captures something of Balthasar’s understanding of hell. According to Balthasar, hell or Sheol is not a mere external punishment for doing evil, as portrayed by

⁷ Matt Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther, and Barth on ‘Homo Incurvatus in Se’* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

imaginative depictions of the fires of hell or demons, but instead is the inner experience and total orientation of the person. Hell is not a juridical result, but rather the natural consequence of evil. The effect bears the virtual impression of the cause, just as the brand is the virtual impression of the hot iron. Evil is the sacrament of hell, for it both signifies and brings about the mystery of iniquity in the very heart of the person. Hell is absolute self-possession that results in the absence of the possibility of relationship with the other, or any other. It is the erasure of the “likeness to God,” the openness to relation and the possibility of love. In Balthasar’s striking account, hell becomes the common experience of the sinner as well as those sinned against. The perpetrator of evil and the victim are both caught in evil’s inescapable logic by which the possibility of communion with the other is dissolved.⁸ The possibility of communion and, therefore, personhood, is eroded in this state.

Balthasar contends that the reality of the cross assumes that Christ experiences not just the punishment for sin but the assumption of sin itself. He explains,

“The necessity whereby Christ had to go down to Hades lies not in some insufficiency of the suffering endured on the Cross but in the fact that Christ has assumed all the *defectus* [weaknesses] of sinners. God is solidary with us not only in what is symptomatic of sin, the punishment for sin, but also in co-experiencing sin, in the *peirasmos*

⁸ This is the point made by Jean-Luc Marion in his essay “Evil in Person.” The experience of evil is unavoidable and drives the subject from communion, toward casting blame, proclaiming their innocence. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* 24 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 1–30.

[affliction] of the very essence of that negation—though without 'committing' (Heb. 4,15) sin himself."⁹

In other words, the solidarity that Jesus expresses in the cross must be reflected in the loss of communion and the solitude of this loss. Under normal circumstances we experience solidarity as sharing with someone, being with someone, or sharing their circumstances. In this case, humanity in Sheol is alone, deprived of communion with all others. As a result, Christ's solidarity with humanity is a co-experience of being "self-enclosed," a solidarity that "excludes a communication on his part as subject."¹⁰

According to Balthasar, Christ's experience of hell is both unique and identical to that of humanity. The divine Son is personally the locus of communion between God and human beings. He experiences the isolation of each resident of hell. Humanity's rejection of God and of others registers directly in his person and he experiences every rejection and experience of rejection as his own. The Son's *human* experience of hell is, therefore, existentially identical to the experience of those who experience complete rejection. It is their experience assumed, and compounded. Yet Balthasar insists that Christ also experiences hell uniquely. As the locus of communion between God and human beings, only he can experience hell in its fullness, as the total human refusal of communion.¹¹ *Within* himself, he contemplates hell-in-itself, experiencing himself as the absence of communion.

⁹ Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 137.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ In Balthasar's understanding, humanity's rejection of God creates a negative distance between creature and Creator. Christ experiences sin as a substantial reality generated by human freedom, or as the "effigies" of human actions gone wrong. For Balthasar human freedom is not nothing. It is real and has real consequences. Significantly, these consequences can only be "measured" by God

The Solidarity of Christ with Humanity in Hell

Balthasar has developed a very dark Christology indeed. To stop here would be to despair at death without resurrection. Hope emerges, however, through the solidarity of Christ with humanity in hell. On the cross, Christ is solidary with those who suffer. In hell, he becomes solidary with a humanity without possibility of communion. By assuming the existential condition of humanity, Christ assumes what is contrary to God. Balthasar explains that Christ's obedience—the obedience which constitutes his identity as the Son— “takes the existential measure of everything that is sheerly contrary to God, of the entire object of the divine eschatological judgment, which here is grasped in that event in which it is ‘cast down.’”¹²

