

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS:

A COMPARISON OF MOLTSMANN AND CONE'S VIEW OF THE CROSS AS AN
ECCLESIOLOGICAL SYMBOL OF HOPE

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ABSTRACT

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This work addresses a theology of the cross by comparing the work of Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone in which the cross, despite its association with violence, can be the ultimate symbol of hope for ecclesiology. For Moltmann, the ecclesiological identity hinges on what Christian theology has to say about the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, and its relation to the human suffering. Moltmann moves beyond the anthropological question of “what the death of Christ means for us,” to a more theological one of “what does the cross mean for God,” and its relation to the human suffering. Cone’s theology of the cross is informed by his socio-historical comparison of the cross and the lynching tree. These two symbols of death, affecting Christians’ ability to live a more faithful witness, are separated by nearly two thousand years. One is a universal symbol of Christian faith, while the other is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. He juxtaposes the cross and the lynching tree as a theological conundrum requiring us to compare and contrast the crucifixion of Jesus with the Black people’s lynching as the authenticity of Christian gospel if the church and society are to overcome the racial divide. Despite their differences in analysis, both Moltmann and Cone conclude that the cross can be a symbol of hope for ecclesiology. Thus, for

contemporary Christians, the cross can become a symbol not only of sacrificial love but also of overcoming hatred.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It began as a Hollywood theatrics, one man's imagination gone wild, leading to one of the breath-taking, profound apocalyptic enactments of the 21st century. Soon after, the thought provoking tale of the historical past, caught the attention of the movie producers, biblical scholars, minister, priests and faith communities. The 'Old rugged Cross' evolved in a different dimension in the hands of cinematography experts in 2004 when Jim Carviesel took the place of the Jewish Jesus carrying the formidable, heavy wooden cross.-

The scenario began to depict the historical narrative documented by Josephus, a Jewish historian, starting from the garden of Gethsemane to the hill of Calvary. Betrayal is followed by arrest and beatings (stripes) which left the body of Jesus torn and bloody with the epic of the final scene at Golgotha (Calvary) where he was crucified. I can understand the controversy this film generated among the American Jews as well as others abroad. Mel Gibson, the producer, became a house hold name especially among the evangelical Christians who took it further by using the movie for evangelism. Jews called him a bigot claiming that he portrayed Jews as murderers and calling for the film to be banned. This call was a little late and could not work because the movie was already breaking the block buster records nationwide.

This film sparked enormous controversy in the United States compared to fewer incidents of opposition from other countries in Europe, Asia or Africa. The nation was divided in two sections, those who are for and those against the release of the movie. The

main contention was centered on the supposedly anti-Semitic depiction of Jews as the ‘Jesus killers’. Scholars too were divided on the subject of the historical facts and accuracy of the first century account used by Gibson on this film. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued a statement in protest, “For filmmakers to do justice to the biblical accounts of the passion, they must complement their artistic vision with sound scholarship, which includes the knowledge of how the passion accounts have been used historically to disparage and attack Jews and Judaism. Absent of such scholarly and theological understanding, productions such as *The Passion* could likely falsify history and fuel the animus of those who hate Jews.”¹

Supporters of the film, on the other hand, argued that the movie played out the first century biblical account according to the four gospels, Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, and as such Gibson did not add his own things. After seeing the film, Cardinal Darío C. Hoyos, a senior Vatican official close to the pope said, “Anti-Semitism, like all forms of racism, distorts the truth in order to put a whole race of people in a bad light. This film does nothing of the sort. It draws out from the historical objectivity of the Gospel narratives sentiments of forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation. It captures the subtleties and the horror of sin, as well as the gentle power of love and forgiveness, without making or insinuating blanket condemnations against one group. This film expressed the exact opposite, that learning from the example of Christ, there should never be any more violence against any other human being.”² This was a very interesting response, I should say, in defense of, not only the film, but also the institution of the church and his message.

¹ Anti-Defamation League. (ADL Press release) June 24, 2003.

² National Review Online (N.R.O.), September 18, 2003

The 'Passion of the Christ' movie, in my own opinion, might have been ok with its critics until it introduced the cross, the agony of suffering, and the epitome of the crucifixion. May be it is easier to only talk about the cross in an abstract sense than it is to reimagine the concrete reality of the events which took place in real historical time, with a real person in a real place. To avoid this bloody story of the cross is to negate the lived reality of the Christian history during which the symbol has been used and abused, even reduced to a symbol of conquering hate rather than a symbol of a sacrificial love demonstrated by Christ. It's been almost two thousand years since the Romans carried out this atrocious acts upon Christ, which was for criminals and outcasts in their society, and to the present day the church is still struggling to defend and present the positive side of the cross as a symbol of hope for humanity.

This project will engage two great theologians who have, based on their diverse backgrounds, addressed the cross and its implications for the church as a community of faith. First there is Jürgen Moltmann whose theology of the cross stems out of his experience during WW II, leading to his conversion to Christianity and pastoring a church in Germany before moving into study and teaching systematic theology at Tübingen University. The subject of the Cross can be disturbing to many, Christians or secular; no wonder the message of the crucified Christ is considered old fashioned or foolishness as Paul states to the Corinthians. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Corinthians 1:18). For Moltmann, the message of the Cross is about Jesus Christ which connects us with the past, present and future. "Yet only when men are reminded of him, however untimely this may be, can they be set free from the power of the facts of the

present time, and from the laws and compulsions of history, and be offered a future which will never be dark again.”³

James Cone’s theology of the Cross on the other hand, like Moltmann’s, stems out of his black experience of the racial injustice. He attempts to compare and contrast the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus with the lynching tree and black suffering as the authenticity of the Christian gospel message and hope of ending violence and division in the church and communities, and black oppression in America. By juxtaposing the cross and the lynching tree as a theological problem, Cone attempts to make sense of the theodicy of blacks’ suffering in American history, and the paradox of hope interwoven with the message of the crucified Christ; “the cross is a paradoxical religious symbol because it inverts the world’s value system with news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first last.”⁴

How can a theology of the cross proceed in the aftermath of the holocaust, the Nazi concentration camps, and death chambers of Auschwitz to the most current acts of al-Qaida’s September 11th attack, and the atrocities committed by ISIS such as beheading visited upon Christians as the people of the cross, and even some Muslims and atheists? Unfortunately, US response to Al-Qaida’s attack killed civilians, women and children who had nothing to do with war/terrorism. How can a Christian theology, whose symbol of the cross was used to legitimize the lynching of blacks in America and in the WWII Holocaust, become relevant to humanity in the midst of suffering? The disturbing issue, in the case of the Holocaust, is that the atrocities visited upon Jews were approved by

³Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993), 1

⁴James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 2

many churches in Germany which sided with Hitler. This work will address these questions and demonstrate how the cross, despite of its abuse, can be a catalyst between suffering and healing, and a symbol of hope.

Summons have been preached in our churches, most of them presenting a positive image of the symbol of the Cross. Books have been published presenting both positive and negative sides of symbol of the Cross, including Moltmann and Cone's work which I'm considering in this thesis. While the Cross is a symbol of hope for the church, it can be viewed, in the case of Holocaust, as a symbol hate and violence against our neighbor, fellow humans, like Jews. At this point I would like address some questions arising from this symbol such as; what is the Cross, and what is its origin and function; and why the Cross is an important symbol of hope for the church.

The Cross

Merriam Webster defines the cross as “a mark, object, or figure formed by two short intersecting lines” or pieces in general terms. When associated with religion, the name may change to ‘Crucifix’, changing the definition to a representation of a cross with a figure of Jesus Christ on it. This symbol can have more than one meaning depending on who is speaking and what they are saying about the cross. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* points to the two main iconographical roots symbolized by the cross, *signum* and *lignum crucis* (sign and wood of the Cross), as an expression of the cross.”⁵

⁵ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Cross” 736

The use of the Cross as a symbol predates the rise of Christianity tracing its roots back to the primitive era of human civilization. The pre-Christian period worshipers in the ancient near east used the symbol of the cross to worship *Tammuz*, a Babylonian deity. During the Roman imperial system, the Cross was regarded as the most humiliating and degrading form of punishment commonly administered to criminals, rebels or the escaped prisoners. Papyrus 66, one of the oldest preserved manuscript of the ancient Greek New Testament, used the word ‘*Staurogram*’ to abbreviate the word “Cross” in an attempt to circumvent its relation to the brutal punishment the icon represented at the time.⁶

From the second century anti-Christian narrative in the Octavian dogma, and the third century declaration by Clement of Alexandria that the cross is the ‘Lord’s sign’, to the Tertullian’s definition of Christians as *crucis religiosi*, “devotees of the cross”⁷, the symbol is still a religious conundrum. The symbol of the Cross is an offense to some, and to others is a triumphant sign of victory and salvation. To formulate a theology about the symbol of the Cross, with its past history, in the context of a theology of hope for the church, we have to examine how Christian tradition has interpreted this symbol. Both Old and New Testament texts records both negative and positive connotations related with the Cross, as seen in Deuteronomy and Galatians. “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”⁸. How does the Christian tradition interpret and apply these texts, and what is the message of the church in relation to the Cross?

