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Review of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

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BREAKING BARRIER

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What better way to introduce our readers to more black Catholic writers than to ask a selection of black Catholic intellectuals to tell us about their favorite books by their fellow writers? We are happy to present this rich cross section of men and women and a mix of history, biography, liturgy, music and fiction that presents a broader picture of creativity and the Catholic Church in the United States.

- *Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.*

THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE

By James H. Cone

James H. Cone, the foremost advocate of a U.S. black liberation theology, is the author of nine books. The most recent is a meditation on one of the most horrifying phenomena in the troubled history of U.S. race relations: lynching—the brutally savage, extrajudicial, sadistic torture and killing of African-Americans, mostly men. Describing it with uncharacteristic understatement as “a shameful and painful way to die,” Cone details how these executions—which included shootings, hangings and burnings, often accompanied by excruciating dismemberment—were public spectacles and widely advertised events that occurred with the “widespread knowledge” of government officials and the “tacit approval” of white churches. Cone notes that these vicious events were intended to bolster white social dominance and to silence any challenge to white rule. Thus our author describes lynching as “a ritual celebration of white supremacy” and the ultimate expression of U.S. callousness concerning the lives of African-Americans and other persons of color.

Cone probes lynching’s two-fold theological significance. First, he details how lynching was both sanctioned by white Christianity and ignored by its leading theologians. Lynching was the tragic consequence of a faith-based worldview that considered white supremacy a “divine right” to be protected by any means necessary.

Second, Cone sees in lynching an “analogy” with the cross of Jesus. He believes that the cross and the lynching tree need each other. The cross needs the lynching tree “to remind Americans of the reality of suffering—to keep the cross from being a symbol of abstract, sentimental piety.” But without the cross, the lynching tree “becomes simply an

abomination,” devoid of hope. The cross, then, enables Christians to stand in solidarity with the victims of unjust suffering who endure contemporary social crucifixions.

Cone unearths the little acknowledged shadow of brutal terrorism that haunts the racial divisions that still plague us. He shows, with stark clarity, how lynching’s logic continues to sustain public indifference toward persons of color, especially those who are poor. And yet he also reveals how authentic faith leads to genuine cross-racial solidarity. This book is a worthy addition to Cone’s lifelong project of relentless truth-telling with matchless courage.

Bryan N. Massingale is professor of theological ethics at Marquette University and the author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*.