If you recall, Balthasar's Trinitarian theology indicates that persons of the Trinity are eternal acts of loving relation. In the descent to hell, the Son obediently enters into the absence of communion, and therefore experiences his self-negation. Paradoxically however, the Son's sharing in the creaturely NO manifests the very character of God's self-giving love. He inhabits our rejection of relation by being an absolute YES to relation. Thus, Christ's obedience to the Father “englobes” human isolation within the Triune relation.¹³ Christ redeems humanity, *not by dying in our place*, but by *opening death to eternal life*, and earthly life to a “death to self.” With his descent into finite suffering and death Christ transforms these realities into participations in the eternal

himself. Christ encompasses these depths of human sin, such that Hell is a function of the Christ event. *Ibid.*, 172.

¹² Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 174. The reality of human rejection which is measured and judged in Christ is Hell. It is his obedient descent into the consequences of human freedom which makes Hell a reality for humanity, a reality which we only experience in and with Christ. *Ibid.*, 178.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 82.

act of self-donation that is the life of God. Through Christ's solidarity, humanity is able to "die with Christ" into the activity of self-offering that *is* eternal life.

In summary, Balthasar's image for the Christ's descent to the dead is not the traditional victorious entrance into Sheol. The descent into hell is conclusion of a process by which the Son is immersed in the human experience of God-abandonment and absence of communion. The solidarity of God with humanity occurs precisely in the moment when the Son is most dehumanized, that is, by experiencing the loss of communion with all others. Yet Balthasar imagines that the site of death is transformed into life. Paradoxically, Christ's experience of hell is a manifestation of the Son's eternal act of giving himself to the Father. Thus, the Son's total identification and experience of depersonalized humanity is simultaneously a revelation of the eternal glory of the Divine Persons. By sharing in the absence of communion, Christ brings about communion.

The Site of Glory

For Balthasar, Christ's experience in hell is *existentially* identical to that of humanity, and that Christ's experience is transformed into the revelation of God's love. The solidarity of Christ secures the common existential situation between God and human beings. By implication, the experience of hell (or hell on earth) is already joined to the revelation of God's love. The darkest places of God-abandonment can be transformed into theophanies of God's glory. As a result, Balthasar provides the Christological and Trinitarian grounds for *identifying* the experience of the suffering, the dehumanized, and the god-abandoned with the glory of God.¹⁴

¹⁴ We have not elucidated precisely what kind of *identification* can be made between human suffering and divine glory. Nor have we elaborated the

Unfortunately, Balthasar did not develop the concrete implications of his understanding of solidarity of Christ with humanity or connect his reflection on Holy Saturday with any concrete circumstance. Yet, Balthasar's reflections on the descent into hell in *Mysterium Paschale* suggest that his theological aesthetics and Christology may fruitfully be appropriated and corrected for contextual theologies, especially those that consider the situation of the oppressed. A theological optic similar to Balthasar's is found within James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which narrates the transformation of vicious oppression into the privileged site of God's glorious revelation.

II. Cone on the Crucified and the Lynched

While Balthasar elaborates the Trinitarian dimensions of suffering as glory, James Cone elaborates the anthropological dimensions of this optic. Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, inspired by the experience of the black church, draws the close parallel between the image of Christ on the cross and the victim of mob violence.¹⁵ Cone's conclusions do not rest with the obvious analogies between the cross and lynching. Meditating on the salvific significance of the cross, he makes the provocative suggestion that the bodies of the lynched are the privileged medium of God's glory.

Cone did not easily arrive at this conclusion. As described in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, he was reticent to approach the subject of lynching head on. As a terrible symbol of white

connection in Balthasar's work between divine "glory," the glory of the Cross, and the human participation in this glory. While beyond the scope of this article, we recognize that these themes in Balthasar's theology are significant for suggesting how human suffering can be, in some sense, a medium of divine revelation.