⁶ Hurtado, Larry. The Staurogram in Early Christian Manuscripts: the earliest visual reference to the crucified Jesus: In Kraus, Thomas. *New Testament Manuscripts*, (Leiden, Brill. 2006), 207–26

⁷ Apology, chapter 16. http://www.newadvent.org/Apology/Church_fathers/Tertullian

⁸ Deut.21:23 and Galatians 3:13

Traditional understanding of the cross

I was raised in a Christian family where the cross was revered so much that the older members of our family were bowing to the sign as we entered the church. Being young and naïve, I never understood why they did that even though I associated it with the church rituals. The cross dominated the churches and schools in the district (East Africa), and the morning prayers were mandatory in primary schools (from K-7th grade in the US). When my family migrated to US, though I didn't know anyone, the symbol of the cross directed us to the nearby church.

The symbol of the Cross is found strategically displayed in places where Christian tradition is practiced or in relation to the person or the organization. We see the cross hanging in church buildings, cemeteries and religious institutions. We hang the cross symbol around our houses; Catholics and Protestants wear crosses as necklaces, bracelets, rings and even some make a sign of the cross during prayer contemplation by touching the forehead, breast, and then each shoulder. The liturgies of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, as the most significant ceremonies in Christian tradition, points their followers to the cross of Jesus Christ.

What we do or say about the symbol of the cross, more often than not, is motivated and informed by our past experience with its use. Symbols invoke different meanings to different people based on their experience and interpretations. As Ricoeur argues in his hermeneutical discourse, a symbol invites thought; while for Moltmann, a symbol invites rethinking. My own feelings about the Cross are mixed, given the history

behind the symbol of the cross, the symbol betrayed by its adherents, and the eschatological message of hope revealed by the same symbol. Any careful examination of the Christian tradition and its followers reveals how the cross, as their religious symbol, is so profound to their life and religious practice.

Most Christian traditions, in their liturgies and worship, talk about the cross almost explicitly in soteriological sense of ‘what the Cross means for us’. This is a good focus, especially on the cross as a symbol of hope, but the cross is not limited to a message of the atonement for the human sins only. The Cross also reveals God’s involvement and identification with human suffering where death on the Cross is not the end but a beginning of a new eschatological hope for the church. To get to the Easter Sunday, as I will expound more later on, we might linger around the terrain of Saturday’s pain and suffering, metaphorically speaking, and then usher in the celebrations of the resurrection Sunday. The symbol of the Cross symbolizes hope and liberation but before that, is a history of violence related to the symbol of the cross in the hands of both Christians and others. I will have to start from Friday, as the biblical text says, ‘pain may endure for a night, but joy comes with the morning’. (Psalm 30:5)

Cross as a Symbol of Violence

I was born and raised in Kenya, across the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro, one of the former British favorite colonies in Africa. Growing up in a Christian family, where going to church for children was not a choice, any attempt to even dare ask for the meaning of the songs or biblical text was a taboo. If I missed church one day, claiming to be sick,

then the African herbs would be administered to me (natural way of treatment) awaiting hospital visit in case the leaves from the forest didn't work. My grandfather was a Methodist minister for about 60years, ministering alongside the white British missionaries, so for his daughter not to take his grandchildren to church would reflect poorly on his ministerial image. Below is one of the songs they sung with vigor as I and the rest of the youth imitated them by singing along.

“Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before. Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe; forward into battle see his banners go! At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee; on then, Christian soldiers, on to victory! Hell's foundations quiver at the shout of praise; brothers, lift your voices, loud your anthems raise”.

(The United Methodist Hymnal Number 575)

Text: Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924

During my early days of ignorance I frequently sung the hymnal about the Christian soldiers marching as to war. Thinking that it was just a metaphor, I stomped my foot in jubilation but little did I know the connotation traced its roots back to the Reformation days, and the events of Christianizing the pagan world. What did the cross mean to these Christians in 16 -18th century? How did they see or interpret the symbol of the cross in relation to their Christology? The energy gleaned out of these lyrics indicates how the symbol of the cross led and motivated the Christian soldier to keep marching to war. Whether this war was actuated in deeds or fought in a spiritual realm, leaves a lot to be desired, especially the ecclesiological meanings attached to the song. I say this

because of the negative implications which has, and can be attached to it as an approval of literal soldiers (of Christ) matching to eliminate non-Christians.

Trinitarian Christology has perpetuated the veneration and public display of the crucifix almost as a defining mark of the houses of worship. Hymns and songs of praises have been used from 4th century CE to the present day cathedrals; from St. Peter's square in Rome, to the Holy family basilica in Nairobi. The symbol of the cross was, according to Paul, God's power made manifest in death and the triumph over the evil (1Corinthians 15:56). The cross symbolized victory over the enemies in battle especially those opposed to Christian faith. The interpretation of the above text can be dangerous in the hands of ambitious men and women all the while thinking that they are the defenders of the symbol. This assumption and use of the symbol was well enacted by Constantine after his dream (vision) where he saw the "Cross going before them in battle as described by Eusebius, the historian from Caesarea (AD 260-339)."⁹

Eusebius records the events which unfolded at the Milvian Bridge in 313 after the Constantine's dream, "He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle"¹⁰. Overcome by the emotions after the fact, the emperor ordered that the banner of the cross to be carried ahead of each group of his soldiers as

⁹ Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace; ed., *The Life of Constantine the Great*, I, 28-29, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series, vol. 1, Eusebius (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1952), 490

¹⁰ Ibid; 490

they marched to battle. He was convinced that God had appeared to him with this symbol and so he had a duty to make a duplicate of what he saw in his dream.

The emperor's dream and his subsequent claim cannot be verified independently, if it was really a dream or a trick to earn loyalty from his army and nation as well. To support his claims he went on to say; "and while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies"¹¹.

By the turn of 11th century, the symbol of the cross had been used and abused by groups like the Crusaders, whose actions have been viewed, especially by catholic scholars like Langmuir, to have been motivated by the symbol. "The preaching of the crusade had excited some of the most alienated, frustrated, and aggressive individuals, who sought immediate gratification, to give new meaning for their lives through violence that was connected with Christ through Christian symbols and that would, they had been told, save them".¹² Although this may be part of the motivation, the church also, especially pope Urban, legitimized the violence against non-Christians like Muslims or atheists while thinking in terms uniting Europe against a common enemy of the Cross.

Moltmann and Cone have addressed similar disturbing incidents of brutality, racial segregation and murder committed or legitimized by some leaders and ministers in

¹¹ Ibid; 4

¹² Gavin I Langmuir; *Toward a Definition of Anti-Semitism*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), 98

the churches bearing the symbol of the cross in 20th Century America. The violence associated with the abuse of the symbol of the cross, through history, can easily deter somebody from engaging in or embracing the bigger picture of the Cross. In the next two chapters I will address in detail the dark history of the Cross, and the hope which emerges out of that experience and continues to, not only to reconcile, but also to demonstrate the proper use and the interpretation of the Cross.

So far the picture, of the Cross, does not look good when viewed through the lenses of its historical past. Constantine might have been lying to the public by using the Cross as a sign from God to legitimize his thirst for battle, or to gather the support of others. Even the church can be lured by personal, political, or economic motives to hide behind the symbol of the cross to propagate ideas that may have nothing to do with the cross itself. To address some of these concerns, Jürgen Moltmann has written extensively on these and other questions. I offer an account of his theological stance concerning the Cross and its relationship with the church in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

The Cross in Moltmann's Experience

Born in Hamburg, Germany, April 8th 1926, Jürgen Moltmann, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen in Germany, was raised in a non-religious family. As a teenager, he wanted to study science and mathematics but his dreams were interrupted by the war. Drafted into the Germany army at the age of 19 years during the WW II, probably against his will, Moltmann served in an anti-aircraft battery in July 1943, which was destroyed by the Royal Air Force during 'operation Gomorrah' in Hamburg. That severe air bombardment left over eight thousand people dead in one week.

