

AMERICA'S 'ANGRIEST' THEOLOGIAN FACES THE LYNCHING TREE

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(CNN) - When he was boy growing up in rural Arkansas, James Cone would often stand at his window at night, looking for a sign that his father was still alive. Cone had reason to worry. He lived in a small, segregated town in the age of Jim Crow. And his father, Charlie Cone, was a marked man.

Charlie Cone wouldn't answer to any white man who called him "boy." He only worked for himself, he told his sons, because a black man couldn't work for a white man and keep his manhood at the same time. Once, when he was warned that a lynch mob was coming to run him out of his home, he grabbed a shotgun and waited, saying, "Let them come, because some of them will die with me."

James Cone knew the risks his father took. So when his father didn't come home at his usual time in the evenings, he'd stand sentry, looking for the lights from his father's pickup truck. "I had heard too much about white people killing black people," Cone recalled.

"When my father would finally make it home safely, I would run and jump into his arms, happy as I could be."

Cone left his hometown of Bearden, Arkansas, and became one of the world's most influential theologians. But the memories of his father and lynch mobs never left him. Those memories shaped his controversial theology, and they saturate his recent memoir, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree."

Cone, who once called himself



A crowd gathers in Marion, Indiana, in 1930 to witness a lynching. This photograph inspired the poem and song "Strange Fruit."

“the angriest theologian in America,” is still angry. His book is not just a memoir of growing up in the Jim Crow era; it’s a blistering takedown of white churches, and one of America’s greatest theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr - a colossal figure often cited by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Today, Niebuhr’s importance is acknowledged by both liberal and conservative Christian leaders. President Obama once called him one of his favorite philosophers. Niebuhr, the author of classics such as “The Irony of American History,” died in 1971 after a lifetime of political activism. Cone, however, said neither Niebuhr nor any other famous white pastor at the time spoke out against the most brutal manifestation of white racism in the 20th century America: lynching.

Between 1880 and 1940, Cone says, an estimated 5,000 black men and women were lynched. Their murders were often treated as festive affairs. Women and children cut off the ears of lynching victims as souvenirs. People mailed postcards of lynchings. One postcard of a charred lynching victim read, “This is the barbeque we had last night.”

But Niebuhr said nothing about lynching, little about segregation, and once turned down King’s request to sign a petition calling on the president to protect black children integrating Southern schools, Cone said. Niebuhr’s decision not to speak out against lynching encouraged other white theologians and ministers to follow suit, Cone said, because Niebuhr was considered the nation’s greatest theologian.

“White theologians didn’t say anything about lynching,” Cone said from his office at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he teaches a course on Niebuhr. “I tried to find a white theologian who addressed it in a sustained way. No one did it.”

Cone has spent much of his career condemning the white church for saying little about slavery or racial justice. Yet his pugnacious reputation doesn’t jibe with his appearance. He is a slight man with a boyish face, cinnamon complexion and dimples. He has a high-pitched voice that drips with the Southern inflections of his native Arkansas.

Cone blended the racial pride of the black power movement with an emphasis on social justice that had been a part of the black church since enslaved Africans first read the Bible. Jesus’ primary message, he said, wasn’t about getting people to heaven, but liberating people here and now from oppression - racial, economic and spiritual. Cone said he was tired of white theologians writing about an otherworldly theology while cities burned and blacks were murdered by racists. “I felt like I was the angriest black theologian in America,” he once wrote in his book “Risks of Faith.” “I had to speak out.”

The Rev. James Ellis III, an author who has been both critical and supportive of Cone, says before Cone, theology was interpreted through a white male perspective. Cone has inspired not only blacks but also women and other racial minorities to enter seminaries and the pulpit, he says. “Whether you agree with Cone or not, he’s definitely someone you need to deal with,” said Ellis,

Cone said his passion for justice comes from growing up in the black church. In his recent memoir, he describes how blacks relied on music and faith to deal with the cruelty of segregation. Church comforted Cone, but it also made him ask questions. “My thing was, if the white churches are Christian, how come they segregate us? And if God is God, why is He letting us suffer?” The cross, he said, helped him find some answers. He said many white Christians “spiritualize” the cross, seeing it as a penalty Jesus had to pay for mankind’s sins.

But black Christians, starting with the slaves who took up the Bible, also viewed the cross as a way to cope with suffering. Blacks looking at the images of lynching victims took heart from Jesus’ suffering on the cross and his resurrection, Cone said.