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

supremacy, it triggered painful emotions.¹⁶ Moreover, the correlation between the cross—which represents salvation—and the lynching tree, ran against the grain of his previous Christology. His previous interpretation of Jesus emphasized the liberation of the poor and oppressed.¹⁷ The image of salvation as a liberation from racism and oppression is not easily reconciled with an image of salvation through the suffering on the cross. Cone was suspicious of those atonement theologies that envisioned the cross as the juridical requirement of sin and encouraged those who were suffering follow the example of Jesus and to passively accept their condition.¹⁸

The spirituals and black preaching provided avenue for Cone to reassess the meaning of the cross in light of the lynching tree. Although the “cross too often functions to make the oppressed accept their lot as God’s will, this is not always the case. Notable exceptions include the slave spirituals which are full of references to the cross and suffering of Jesus.”¹⁹ The recovery of the theological imagination of the black church allowed Cone to reevaluate the meaning of the cross. This theological imagination claims the cross of Christ as its own, “[relating] the message of the cross to [its] own social reality.”²⁰ Cone argues that, for the black church, the salvific significance of the cross of Christ is glimpsed through the experience of lynching and that the cross provides the means to theologically interpret lynching.

¹⁶ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black Religion (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). Citations are to the Orbis edition.

¹⁸ After reading womanist criticisms of atonement Christology, Cone states, “It has been difficult for me to write and speak about the salvific significance of Jesus’ cross.” Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, xvi.

¹⁹ Ibid., xvii.

²⁰ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.

The question arises as to why the theological imagination that links lynching and the cross is significant. “Why bring that up? ... isn’t that best forgot?”²¹ Lynching is certainly an atrocity, but the lynch mobs are something of the past, right? Cone responds on several levels to this question. First, he recognizes that the specter of lynching continues to affect the imagination of black Americans. He states, “The trauma of lynching lives on in the blood and the bones of black people.”²² It is painful to recall the lynching of the past precisely because they impinge upon the meaning of the present: the ever-present possibility of grave injustice and barely-imaginable violence without recourse. Black Americans keenly recognize that, while great progress has been made in the last one hundred years of American history, there remains a violent racial tension bubbling just below the surface.²³ Second, whether or not one feels insulated from violence, lynching is branded onto black identity like the Shoah is branded onto Jewish identity. In light of these horrors, how is it possible to believe in a loving God who takes care of his people? “How can one believe that God loves black people in a world defined by 400 years of white supremacy?”²⁴ The experience of black people in the Americas demands a theological explanation of the experience of evil, a theodicy in some form. Third, Cone suggests that facing the reality of lynching with a theological lens is critical to doing God’s will, that is, to overcome racism and mutual suspicion.

²¹ James H. Cone, “Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree” (presentation, Ingersoll Lecture, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, October 19, 2006), <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/multimedia/video/strange-fruit-the-cross-and-the-lynching-tree>.

²² Ibid.

²³ See Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 4–9.

²⁴ Cone, “Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree.” Cone states that he has maintained a theological interest in the problem of evil since childhood. His first essay in college was entitled “Why Do People Suffer?” Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 153.

The Theological Syn-Optic

Leon F. Litwack mentions that lynching was an extrajudicial punishment used most frequently against whites (not blacks) during the nineteenth century in the West and Mid-West. Beginning in the 1890s it became a ritualized form of terrorism against black populations. "What was strikingly new and different in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the sadism and exhibitionism that characterized white violence...To kill the victim was not enough: the execution became public theater, a participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle prolonged as much as possible (once for seven hours) for the benefit of the crowd."²⁵ Lynching was thoroughly religious. The lynched was a "scapegoat," as René Girard calls it, the sacrificial victim rejected and killed by society in order to keep violence outside society.²⁶ While lynching was triggered by an accusation of wrongdoing by the victim, it was a form of public expiation of sin.

Given the religious nature of lynching in America, it is not entirely surprising that blacks interpreted lynching religiously. But given the experience of being on the receiving end of domestic terrorism, it is remarkable that "black people embraced the Christian cross that whites used to murder them."²⁷ As Cone shows, it is significant that the black church spontaneously interpreted lynching in terms of the suffering of Christ. Jesus was tortured and killed outside the city in a public spectacle. His victimhood is linked to the temple sacrifice of the Jewish high priest in the book of Hebrews. By joining the image of lynching to the image of the

²⁵ Leon F. Litwack, "Hellhounds," in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen (San: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000), 13.