Moltmann narrates the experience in his book, *The Source of Life*. He describes what went through his mind and the many questions he asked God. "The friend standing next to me at the firing predictor was torn to pieces by the bomb that left me unscathed. That night I cried out to God for the first time: 'My God, where are you?' And the question 'Why am I not dead too?' has haunted me ever since. Why are you alive? What gives your life meaning? Life is good, but to be a survivor is hard. One has to bear the weight of grief. It was probably in that night that my theology began, for I came from a

secular family and knew nothing of faith. The people who escaped probably all saw their survival not just as a gift but as a charge too.”¹³

After surviving the attack, Moltmann surrendered to the first British soldier he met. He was moved from camp to camp, ending up in Scotland as POW. It was here in this Scottish camp where Moltmann was given a bible by an Army chaplain in the midst of the tormenting memories of war which he describes in vivid memories. “And then came what was for me the worst of all. In September 1945, in camp 22 in Scotland, we were confronted with pictures of Belsen and Auschwitz. They were pinned up in one of the huts, without comments. Some people thought it was just a propaganda. Others set the piles of bodies which they saw over against Dresden. But slowly and inexorably the truth filtered into our awareness, and we saw ourselves mirrored in the eyes of the Nazi victims. Was this what we had fought for? Had my generation, at the last, been driven to our deaths so that the concentration camp murderers could go on killing, and Hitler could live a few months longer? Some people were so appalled that they didn’t want to go back to Germany ever again.”¹⁴

Moltmann began to read the Bible from the Psalms of Lament, which comforted him, and later he was intrigued by the narrative of Christ’s crucifixion which led him to identify with Christ’s cry of dereliction: ‘My God my God, why have you forsaken me’. (Mark 15:34). Moltmann states that, after reading this text, he believed that Jesus died for him, “I knew with certainty; this is someone who understands you. I began to understand

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, (Fortress Publishing, 1997), 2

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, (Fortress Publishing, 1997), 4

Christ because I felt that he understood me....this early fellowship with Jesus, the brother in suffering and the redeemer from guilt, has never left me since.”¹⁵

For Moltmann, Camp Norton became a generous gift of reconciliation where prisoners of war got an opportunity to study theology under well trained biblical scholars. Challenged by the message of the Cross, from reading the bible in Mark 15:35, Moltmann says that he started to breathe and live again after crossing the bridge, metaphor for conversion, to Christ. “They told us that Christ was the bridge on which they could cross to us, and that without Christ they would not be talking to us at all. They told of the Gestapo terror, the loss of their Jewish friends, and the destruction of their homes. We too could step on this bridge which Christ had built from them to us, and could confess of the guilt of our people and ask for reconciliation...for me that was an hour of liberation.”¹⁶

After the war was over, Moltmann returned home to Hamburg and decided to pursue theological training at University of Gottingen where he received his doctorate. Moltmann’s theology was developed out of life’s questions, his lived experience, which cannot be separated from the lived experience of his German people and the aftermath of Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

Moltmann articulates the meaning and place of the Cross both in Christian theology, and in his conversion experience. In his reflections on this subject of the Cross, Moltmann includes other scholars who have wrestled with this subject of the suffering and abandonment of Christ by God on the cross. He points out that the crucified Christ

¹⁵ Ibid; 5

¹⁶ Ibid; 6

brings God to those who are abandoned by God, and through suffering he brings salvation to those who suffer. Citing Luther's view of the cross from what he refers to as the monstrous phrase 'crucified God', and Bonhoeffer's letter from prison, Moltmann states that, "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt.8:17 makes it clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.... Only the suffering God can help; that is the reversal of what the religious man expects from God. Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a Godless world."¹⁷

Moltmann's Theology of the Cross

Moltmann's theology developed in progressive stages through his lived experience with war. The primal encounter, which contributed more in the formative stage of his theology, was the cry of dereliction, the agony of Jesus on the cross. As stated in my previous subtitle, he identified with Christ's suffering by relating it with his own at the time when he was asking 'where is God'. The crucifixion event, where the Father is separated from the Son, is a dialectical epistemology, where being can be known only in its opposite, rather than by analogy where like is known by like. "The epistemological principle of the theology of the cross can only be this dialectic principle; the deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross."¹⁸ He argues that if a theology of the cross is reduced to an analogical principle only, then it becomes what he calls a

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God*: (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993), 47

¹⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God*: (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993), 27

'Theologia gloriae'. This allows Moltmann to make his case for the relevance of the cross in human suffering.

On the Cross, where the Son experienced God's abandonment and God's forsakenness, can be viewed as a paradoxical display of God's omnipotence revealed by the impotence of the crucified Son, especially by the tradition. For Moltmann, it is at this event of the Cross where, and finally, the Father is in solidarity with the Son, who had been abandoned, in the resurrection. In this case then, the church cannot speak about the eschatological hope of his resurrection without first identifying with his God-forsakenness and abandonment by the Father on the Cross.

Moltmann's theology of the Cross, as reflected in his book, *The Crucified God*, presupposes the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, not only as the main theme, but also as the center of all Christian theology which gives rise to its problems and answers. What we say about the crucifixion reveals, and includes, what the cross reveals about God's self, and God's solidarity with human suffering. Moltmann concludes that this action on the cross is the incarnation of the *logos* (word of, and is, God) fulfilled by Jesus Christ. "There can be no theology of the incarnation which does not become a theology of the cross. As soon as you say incarnation, you say cross."¹⁹ The events encompassed in the phenomenon of the cross and crucifixion, according to Moltmann, are orchestrated by God and through the Cross and crucifixion the abandoned Christ brings reconciliation to those who feel abandoned in life.

Addressing the mystery of the cross in relation to that of suffering, Moltmann warns against the possibility of misusing the cross and suffering, against their intended

¹⁹ Ibid, 205

meaning, as an excuse to oppress the poor. Wondering why Luther recommended the peasants to accept their suffering as their cross, he indicates how the church has abused the theology and mystery of the cross for the interest of the dominant groups. Citing the Indians and black slaves forced to accept their suffering as their cross, Moltmann draws the dichotomy between the use and abuse of the cross, “Thus it makes a difference who speaks of this mysticism of the cross, to whom he speaks, and in whose interest he speaks. In a world of domination and oppression one must pay close attention to the concrete function of any preaching and any devotion.”²⁰

Moltmann’s theology of the cross presupposes that, in the context of Christian life, the Godlessness and God-forsakenness is a sum of all Christian theology and life, “Either Jesus who was abandoned by God is the end of all theology or he is the beginning of a specifically Christian, and therefore critical and liberating, theology and life. The more the reality of the cross is taken seriously, the more the crucified Christ becomes the general criterion of theology.”²¹ To qualify this thought, he points out that, Christian theology needs first to understand God’s self- involvement and identification with the suffering humanity revealed by the cross and the crucifixion.

Moltmann exegetes the event of the cross as an expression of God’s love where God, through Christ’s suffering on the Cross, identifies with our human suffering. In this case, Moltmann refers to Paul and Johannine’s theology of God as love, “God so loved the world...” (John 3:16). In this context, if God is love and exists in love, then he can only be revealed in and by the event of his love, which is the event of the cross. This is the community of the will of the Father and the Son on the cross, a formula which Paul

²⁰ Ibid; 49

²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God*: (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993), 4

calls ‘the delivering up of the son’ to the cross. (Gal.2:20) “In the cross, the father and the son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender.”²² This event of Christ on the cross, is God’s event which takes place on the cross of the risen Christ. This can lead to a Trinitarian theology of incarnation.

If a theology of the cross is to be based solely on a Christological view point of the divine nature of Christ, then the cross would be reduced to an event between God and God. According to Moltmann, it’s the paradox of the cross where God is dead, and yet not dead, because the divine nature cannot die. On the other hand, if Christ’s suffering and death on the cross is based only on his humanity, as tradition shows, this impassibility of his divine nature would result in a theology in which the cross is evacuated of deity. To differentiate the two natures of Christ, Moltmann elaborates that, “the doctrine of the two natures must understand the event of the cross statically as a reciprocal relationship between two qualitatively different natures, the divine nature which is incapable of suffering and the human nature which is capable of suffering.”²³

For Moltmann, a theology of the Cross, in relation to human suffering, is a Trinitarian event where the three members of the godhead, the Trinity, participate and identify with the human suffering in the world. This point is part of his contribution to the theological discussion about the divine suffering, which is informed by his doctrine of Trinity. Moltmann’s key question here is the relationship between God and human suffering. Both the historical and his lived experience have influenced and informed Moltmann’s theology, especially the theology of the Cross, as Müller-Fahrenholz states

²² Ibid; 244

²³ Ibid, 245

in his book *The Kingdom and the Power*, as he examines Moltmann's life and theology. "One needs to examine the inner development of this man to be able to understand the elementary decisions and impressions which govern his work. So the key question is: what are the key experiences which have given this life its unique direction?"²⁴

Christological Implications

Moltmann approaches Christology from its historical relationship with the Jewish people, as a messianic Christology which gives meaning to Jesus and his mission as the messiah in the Jewish history of the Old Testament, or what he calls 'messianology'. By linking Jesus as the messiah and hope to both Jews and Christians, Moltmann cautions Christian Christology not to lose its hope for the messiah in order to avoid becoming a pagan cult; "Christian Christology is a particular form of Israel's messiah, and it is still related to, and dependent on, the Jewish forms of the messianic hope that antecedent Christianity and runs parallel to it."²⁵

Theology of the cross, conversely, leads us the concept of the Trinitarian God who is revealed by Jesus, the ultimate subject of our Christology. God became man in Jesus as recorded in the scriptures. "He is the image of the invisible God, in him all the fullness of God dwells, he is of one substance with God, begotten, not created, God of God, light of light." (Col.1:15-19). These attributes can raise questions regarding human relationship with this God, which Moltmann attempts to address. Basing his argument on the cross and incarnation, he views the Trinitarian God as relational and personal, the

²⁴ Müller-Fahrenholz, Geiko. *The Kingdom and the Power: The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (SCM Press, 2000),16

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimension*, (Fortress Press, 1993),2

God who suffers and redeems in Christ. By this connection, Moltmann agrees with Karl Rahner, by criticizing most Christianity as ‘a weakly Christianized monotheism’ that does not integrate Trinitarian ecclesiology with their Christology. The emphasis here is that, God’s being, and God’s being for us in Christ cannot be separated from each other, especially in the context of economic and immanent trinity; God acts, from God who is.

