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“A powerful and painful song of hope in our dance with mortality.”—Cornel West

Influential Black Theologian James H. Cone, Founder of Black Liberation Theology, Explores the Connection Between *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

The cross that Jesus Christ died upon in Jerusalem and the lynching trees from which thousands of black people were hung in America are the two most emotionally charged symbols in the history of the African American community. Yet few people, apart from black poets, novelists, and artists have explored the symbolic connections. American theological discourse has been conspicuously silent on the matter, says eminent theologian James H. Cone. Now, in his new book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, \$28.00, September 2011), Dr. Cone shows how these images are intertwined in the history and souls of black Americans.

Known as the founder of black liberation theology, Dr. Cone’s work has focused on how to reconcile the gospel message of liberation with the reality of black oppression. Yet he too avoided dealing with the reality of lynching until now. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is the continuation and culmination of his more than four decades of work. It was a particularly personal, and harrowing, experience, he says.

“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,” he says. “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.”

Spanning social history, theology, and cultural studies, Dr. Cone:

- illuminates the central place of Jesus’ death on the cross in the black church;
- looks at the failure of even the most “progressive” of America’s white theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr, to connect the cross with “its most vivid reenactment”;
- tells of growing up in the South and the specter of the lynching tree during his youth;
- explores the power of the blues to affirm black humanity;
- recounts the passion and death of Emmet Till;
- shares Martin Luther King, Jr.’s struggle to “redeem the soul of America”;
- invokes the spirits of Billie Holliday, Langston Hughes, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ida B. Wells;
- calls forth the witness of black artists, writers, preachers, and fighters for justice.

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Most powerfully, he remembers the victims, especially the 5,000 who perished during the lynching period. Through their witness he contemplates the greatest challenge of Christian theology—to explain how life can be made meaningful in the face of death and injustice.

While American history and theology seem to prefer to keep quiet about the horror of the lynching era, the lynchings themselves were public spectacles—as were crucifixions in the Roman Empire. Thousands would turn out to jeer at and photograph the torture and murder of a black person.

“Until we 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,” Dr. Cone writes.

“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.”

James H. Cone, Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, is widely regarded as one of the most influential theologians in America. His books include *A Black Theology of Liberation*, *The Spirituals & the Blues*, *God of the Oppressed*, and *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (all from Orbis).

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The Cross and the Lynching Tree

by James H. Cone

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