²⁶ On the scapegoating mechanism and racism, see Susan Peppers-Bates, "The Satanic Nature of Racist 'Christianity,'" *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 6 (2012): 45-71.

²⁷ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 159.

cross, the black church responded to the narrative of the lynchers of black barbarity and criminality. The lynched, like Christ, was the innocent victim of a barbarous crowd. Likewise, the image of the cross responded to the expiatory role of lynching. The expiatory value of the blood of Christ provided a counter-narrative for the tortured flesh of the lynched. The cross of Christ reinscribed the religious meaning of lynching within a Christian framework and, as a result, highlighted the innocence of the victim and the closeness of the victim to Christ. For Cone, the historical absence of any significant theological reflection on lynching by white theologians and the failure of the white church to link these two realities is blindness, a failure to see correctly.

Cone suggests that there is more than an external analogy between the cross and the lynching tree. Despite the historical distance between the two, they are linked, not only in the religious imagination, but in reality.²⁸ The black spiritual, “Were You There” illustrates the realism with which the crucifixion of Christ is experienced and made present.

‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’... Now the ‘were you there’ was a rhetorical question. Black people were there. Through the experience of being lynched by white mobs, blacks transcended their time and place and found themselves existentially and symbolically at the foot of Jesus’s cross, experiencing his fate.²⁹

The symbolic linkage between the two is no mere construction. It is based, for Cone, on the recognition of an existential connection

²⁸ Cone writes, “the Cross of Jesus and the lynching tree of black victims are not literally the same—historically or theologically. Yet these two symbols or images are closely linked to Jesus’ spiritual meaning for black and white life together.” *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁹ Cone, “Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree.”

between Christ on the cross and the experiences of the tortured. Cone's express conviction—God was "present at every lynching in the United States"—is not an abstract reference to God's omnipresence.³⁰ Rather, it is the assertion that, properly seen, the cross and the lynching tree exist within *the same existential frame*.

Yet the critical question remains: in what sense are these two events, separated by time and space, conjoined in some manner ontologically? Cone's previous theological work, as J. Kameron Carter suggests, sought to overcome the "hiatus between 'who Jesus *was*' in the world of the scriptural witness and 'who Jesus *is*' now *pro nobis* [for us]... What is continuous between the Jesus of Scripture who *was* manifest in the history—or perhaps better, the histories—that Scripture records, and the contemporary Jesus, who *is* manifest in history's now?"³¹ In other words, what is continuous between Christ's historical body and the ecclesial body of Christ today? If the syn-optic intuition of the black church is true, along with its ethical implications, the interior relationship between the two histories is of utmost importance for the justification of this intuition.

According to Carter, in his theological career, Cone moved from a methodological dependence on Karl Barth's *analogia fidei* [analogy of faith] toward the *analogia existentia* [analogy of existence] of Paul Tillich. Barth's *analogia fidei* was a resistance against identifying the Gospel with our limited thinking about God, against identifying God's revelation through Christ with creaturely truth or untruth. For Cone, the *analogia fidei* was a deconstructive instrument for the "unmasking" of racist ideologies. However, it was "difficult to articulate in Barthian terms...how creaturely truth participates in God's truth." The *analogia fidei* did not allow for

³⁰ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.