Citing Athanasius’s concept of Jesus Christ, as being God, and how he lowered himself to a level of humanity so as to make it possible for human beings to relate with God’s revelation, Moltmann states that, “if the mystery of Jesus is the eternal presence of God amongst men, then the salvation of the world is also to be found in him. God became man, so that men could partake of God. He took on transitory, mortal being, for that which is transitory and mortal to become intransitory and immortal.”²⁶

Addressing this subject and implications of Christ’s suffering on the cross, the Pope said that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and God who shares human’s lot and participates in his destiny. Like Moltmann, Pope John Paul argues that God is not someone who remains outside of the suffering world. “God is not content to be in himself all-knowing and omnipotent. His wisdom and omnipotence are placed, by free choice, at the service of his creation. If suffering is present in the history of humanity, one understands why his omnipotence was manifested in the omnipotence of humiliation of the cross. The scandal of the cross remains the key to the interpretation of the great

²⁶ Ibid; 88

mystery of suffering, which is so much a part of the history of mankind... Christ is proof of God's solidarity with man in his suffering."²⁷

Pope's interpretation of God's omnipotence on the Cross as an 'omnipotence of humiliation' is a metaphor, where God's omnipotence, through and in Christ on the Cross is humiliated, expressing the mystery of, and in solidarity with, human suffering. I was intrigued by Pope John Paul's comment on this subject of the cross in relation to the Trinitarian understanding of Christ's death on the cross. The question to the church and its message, in relation to Christ and human suffering, is whether the crucified Christ is a stranger to it or the Lord who determines its existence and destiny.

Cross and Human Suffering

I had just returned from London to Nairobi a few weeks before the fateful bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi, Kenya on August 7th 1998. Opposite the embassy is a corporation house where my brother and fellow workmates sat on the 9th floor of a glass covered building. The explosion shattered their office building leaving my brother and colleagues with several cuts on the head, faces and hands as they tried to move away from the windows. My breakfast was interrupted as neighbors came to tell me to turn on the TV, and that my brother's building was also affected, and the calls to his office were not answered.

As we tried to find means to go and look for him among the injured, he luckily showed up walking slowly towards the house. The first aid people had put temporary

²⁷ John Paul II, crossing the threshold of hope; Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil, ed, Van Inwagen (Eerdmans 2004), 62-63

bandages on his wounds and he survived. Many lost their lives that day which was followed by Tanzania's bombing as well. The following year 1999, I relocated to New Jersey and all was peace and calm, away from the bombing experience in Nairobi. Less than two years later the September 11th attacks happened which provoked me to question God's omnipotence in the midst of the escalating atrocities. Is the biblical God removed from human suffering, or is he preoccupied with it? I wondered. As much as I could rationalize a creative reason to exempt the Christian God from the equation of human suffering, the image of the cross reminded me of the same or similar suffering, at least if I contemplated upon the events leading to the symbol hanging on the wall at the church.

'If there is a God, He will have to beg my forgiveness', is a phrase that was carved on the walls of a concentration camp cell during WWII by a Jewish prisoner, according to Eli Wiesel who was imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp at the time. As the story goes, God was put on trial by these Jewish prisoners in an attempt to deal with the same question of suffering under the auspice of 'God's people'. In his book, *Night*, Wiesel narrates a similar story of hopelessness and God-forsakenness which he and other Jews felt during their time in these camps. He dealt with difficult questions like, why do I cry when praying, or even why do I have to pray to a God who has abandoned us here to suffer, or why should we take time to adore him? Wiesel calls God 'The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, who chose to be silent when they needed him most.

The tortures at Auschwitz haunted them to a breaking point, which makes sense as to why they were questioning the existence and presence of God in all of this. "Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were

hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing...And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God? "And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where is He? This is where--hanging here from this gallows."²⁸ In this answer, he believed that God was with them in their suffering, probably as he was with their ancestors in Egypt during pharaoh's torture.

Though it's been over sixty years between Wiesel's encounters at the concentration camps and my story about the atrocities of Nairobi's bombing of American Embassy and the nearby buildings, the cry of pain sounds the same. Both of these events led to the victim's questions about the absence of the God who is, according to tradition, supposed to be omnipresent in the here and now, and in his omnipotence, protect these lives from suffering and death. To avoid dealing with, or involving God with our suffering, the church tends to focus of the futuristic eschatology where the resurrected Christ is soon coming to end the woes of this world.

Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God*, argues that God is not a disconnected deity, but rather, a Trinitarian God who partakes in human suffering which, for Moltmann, is the context of all soteriology. "Thus the trinity means the Christ event in the eschatological interpretation of faith. Trinity therefore, also means the history of God, which in human terms is the history of love and liberation...what proceeds from this

²⁸ Elie Wiesel, *Night*: 64

event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead to life....the dead in God are also included.”²⁹

God in Christ did not step into, and partake of, the godlessness and forsakenness as a victim, even the death on the cross, but rather, did so willingly in order to justify the godless and God-forsaken which is actuated in his resurrection. Both God the Father and Son suffer in the event of Jesus’s suffering and death on the cross. The Father suffers, in his love, the grief of the Son’s death, and the Son suffers, in his love, for being forsaken by the Father in his death. This is what John refers to in his gospel that, God so loved the world’ and the price for this redemptive love was demonstrated on the event of the Cross. It is a mystery if one considers this divine surrender of the one who is declared and known, in tradition, as the omnipotent God, all powerful and impassible.

Paul’s letter to the Romans attempts to capture the event in relation to human pain and God’s involvement in which hope looms at the horizon of the aftermath. “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not, with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies..... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:32-35). In the Trinitarian Christology, this gospel narrative justifies the church’s soteriology, and its understanding of human suffering because God, through the Son, suffered on the cross and paid the price in the victory of his resurrection.

²⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The way of Jesus Christ*; Christology in messianic dimension, (Fortress press, 1993), 255

For Moltmann, Paul's narrative to the Romans is not intended to for the church to ignore their pain and suffering by emphasizes that Jesus's suffering is not an exclusive event, instead, it is an event where God identifies with and partakes in human suffering on the Cross. He also addressed this notion of God identifying with human suffering, from an anthropological view point, where God is not only in solidarity with our suffering, but also acting in defense for the poor and vulnerable who cannot defend themselves. The implication of the passion of Christ, and the event of the crucifixion, for the church, is to identify Christ in the 'least of these' and the mysticism of suffering. "It is demonstrably the devotion of the poor and sick, the oppressed and crushed. The 'God' of the poor, the peasant and the slave has always been the poor, suffering, unprotected Christ, whereas the God of empires and rulers has usually been the Pantocrator, Christ enthroned in heaven."³⁰ This makes Moltmann's theology political in the sense that he brings in the case for the poor, while challenging the empires and the powers that be. By this point I don't mean that the poor should accept their suffering as their cross.

I was intrigued by how cautious Moltmann was with his case for the poor. He carefully warns against mistaking the mysticism of the suffering as an excuse or justification for any suffering, and that the mysticism of the cross can praise submission to fate as a virtue and be perverted into melancholy apathy. This notion of submission will be addressed in chapter four as I examine James Cone's case on Christian churches in the south during the segregation and lynching of the Jim Crow era. Based on these accounts, Moltmann argues that God, in Christ's suffering on the Cross, is present and in

³⁰ Ibid, 45

solidarity with our suffering which reflects his reason for focusing on the ‘Crucified God’. I will explore more about this work in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Moltmann’s Crucified God

Several scholars and readers of Moltmann, including me, have wrestled with the way he has progressed from his previous work, *Theology of Hope*, to this one, *The Crucified God*. The former puts emphasis on the resurrection and the eschatology of hope, whereas in *The Crucified God*, the emphasis is on the cross, which seems like he is making a turnaround from resurrected Christ to a crucified Christ. Moltmann tries to clarify this in his preface to the *Crucified God*, but it’s a hard nut to crack. For this reason, where the attention is fixed on the crucified God, I chose to examine his theology of the cross in the context of what God does to God’s self in the event of the cross.

The onset of this work presupposes that the crucified Christ is the general criterion of theology, which means, for Moltmann, the crucifixion is the event which demonstrates, determines and defines Trinity. “The death of Jesus on the cross is the

center of all Christian theology. It is the entry to its problems and answers on earth. All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ. All Christian statements about history, about the church, about faith and sanctification, about the future and about hope stem from the crucified Christ.”³¹ In this case, Moltmann is attempting to deal with his previous work’s ‘entanglement’, as Dr. Keller might put it, between the present, the future, and history, to point them in the direction of the crucified Christ.

Like other European post WW II scholars, Moltmann’s theology stems out of his lived experience of the war as they wrestled with the question of the ‘good’ which could come out the aftermath of what they had gone through. The message of the church and its adherents, that there is an omnipotent, loving and caring God, was overshadowed by the evil which was visited upon fellow humans in the death camps. He does not want his arguments and work to be viewed as a quick fix to explain away pain and suffering. Rather, he addresses the radical nature of incarnation which, according to Moltmann, cannot be understood, in the context of the crucified Christ without dealing with the question of what happened, and who is it that was crucified on the cross. Only then, can the church speak about incarnation, which is the revelation of God’s redemption evidenced in the resurrection of the crucified Christ.

The 20th century’s political and socio-economic chaos in Europe, which led to the two world wars, provoked Christian theologians like Moltmann to re-evaluate their understanding of the doctrine of God. The extent of horror visited upon fellow humans, and the loss of human dignity, while most of them were claiming membership in their

³¹Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 204.

churches, indicated that something was not right. Moltmann takes his cue from these events to engage the doctrine of the Cross by explaining the Threeness of God, which is the doctrine of trinity, and Christ's death on the Cross in relation to our suffering.

Trinitarian God

This work has triggered some of my childhood memories as a fifteen year old student. Our class leader, who was a Muslim, forced us to memorize a 'Swahili/Aramaic' phrase, "*Mungu hakuzaa wala kuzaliwa*", translated to English is 'God did not beget and is not begotten'. The intended meaning was geared towards a monotheistic deity or a God who cannot be linked to any other deity or human. This memory verse flies in the face of the Trinitarian God of the tradition, which, according to Muslims, disqualifies Jesus as the Son of, and equal with, God the father. This has sparked religious differences between Christians and Muslims over the past centuries and still getting worse by the day.

The doctrine of Trinity has stirred up theological debates before and after the 16th century Reformation. To talk about a Trinitarian God in this work, I may have to weave my way past the Catholic and evangelical 'Triune God' themes addressed by some Trinitarian theologians like Rahner and Schleiermacher, and proceed to others, after Barth, like Moltmann and Cone's theology of the Cross in the context of Trinity

The Church's stance today, pertaining to the doctrine of Trinity, is derived from the past struggles of the early church fathers in the third century in their attempt to underscore the primacy of Jesus, and the divine unity of the Father, Son and the Holy

Spirit. Before Emperor Constantine summoned over three hundred bishops to his temporary residence in Nicaea, Christians were wrestling with questions like, ‘how Christians could consider themselves monotheists and yet hold that both the God of Israel and Jesus are divine, which appears to make two gods? The Nicene Creed was born from this gathering of A.D 325, which condemned the philosophical interpretation of Jesus by Arius as heretical, affirming the concept of Trinity, and thereafter, the Nicene Creed became the first and the only creed to be used, ecumenically, by many Christian churches around the world up to date.

Trinitarian theology, at least after Nicaea, was confronted with the task of addressing the divine nature of Christ, in the context of the doctrine of ‘*epektasis*’ (the continual pursuit of God by the human soul), which renders it unknowable to human nature. To deal with this question, one has to keep in mind the two natures of Christ. The divine nature, which is incapable of suffering, and the human nature of Christ which is capable of suffering, as demonstrated on the cross. Athanasius, in his ontological application of scriptures in naming God and Christ, indicate a correlation with that of the Father and Son in the divine nature. Moltmann takes the argument beyond the two natures, focusing his attention to God’s redemptive work revealed by the crucified and resurrected Jesus concluding that it can only be understood in personal, relational and Trinitarian language.

To Moltmann, the Trinity is understood better within the concept of the crucified God and not the traditional theism which is intermingled with metaphysical concepts of omnipotence, immutability and impassibility of God, as everything that human beings are not. This notion of intermingling classical theism with metaphysics disconnects man from

God. "Theism thinks of God at man's expense as an all-powerful, perfect and infinite being. consequently man appears here as a helpless, imperfect and finite being...therefore what is ascribed to God must be taken from man and what is ascribed to man must have been taken from God."³² According to Moltmann, a Trinitarian concept of God should bridge this divide and mitigate the differentiation in the understanding of the triune God in the Christian tradition.

This argument indicates one of Moltmann's points of departure from tradition, in that, a God who cannot suffer is a God who cannot love or relate, because love demands relationship. This God, according to Moltmann, is the insensitive and impassible God of metaphysics, and not the God of the bible who identified with human suffering on the cross. He insists that, if the message of the cross remains central to the church's tenets, as it was in the apostolic days, then it is a new and radical message to the metaphysical world. "The time has come for differentiating the Father of Jesus Christ from the god of the pagans and the philosophers in the interest of Christian faith...faith must understand the deity of God from the event of the suffering and the death of the son of God and thus bring about a fundamental change in the orders of being of metaphysical thought and value tables of religious feeling. It must think of the suffering of Christ as the power of God and the death of Christ as God's potentiality."³³

Divine Suffering

³² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 249

³³ *Ibid*; 215

Moltmann's argues that, crude atheism for which this world is everything, is as superficial as the theism which claims to prove the existence of God from the reality of this world. To contrast this with what the early church fathers said, as in Justinian's apology, that the suffering of Christ is the suffering of God, Moltmann wonders whether they understood the divine nature as passable in their view of God. Moltmann insists that, God's being and suffering are key to Christian theology. "God and suffering are no longer contradictions, as in theism and atheism, God's being is in suffering and suffering is in God's being itself, because God is love."³⁴ Moltmann makes this firm claim, while many theologians before him avoided it because they couldn't think of a possibility of God's suffering.

The fact that traditional Christian orthodoxy insists that God is incapable of suffering, in his divine nature, does not close the possibility of God, in his divine love, to embrace suffering. Moltmann argues that, "If love is the acceptance of the other without regard to one's own well-being, then it contains within itself the possibility of sharing in suffering and freedom to suffer as a result of the otherness of the other."³⁵ God is love, and love is relational and sensitive enough to be involved even in the suffering of the 'other'. In this context then, God's suffering is out of free love and not a deficiency or God's being incomplete as it is with other created reality.

For God to embrace suffering, according to Moltmann, does not diminish or reduce God's perfect being. Rather, the suffering of Christ is a suffering of a passionate God who, "suffers from the love which is the superabundance and the overflowing of his

³⁴ Ibid; 227

³⁵ Ibid; 230

being.”³⁶ In other words, God is never lacking in his being, and by taking on suffering it’s an overflow expression of his love which, out of his divine being, can partake in suffering without fear of changing or diminishing his attributes or God’s being. This outward expression of God’s love is recorded in John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his own begotten son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.” Moltmann uses this text to show what is revealed by the death of Jesus on the Cross, and its relation to humanity.

Keeping in mind how complex the issue of God’s impassibility and omnipotence is, Moltmann makes a conclusion, which I find quite impressive, that impassibility and omnipotence can be understood on the basis of incarnation. These are Trinitarian terms of God’s personal involvement, where God suffers and redeems in Christ, because it is in Christ that the triune God is incarnate for all humanity. The message of the Christian church, according to Moltmann, gains relevance because of God’s suffering in the crucifixion of Jesus. “Christian theology finds its relevance in hope, thought out in depth and put into practice, in the kingdom of the crucified Christ, by suffering in the ‘suffering of this present time’, and makes the groaning of the creation in travail its own cry for God and for freedom.”³⁷

Moltmann was not the only or first to question the traditional concept of God’s impassibility and immutability in relation to human suffering. Japanese theologian, Kazoh Kitamori, who published *Theology of the Pain of God* in 1946, attempted to relate suffering with God. “The pain of God gives meaning and value to human suffering.”³⁸

³⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, (Fortress Press, 1993), 23.

³⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* : (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 24.

³⁸ Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the pain of God*: (1957), 14.

Several years later, in the *Crucified God*, Moltmann expanded extensively the possibility of God's divine passibility in the event of God's suffering in Jesus Christ on the cross.

After addressing the suffering and the death of Christ on the Cross, Moltmann tries to focus the church to something more, leading to the question of what happens there after, or the end of time. He expounds this in his understanding of eschatology as both present and also futuristic, and as both here and always coming. Suffering, divine or human, is not the central focus neither does it diminish the hope for the church. The death of Christ is not the end of the story in the event of the Cross because of the resurrection which follows, as Moltmann indicates that God, in Christ is incarnate for all humanity. To find hope after or in the midst of suffering, one has to understand the kind of hope we are talking about. Moltmann calls this hope 'eschatological', which I will explore in the next segment.