³¹ J. Kameron Carter, *Race : A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 171.

understanding how the experience of the black church is a corrective to racist ideologies and how the existential situation of blacks can be revelatory. Cone's methodology shifted toward Paul Tillich's *analogia existentia*, that is, an analogy of existential situation that allows one to understand the humanity of Christ through experience of human beings. For Tillich, God is being-itself, the ground of being; all existing things participate in this ground. The *analogia entis* [analogy of being] suggests for Tillich that our minds do, in some way, participate in the intelligibility of God. As a result, human experience is a finite reflection of its ground, suggesting an inner relationship between human experience and the divine truth. In other words, Cone's shift in methodology secured space for creaturely truth to reflect the divine truth, for human experience to reflect divine revelation. Cone's methodological shift is significant for seeing how the experience of black people and of the black church can make present the divine revelation manifest in Christ.³²

Significantly, Cone suggests that there are soteriological and aesthetic connections between the cross and the lynching tree. Going beyond the consideration that human experience can reflect the divine truth, Cone suggests that the rejected, tortured, and lynched are the loci for seeing the form of Christ. Recognizing this theological reality requires "another type of imagination...the imagination to relate the message of the cross to one's own social reality, to see that 'They are crucifying again the Son of God' (Heb. 6:6)."³³

³² A tension remains, however, between Barth and Tillich, manifest in Cone's statement: "The Gospel is transcendent and immanent, it is here and not here..." Cone, "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree."

³³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.

God transformed the lynched black bodies into the re-crucified body of Christ. *Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.* The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.³⁴

Although Cone states that we need a kind of *imagination* to see lynching in the same soteriological frame as the cross, this imagination does not suggest a lack of realism. This religious imagination is seeing correctly by recognizing the truth of Christ's real presence in and "God's loving solidarity" with broken black flesh.

To see aright is to recognize the paradoxical otherness of the crucified God *in* those subjected to torture and rejection. Cone elaborates:

The Gospel is the Word of the Cross, a lynched Word...a tortured Word, a Black Word... The Cross and the Gospel cannot be separated. The cross stands at the center of the Gospel...The Gospel is a tortured word...the cross stands at the center of the Gospel...the heart of Christian mystery. Jesus died like lynched black victim...on the tree of shame.³⁵

According to Cone, the Gospel overturns the values of this world. It is "suffering love" that stands at the heart of the Gospel. Because of Christ's historical sacrifice, complete rejection and total suffering are now essential to the revelation of the tortured Word. The bodies of the crucified constitute the means by which we encounter the Word.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Cone, "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree."

The soteriological dimension of the cross and the lynching tree is closely related to the aesthetic dimension. In what sense can the unspeakable experience of the lynched be redeemed? Salvation, for Cone, is not merely a pleasant afterlife that makes up for the hell of this life. History must be saved from the inside. Cone's assertion of an interior, soteriological connection between the cross and the lynching tree responds to the scandal of evil. The cross of Jesus, he explains, *redeems* the lynching tree, redeeming the very rejection and suffering of the black body:

The cross and the lynching tree need each other... The cross can redeem the lynching tree, and thereby bestow on lynched black bodies an eschatological meaning for their ultimate existence. The cross can also redeem white lynchers and their descendants. But not without a profound cost, not without a revelation of the wrath and the justice of God which executes divine judgment with the demand for repentance and reparations as a presupposition of divine mercy and forgiveness.³⁶

This quotation reflects the realism with which two events are united somehow in fact and not only in the religious imagination. According to Cone, black spiritual imagination recognized the truth of the matter through a near-literal identification between or circumincession of the two.

In summary, the lynched are more than external analogies of the cross of Christ; they constitute icons of God's revelation of the Gospel to humanity, the ongoing communication of God's Word.³⁷ The failure to see Christ in those suffering is a failure to see Christ.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cone extends his interpretation of lynching to those who suffer injustice through incarceration in American prisons, the death penalty, and torture as enemy combatants. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 164.

Scandalously, for Cone, the lynched dead body is the locus of God's redemption and the site of God's glorious revelation. It is the place where we can see (with our eyes healed by God's grace) the truth of who God is. Though Cone himself does not fully justify the realism with which he understands the soteriological and aesthetic identification of these realities, he repeatedly mentions God's entrance into the human condition, God's *solidarity*, as the ground of this identification.