Eschatology of Hope

Dietrich Bonhoeffer that, "the church of Christ witnesses to the end of all things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end The church speaks within the old world about the new world."³⁹

Eschatology, as a branch of study in Christian theology, draws its complex and diverse interpretation from ancient biblical texts, and the teachings of Jesus as well as from his apostles like Paul and John. This teaching was later continued, in western Christology, by Tertullian and Origin among others, and by the twentieth century, the

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A theology of exposition of Genesis 1-3*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 21

concept of eschatology, in relation to the end of time and life, had spread in the church. It is my speculation that different opinions arising from the eschatology might have obliged Moltmann to distinguish where eschatology begins, and what it entails. “So in eschatology it makes sense to begin with the personal hope, then to advance to the historical hope, and finally to pass on to the cosmic hope, so as to end with God’s glory for God’s sake.”⁴⁰

Moltmann’s theological inquiry was first influenced by Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*, which led to his quest to discover what had happened to Christian hope in theological discourse. He attempted to develop a theology of hope on the basis of, “the God of promise and exodus, the God who raised Christ”⁴¹. His eschatology is reflected in his emphasis on God’s divine action, which is the way God acts in the world, and God’s involvement with his people, which, according to Moltmann, is ‘eternity present’. For Moltmann, the Lord’s prayer, ‘let your kingdom come’, and Jesus’ proclamation that, ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’, does not transpose eschatology into the future. He claims that, “the kingdom of God does not ‘come’ out of the future into the present. It comes from heaven to earth.”⁴²

Eschatology, when considered in apocalyptic terms, it deals with the last days, the end of time, which in turn may be also in search of a final solution to all things, both cosmos and human. As Moltmann insisted in his work, *The Crucified God*, about the death of Jesus on the cross, death does not have the last word, therefore the death of humans, for whom Christ died, also does not have the last word. For Moltmann, the

⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian eschatology* (First Fortress MN: 1996), xvi.

⁴¹ Ibid; 15

⁴² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian eschatology* (First Fortress MN: 1996), 15.

resurrection of the incarnated Christ gives rise to the eschatology and hope for the church. James Cone captures this intricacy in his assertion that what comes out of, or after the cross is paradoxical. “Hope comes by way of defeat, suffering and death do not have the last word, first shall be the last; it’s God’s powerless love snatching victory out of defeat.”⁴³ Christian eschatology has to deal with the sustained hope in the risen Christ because the end of Christ was his true beginning.

Other scholars, such as Bauckham, have analyzed Moltmann’s Christology in the *Theology of Hope*, concluding that, it is more focused on eschatology as God’s action in history; a divine action which creates a new future. Bauckham thinks that, Moltmann’s theology of hope should have been called a theology of the resurrection because, “the future it addressed was the future of the risen Christ and its theological heart was an interpretation of the resurrection of the crucified Christ as divine promise for the future of all reality.”⁴⁴ I can see where Bauckham is coming from in this assumption as evidenced throughout Moltmann’s work, *The Coming of God*, and the concluding questions derived from Isaiah 6:3 as fundamental to biblical eschatology. “First is hope for God, hope that God will arrive at his rights in his creation....when will God show himself in his divinity to heaven and earth, and the answer is to be found in the promise of the coming God: the whole earth is full of his glory.”⁴⁵

For Moltmann, the eschatology of hope for the church is not only in the future yet to come; it is the hope revealed by the resurrection of Christ, Emanuel, and God with us in our suffering as well as in our Sunday worship. It is about God who is revealed in his

⁴³ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 2.

⁴⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Moltmann*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Coming of God: Christian eschatology* (First Fortress MN: 1996), xvi.

incarnation, as Isaiah envisioned, the earth filled with his glory. This is the eschatology of hope for the church because hope is not bound by race, class, economic, or socio-political status. I will address these items in the next chapter as I explore James Cone's theology of the Cross in the context of African American's experience.

Chapter 4

James H. Cone:

Preamble

'I was within inches of leaving the Christian faith, because that faith as I had received it and learned it no longer explained the world to me satisfactorily' (James Cone).

Cone is an African American theologian born in Fordyce, Arkansas in 1939. He grew up in the small town of Bearden where he and his family attended a vibrant black church. He witnessed firsthand the debilitating wave of hate, murder, and the dreadful reality of white racism. It was here in the Macedonian AME church where Cone listened to prayers, songs, preaching and the pleading with God for his divine intervention, which left him with questions. His experience also taught him, "how to deal with the contradictions of life and provided a way to create meaning in a society not of [his] own

making.”⁴⁶ Cone was inspired by, and wanted to be, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which led him to further his career as a minister by going to graduate school. He attended Garrett Theological Seminary in Wisconsin, and received M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Northwestern University in 1963 and 1965.

A township of 400 blacks and 800 whites, Bearden was plagued by white racism such as, separate but “equal” schools, segregated movies, restaurants, beatings, arrests and economic inequality. Majority of the white population in Bearden claimed to be Christians, a claim Cone could not come to terms with, leaving unanswered questions in relation to the lynching of African Americans at the time. He claims that the whites tried to make them believe that God created black people to be white people's servants. Cone’s theology stems out of these experiences which led him to question how theology was being interpreted by the white theologians and white churches.

Though he taught theology and religion at Philander Smith College, Adrian College in Michigan, and Union Theological Seminary (1970 – current), Cone’s critique of the theologians he studied in graduate school, which he claims did not give satisfactory answers to theology in the context of blacks experience, was his hermeneutical point of departure. Expressing this departure point, Cone asked, “What could Karl Barth possibly mean for black students who had come from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, seeking to change the structure of their lives in a society that had defined black as non-being?”⁴⁷ I think it’s important to note that Cone’s critique of Barth and other white theologians is not intended to be indifferent towards them, because he

⁴⁶ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*; 3.

actually did his doctoral dissertation on Karl Barth. Both Bath and Paul Tillich influenced his earlier work in late 1960's.

Cone's quest to make sense of the binary view of black vs white churches or theologians weighed heavily on him, and for that reason, he went back to biblical scriptures like Exodus, the teachings of Jesus, and any other text addressing human liberation. He expresses his central issue at the time as indicated in his preface to the *Black Theology and Black Power*, "For me, the burning theological question was, how I can reconcile Christianity and Black Power, Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of nonviolence, and Malcolm X's by any means necessary philosophy?"⁴⁸ This view, I think, ties to Tillich's argument that theology is always tied to a specific historical context, it cannot be just universal. Therefore, for Cone, the social context of Black experience was a theology of black liberation, which he tries to relate with Jesus's message and task of liberating humanity.

Cone's Theology of the Cross

If Theopoetics admirers were to merge their intellectual delight with the sacred choral singers at the Craig chapel, then the choir master/leader has to be James Cone taking his cues from *The Cross and the Lynching tree*, which was judged by Cornel West as 'A powerful and painful song of hope in our dance with morality'. I chose to start my inquiry from this phrase because Cone, in the *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, does not separate the Cross of Jesus from the lynching tree where African Americans were

⁴⁸ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), viii.

‘crucified’ also. His socio-historical and theological analysis juxtaposes the Christian cross with the lynching tree of Blacks in America as a theological problem, and shows how these two potent symbols inhibit the Christian’s ability to be a faithful witnesses of their tradition. He states that, “The cross can heal and hurt; it can be empowering and liberating but also enslaving and oppressive. There is no one way in which the cross can be interpreted.”⁴⁹ Moltmann makes a similar argument, in his European experience of war, where the Christian Cross was used to legitimize evil committed against neighbors, like the Jews and the Holocaust.

Cone’s theological journey includes grappling with God in the context of African American’s suffering and the paradox of hope promised and sustained by the death of Jesus on the cross. Separated by nearly two thousand years, the cross and the lynching tree, are both symbols of death except, for Cone, one is a universal symbol of Christian faith while the other is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. While the lynching tree is ignored, in this context of theological interpretation, the cross is visible in almost every church and Christian institutions as a symbol of redemption and salvation. He insists that, throughout this period of Christian history, the cross has not been connected to or referenced to the present human suffering in the black community. “Until we can 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

⁴⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xix.

understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy.”⁵⁰

Blacks created and used the power of the blues music genre, poetry, and the hermeneutical excellence of the black preacher’s ability to imagine a God who sojourned with them, as a strategy to combat the existential terror they were dealing with at the time; a ‘common sense- hermeneutics’. This provoked Cone to criticize white Christian theologians, like Reinhold Niebuhr, who apparently was sympathetic to blacks, for failing to see the interconnection between the cross and the lynching tree. He struggles with the fact that, while these white theologians ignored or failed to see the obvious correlations between the crucifixion and lynching, it was the black American artistic expressions that gave voice to this reality.

Comparison of the Cross and the Lynching Tree

If the cross and the lynching tree of Blacks in America depict such a tremendous and obvious similarity, why have we taken so long, in our churches and theological institutions, to make the connection? Is it because we can’t see it, or we are afraid of opening a ‘can of worms’? The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other, Cone insists, and so the Blacks in America were able to understand and use it to interpret the cross of Jesus with its complexities and found hope and comfort in knowing that, as death

⁵⁰James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xv.

did not have the last word in Jesus, so neither would the lynching have the final word for them.

For Christians not to see the connection between the cross and the lynching tree, Cone laments, is a painful reminder of the lynching because it was overwhelmingly Christians who carried out and attended the lynching; the same Christians, who worship a crucified Savior and failed to see the irony of their actions. He regrets that many Christians are silent today towards racial injustice just as they were then, or even in the first century crucifixion of Christ. “It should have a prominent place in American images of Jesus’ death. But it does not. In fact, the lynching tree has no place in American theological reflections about Jesus’ cross or in the proclamation of Christian churches about his Passion. The conspicuous absence of the lynching tree in American theological discourse and preaching is profoundly revealing, especially since the crucifixion was clearly a first-century lynching.”⁵¹

While I’m cautious about reverse racism, I credit Cone for his carefully selected words acknowledging white Christians and theologians, as he rebukes some and challenges others in a reconciliatory tone. In fact he devotes more time to praising Reinhold Niebuhr than he devotes in criticizing him. He emphasizes joint responsibility in the bond of God’s love. “We are bound together in America by faith and tragedy. All the hatred we have expressed toward one another cannot destroy the profound mutual love and solidarity that flow deeply between us; a love that empowered blacks to open their arms to receive the many whites who were also empowered by the same love to risk their lives in the black struggle for freedom. No two people in America have had more

⁵¹James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 30.

violent and loving encounters than black and white people. We were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union, and the blood of the cross of Jesus.”⁵²

Finally, in Cone’s reflection on these two symbols, he still grapples with the meaning of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection, and the case of humanity, leaving him with some questions. Can death be redemptive in and of itself? Can the cross or lynching tree reveal God, and how does life find victory in defeat? And on a personal note he says, “I find nothing redemptive about suffering in itself. The gospel of Jesus is not a rational concept to be explained in a theory of salvation, but a story about God’s presence in Jesus’ solidarity with the oppressed, which led to his death on the cross.”⁵³

Blacks’ Hope in the Church and the Blues

As I stated earlier in my introduction, Dr. Cone was born and raised in a Christian family. Church was everything and a source of hope and support during his agonizing period of uncertainty due to segregation. The Macedonian AME Church must have influenced him enough to later become a pastor of a local congregation, before moving on to advance his theological studies. Like Cone, many blacks found refuge in the church, especially the black churches, for the obvious reasons which Cone mentions. “White racists preached a dehumanizing segregated gospel in the name of Jesus’ cross every Sunday. And yet in rural black churches I heard a different message, as preachers

⁵² Ibid; 165

⁵³ Ibid; 150

proclaimed the message of the suffering Jesus and the salvation accomplished in his death on the cross.”⁵⁴

The energy in the black churches was high, Cone acknowledges, as they shouted ‘Hallelujah’ back to the preacher, and stomped their feet with intensity as, what he calls, a living reality of God’s Spirit transforming them from nobodies in the white society to somebodies in the black church. You cannot underestimate the influence of the church to the black community at the time; it was not just a gathering, but a place of re-fuelling for the next six long days on the terrain of Jim Crow’s segregation. Cone uses his own case to affirm this. “Just as books kept Richard Wright alive and gave him vague glimpses of life’s possibilities, the black church and theological texts kept me wrestling with life and faith, trying to find meaning in a society and an intellectual discourse that did not acknowledge that I existed.”⁵⁵

I do agree with Cone’s decision to stay, or should I call it hide in the church. Otherwise, I probably would not have heard of his name in history. The white community may not fully comprehend the enormity of this part played by the (black) church which has not only impacted, but influenced nearly all civil right leaders and scholars like Dr. King, W.E DuBois and Cone among others who used ‘theology from below’ to make a case for their people and find their own voice. As Cone narrates the experiences of black people in the black churches while dealing with what he calls, “faceless, merciless, apocalyptic vengefulness of the massed white mob.”⁵⁶ It was the Sunday mornings where

⁵⁴ Ibid; xv.

⁵⁵ Ibid; xvi.

⁵⁶ James H. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 18.

the black people used prayers, songs and preaching to respond to these atrocities of segregation and lynching. There was hope in the black Church.

It is an historical fact, since Constantine's era, the Holocaust, slavery and white racism, that the symbol of the Cross has been used and implicated in violence causing human suffering in the hands of 'Christians', as I have documented in this work. The Cross has been abused, as a symbol of violence, and also used, as a symbol of liberation and hope for the church after the fact. Based on the above data, I think it is fair to say that the church was and is inseparable from human liberation and freedom despite of its history. The channels used by the Black people to voice their ant-slavery campaign was not only in church songs, but also in the carefully crafted themes sung in the blues on Friday nights. Most of these blues documented the atrocities of lynching while keeping the black's hope alive in the midst of the suffering.

The Blues

*"Mean ole hangman is waitin' to tighten up the noose, Lord I'm so scared I'm
trembling in my shoes."*

Lemon Jefferson's 'Hangman blues' confronted the lynching atrocity as the black community danced their sorrows away. The blacks were united in the struggle; those in the church and others out in the night singing blues to deliver the same message of hope. Blues genre and black poet created another avenue of resistance and hope in a way that exceeded their intellectual expectations. In comparison, Cone states that, 'if the blues offered an affirmation of humanity, religion offered a way for black people to find hope'.

I agree with Cone that Richard Wright got the gist, in his *Twelve Million Voices*, “Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool the spring of hope.”⁵⁷

The Blacks in the south might not have been educated with a seminary degree like their white masters, but when it comes to theological meditations on lynching, especially in the black literary imagination, Gwendolyn Brook’s line sets her apart. She was the first black Pulitzer prize winner in 1957 in her poem, “The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock” including the words, which Cone refers to as powerful Christological declaration; “The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.”⁵⁸

There was hope in the blues because it gave them a platform to express their linguistic and theological connection between the cross in the first century Rome, and the twentieth century lynching in America. Cone has pointed us to both the evil acts of the white supremacist, most of whom were active members of their churches, and how Blacks found hope in the black churches and the blues. Moltmann also points to similar case, from his conversion, and witnessing the atrocities of the war, to the hope found in the resurrected Christ. For a person or community to find hope, especially in the suffering, they have to find a specific reason, person or event to attach that hope. Hope can be found in the symbol of the Cross despite of its negative history, as I will discuss in my conclusion in chapter five.

⁵⁷ James H. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

Chapter 5

The Theology of Hope

Where should I start to talk about the theological underpinnings of hope, after being haunted by Moltmann and Cone, except may be Theo-poetry like; ‘John Caputo throws out the word death of God, metaphorically speaking, Moltmann intercepted it in midair, and placed it at the center of the Trinitarian ecclesiology, and changed it to a ‘death in God’ and informs Jack that his word cannot be an origin of Christian theology’. For Moltmann, “The origin of Christian theology is only in the death on the Cross in God and God in Jesus’ death.”⁵⁹ The ‘death of God’ doctrine holds no water as indicated in

⁵⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993),207

this work. In conversation with Moltmann and Cone, death did not have the last word on the Cross or on lynching tree. Jesus's death on the Cross, for Moltmann, was not the end but the beginning; and lynching of black bodies, for Cone, did not have the last word because, "God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair"⁶⁰.

The biblical definition of 'hope' is a confident expectation; a firm assurance of the things which are unclear and unknown. (Hebrews 11:1). In the absence of hope, according to this New Testament biblical narrative, life is deprived of its meaning because Christian hope is rooted in the faith in, and of God, as an enduring virtue of the Christian life. Moltmann explored hope in conjunction with faith as indicated in Hebrews 11:1. "Faith sees in the resurrection of Christ not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very earth on which his cross stands. It sees in him the future of the very humanity for which he died. That is why it finds the cross the hope of the earth."⁶¹

Hope is the key to any meaningful discourse of faith, life and theology. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26, labels death as the last enemy. "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power; For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." For Paul, like Moltmann or even Cone, hope is supposed to be central to the way we do theology and church.

Moltmann and Hope

⁶⁰ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 150

⁶¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, on the grounds and implications of a Christian eschatology (SCM press, 1967), 21.

Published in England in 1967, *Theology of Hope* gave way to the unknown German theologian as *New York Times* placed his work on the front page, “God Is Dead Doctrine Losing Ground to ‘Theology of Hope’”. What caught the attention of the *New York Times*, as well as other readers, was the message of hope emanating from Tübingen while, in America, the drums of the death of God, or should I call it funeral, was humiliating and draining the ecclesiological vitality. Moltmann makes no apology for his eschatological view of the church ‘in the power of the Holy Spirit’ and its hope in the resurrected Christ.

The event of the Cross and resurrection has a message of hope for the church, both now and future. Hope for the church, according to Moltmann, is not a withdrawal from the world in anticipation for a better one, but rather, an active participation in the world to assist in the coming of that ‘better world’. For Moltmann, it is by this promise that we are able to reconcile our present experience with the coming of God, who is the power at the ‘front’ of history and not ‘above’ it, setting us in contradiction to current natural and social powers. Agreeing with Calvin, Moltmann clarifies that Christian faith does not mean fleeing from the world, but rather, it means straining after the future without need to transcend the bounds. He argues that, “in the contradiction between the word of promise and the experiential reality of suffering and death, faith takes its stand on hope, and ‘hastens beyond this world.’”⁶²

For Moltmann, It is in this contradiction that hope must prove its power. Hence eschatology, too, is forbidden to ramble, and must formulate its statements of hope in contradiction to our present experience of suffering, evil and death, “Hope without

⁶² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, on the grounds and implications of a Christian eschatology (SCM press, 1967), 19.

remembrance leads to illusion, just as, conversely, remembrance without hope can result in resignation.”⁶³ Moltmann’s insistence on hope, with its socio-political component, is not only intended to change the interpretation of the world, history, and human relations, but also the expectation of God’s transformation. It is a call for ‘the realization of the eschatological hope of justice, life, socializing of humanity and peace for all creation’.⁶⁴

Israel’s hope in God’s future salvation of his people, which had already reached ‘eschatological’ proportions by the end of the Old Testament period, became a Christian eschatology of hope in the future revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ. Hope is the power aroused in a person in the light of their faith in God’s promise of a definite future existence of that person. We cannot afford to live without it. As Moltmann laments, “Totally without hope one cannot live. To live without hope is to cease to live. Hell is hopelessness. It is no accident that above the entrance to Dante’s hell is the inscription: Leave behind all hope, you who enter here.”⁶⁵

Cone and Hope

Hope, for Cone, is not a theoretical concept to be answered in a seminary classroom, or in the privacy of one’s experience; it is a practical idea which deals with the reality of this world. To understand hope in a broad perspective, Cone believes that it has to be attached to particular point in history, so as to be relevant to the present experience and even to the future. His hope is rooted in his lived experience as he

⁶³Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993), ix.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the grounds and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (SCM press, 1967), 309.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*; 33.

observes that the Black church was born out of a difficult time of oppression as its people refused to believe what the white supremacist said to diminish their hope.