An Uneasy Tension

As mentioned above, Cone is uncomfortable with atonement Christologies that envision Christ's acceptance of the cross as a model for the oppressed to passively accept their suffering. Nevertheless, Cone's understanding of the cross and lynching tree and Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday provoke the question: If human sufferers can be the media of divine glory, should we draw the conclusion that God wills suffering or oppression as part of the divine plan or as essential to the revelation of God's glory? If so, the result would be an unacceptable ethical imperative for the oppressed to passively accept their lot rather than to fight against oppression. Without attempting to resolve this delicate theological issue, we suggest a direction for approaching the problem by distinguishing between the kind of suffering entailed in communion with others and the kind of suffering resulting from the absence of communion.

Communion with God and human beings is God's will for us. Communion entails *kenosis*, giving or emptying oneself. However, communion should not be described as exclusively passive acceptance of violence or oppression. The authentic gift of self requires personal integrity rather than the dissolution of the self. It often requires active resistance in the efforts to change

relationships and social conditions. The self-giving that establishes communion should be characterized primarily as something positive and essential to friendship, pleasure, and love. At the same time, in a fallen world, the gift of self is also a self-emptying that may be experienced as suffering. One must cease to be self-centered in order to enjoy friendship. The conversion from being self-centered to other-centered is a form of asceticism and may entail suffering. The old self must die—willingly and lovingly—in order to become the new self in Christ.

There is another kind of suffering that derives, not from communion, but from its absence. In loneliness, oppression, and violence, the person experiences the absence of communion. The absence of communion is a form self-enclosure that causes suffering. The ultimate suffering derives from lack of the ultimate good, communion with God. In itself, there is nothing salvific about this kind of suffering, for it is the closure of the self to every “other.” It is a hell closed off to the presence of God. However, as Balthasar indicates, hell itself can be redeemed by the descent of Christ, transforming the place of suffering from death into life.

The intention of this article is not to propose the passive acceptance of evil as an ethical norm. Instead, we hope to indicate that the experience of horrific evil—itself not willed by God—can be transformed into the place of God’s glory. Two truths are held in an uneasy tension. First, oppression and suffering are not willed by God, even as a means to a greater good. Second, those who are oppressed and experience suffering are solidary in Christ’s redeeming action.

IV. Conclusion: God Revealed

There are considerable differences between the meditation on lynching by James Cone and the meditation on hell in Hans Urs von

Balthasar. While Balthasar's account of the descent only concerns the dead in hell, Cone's account of lynching concerns the hell experienced by the lynched and the effects caused by lynching on the living. Whereas Balthasar locates the fruition of Christ's solidarity (*kenosis*) in the descent to Sheol, Cone looks to the suffering on the Cross. The suffering endured in the Second World War and the Shoah is conspicuously missing from Balthasar's account of hell. Cone, on the other hand, seeks to apply a theological lens directly to the phenomena of lynching in the United States. Where Balthasar leaves undeveloped the implications of his meditations on the solidarity of Christ, Cone's work suggests a lens for recognizing God's glorious revelation in the midst of disaster. While Cone asserts a soteriological connection between the cross and the lynching tree, Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday supplies a needed theological aesthetic.

Although they approach Christology from different directions, both Balthasar and Cone elaborate a theology in which the very site of suffering and rejection becomes the transparent medium of God's revelation. Without compromising the historical distance between the cross and the lynching tree, or the difference between divine and human sufferers, Cone and Balthasar indicate that Christ shares in the identical experience of those cut off from communion and abandoned. Flemister's *The Mourners* presents a lynching within the same frame as the Pietà and suggests, in the pose of the observers, an indeterminacy between mourning and praise. Similarly, Cone and Balthasar supply a theological lens for recognizing God's glory in those who suffer. As a result, the lynched, dead body is not merely analogous to the cross. It is a theophany that bears us into the very mystery of God's love. In the broken bodies of the rejected that the veil is torn, our eyes are opened, and we can say "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54).

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