Though the Black church had lost its zeal and hope for freedom, and the ability to speak to the black people, according to Cone, the church gained back its motif during the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. He compared Dr. King with Rev. Henry Garnett, Nat Turner and Biblical prophets of old. For Cone, any theology of hope, in the context of eschatological hope, must correlate with Black experience and that of the Black church. He says that the Black church is the only institution which grew out of slavery. This view is similar to J. D. Roberts in his view of the church as a symbol of hope. "Black church had become not only the symbol of hope but the agent of liberation for black people. It was the awareness of the presence of the despised and rejected one in its midst which enabled the black church to become the inspirational source, the organizational drive, and sustaining power for a moment which might often have faltered and failed but for the conviction that almighty God himself was committed to the struggle and would reward those who endure to the end."⁶⁶

According to Cone, Jesus had no choice, as the merciless powers of Rome took him to Calvary, just as the Blacks in America, as the white supremacist took them to the lynching tree. In this contrast, Cone says, yet God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. In his comparative analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr., as respected theologians, he show how our contextual particularities inform and influence our theology.

⁶⁶ J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Political Theology*; (West Minister press, 2005), 179.

Cone's concluding section offers profound healing and hope out of the twisted wooden cross and the twisted lynched Black bodies. For him, Christ's death denotes salvation and healing for Blacks and Whites, and America in general, because God was revealed in Jesus on the cross. The history between blacks and the white supremacist, according to Cone cannot permanently stop the reconciliation and salvation, for the whites, because of the union which exist through the blood of lynching, sexual union and of the Cross. The cross and the lynching tree complement each other, reminding us of human terror and heavenly power on earth. Cone warns us that this healing is not going to come easily due to the American history between Whites and Blacks, in his view of the lynching tree as a metaphor for the white America's crucifixion of the Black people.

Cone does not close the door for healing and reconciliation, rather, he challenges hypocrisy of the whites for deliberately refusing to name or see Christ in the context of the lynching tree. This will only end, he says, if America will have the courage to confront the great sin and the ongoing white supremacy with repentance and reparation to experience what he calls, "Hope beyond tragedy."⁶⁷

The Cross, Hope and Liberation

A committee of the National Conference of Black Christians issued a statement in 1963, "The demand that Christ the liberator imposes on all men requires all blacks to affirm their full dignity as persons and all whites to surrender their presumptions of superiority and abuse of power." In support of this proclamation, Cone expressed his

⁶⁷ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 166.

frustration as well as hope, “If God loves black people, why then do we suffer so much?”⁶⁸ That was the question which has bothered Cone from his childhood till now, he said in 2011. This question notwithstanding, he sees hope in the horizon, a glimpse of hope, though the wheels of change and liberation for the black Americans have been moving slowly but sure. Liberation has not been handed over from the masters willingly, but rather the price was, as it was for Christ, paid by death on a tree.

Theology cannot separate itself from the community which it intends to serve or represent; just as Black theology uses Black experience in its historical context to address a theology of liberation. In this case, Cone first began his work by stating that, “Christian theology is a theology of liberation”, only to reverse his own words by questioning how white theologians and Churches interpreted or applied their Christian theology. “White theology has consistently preserved the integrity of the community of oppressors. I conclude that it is not Christian theology at all.”⁶⁹ Based on this observation, I wonder whether Christian theology has to be constricted, in its interpretive enclave, to only Black liberation, or be confined within the limits and parameters of one’s cognitive ability. This is one of several questions I intend to work on in my further studies on this subject of the theology of the cross.

To begin a dialogue about the cross and liberation, intertwined within its multiplicities, theology has to inquire beyond the biblical text. The point of departure in theological discourse for the Latin American liberation theologians, like Cone, is not from the Biblical text but the social context of the people and their history, as Hugo Assmann puts it. “Theology of liberation as an effective process of critical reflection on

⁶⁸ Ibid; 154

⁶⁹ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*: (Mary Knoll, N.Y.: Obis, 1970), 1, 9.

historical practice, will have to go back to the theology of the cross. It will also have to strip it of the alienating mystifications that have accrued to it...it will have to give back to the man Jesus his full integrity as a human being and give his death the historical and political meaning that in fact it possessed.”⁷⁰

Though Assmann’s theological thought has a Catholic influence in it, the message of the Cross and its liberation implications goes beyond boundaries of race, religion, or nationality. My question here is, how do we know that we are interpreting the Cross for hope rather than violence and death, and can we avoid this misuse which has been perpetuated through history?

Conclusion

To conclude this work, we have to look back to where I started, with the ‘*The Passion of the Christ*’ movie, as the story took us back through history in an attempt to re-live the Gethsemane experience. The cross is central to this work as it should be to our Christian theology and the church, though its meaning and interpretation may vary depending on what we are saying about the cross. Moltmann’s theology of the cross is centered on his European experience of World War II, and though he criticizes the western Christology for the way the message of the cross has been interpreted, he focuses more on the eschatological aspect of the cross.

For Cone, “The cross was God’s critique of power with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.” In these weighty words, Cone embodies his way of grappling with

⁷⁰ Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*: (Maryknoll Orbis, 1976), 54-55.

the mystery and the theology of the cross. Dr. King would agree with him in his non-violent call to Black Americans to stand up to racial segregation in a peaceful demonstration, fashioning this move with Jesus, who endured the Cross despite of being God.

Christian theology, as I see it in the prism of the inescapable reality of the cross, cannot affirm its soteriology in any meaningful way by circumventing the crucified God in Jesus Christ. One has to let radical theology of the Cross to imbue the criterion of all theology. As Moltmann argues, “The crisis of the church in present-day society is not merely the critical choice between assimilation and retreat into the ghetto, but the crisis of its own existence as the church of the crucified Christ”⁷¹. It is from this view that he redirects the church and scholars of Christian theology back to the basics of identity which, according to Moltmann, will reveal the individual’s stance in the Christian church and Christian theology. “Crucified Christ himself is a challenge to Christian theology and the Christian church, which dare to call themselves by his name”⁷²

Where do we go from here, after reading Moltmann and Cone’s view of the Cross? How do we extract and display the obvious evidence of hope eclipsed by the violence associated with the symbol of the Cross in its history? Both Moltmann and Cone, especially in the *Crucified God* and *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, have shown extensively how the Cross has been more abused negatively than the positive use it deserves. The question raised by this work is, in the context of Moltmann and Cone, “Is it possible to be more ‘positive’ and less ‘cautiously affirmative’ about the church’s use of the symbol of the Cross?” If so, on what basis or evidence; and how can we proceed

⁷¹Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress press, 1993), 3.

⁷² *Ibid*; 3.

without denying and betraying the past centuries where victims have suffered unjustly at the hands of the church's destructive misuse of the Cross?

After reading Moltmann and Cone's view of the Cross, I was left half satisfied because, I expected them to say more about the power and positive use of the cross by the church at least in the last hundred years. Reconciliations have taken place under this symbol. Race equality may not be where Cone wants it to be, but I expected some more acknowledgments of the progress we have made in history. Juxtaposing the good and the ugly part of the cross is not enough, otherwise we can easily be lost in the realm of philosophical quagmires of academia and miss its intended meaning. I can understand the precaution taken by these two theologians, almost scared to transition from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Moltmann addressed the event but I didn't hear the drum beats of resurrection Sunday, which were overshadowed by the violence and woes of Friday. On the other hand, Cone reduces his theology of the cross to keep the Black experience of slavery and lynching in the history of America. The point he made by criticizing white theologians for refusing to see the correlation between the cross and the lynching tree is profound, but there is more to the cross than black and white, or geographical locations.

I have argued that it is possible to proceed into a theology of hope, in the context of the Cross, despite and precisely in the face of its violent history. The Cross can be a symbol of hope for and in the church, and also for and in the world, if and when used for the new meaning it gained after Christ's death on that Cross. The common thread between Moltmann, Cone and I is that death did not have the last word on the Cross. My concern to both of them, as demonstrated in this work, is that I proceed after the cross

and suffering and the abuse of the Cross in history, to hope and reconciliation that has and is and will take place under this symbol of the Cross.

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