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"The Terrible Beauty of the Cross" and the Tragedy of the Lynching Tree:

A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr

> They murdered the negro in cold blood in the jail doorway; then they dragged him to the principal business street and hung him to a telegraph-pole, afterwards riddling his lifeless body with revolver shots. . . . And there the negro hung until daylight the next morning—an unspeakably grisly, dangling horror.[1]
>
> —Ray Stannard Baker

> Our country's national crime is lynching.[2]
>
> —James Cutler

The lynching tree—so strikingly similar to the cross on Golgotha—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. In the "lynching era," between 1880 to 1940, white Christians lynched nearly five thousand black men and women in a manner with obvious echoes of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus. Yet these "Christians" did not see the irony or contradiction in their actions.

As Jesus was an innocent victim of mob hysteria and Roman imperial violence, many African Americans were innocent victims of white mobs, thirsting for blood in the name of God and in defense of segregation, white supremacy, and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race. Both the cross and the lynching tree were symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals, and insurrectionists—the lowest of the low in society. Both Jesus and blacks were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity and cruelty. They were stripped, in order to be deprived of dignity, then paraded, mocked and whipped, pierced, derided and spat upon, tortured for hours in the presence of jeering crowds for popular entertainment. In both cases, the purpose was to strike terror in the subject community. It was to let people know that the same thing would happen to them if they did not stay in their place. What New Testament scholar Paula Frederickson says about crucifixion in Roman society could be substituted easily for lynching in the United States.

> Crucifixion was a Roman form of public service announcement: Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar. The point of the exercise was not the death of the offender as such, but getting the attention of those watching. Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience.[3]

The crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans in Jerusalem and the lynching of blacks by whites in the United States are so amazingly similar that one wonders what blocks the American Christian imagination from seeing the connection.[4]

That the analogy between the cross and the lynching tree

should have eluded the Christian agents of white supremacy is perhaps not surprising. But how do we understand the failure of even the most "progressive" of America's white theologians and religious thinkers to make this connection? A case in point is Reinhold Niebuhr, widely regarded as America's most influential theologian in the twentieth century, and possibly in American history. Among his contemporaries he was unusually attuned to social reality and the "irony" and tragedy of American history. Among white theologians he was particularly sensitive to the evils of racism and spoke and wrote on many occasions of the sufferings of African Americans. Few theologians of the twentieth century focused as much attention on the cross, one of the central themes of his work. And yet even he failed to connect the cross and its most vivid reenactment in his time. To reflect on this failure is to address a defect in the conscience of white Christians and to suggest why African Americans have needed to trust and cultivate their own theological imagination.

Born in 1892 in Wright City, Missouri, Niebuhr was the pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit (1915-1928) and later professor of Christian Social Ethics and Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1928-1960), where he was the dominant voice in defining the discipline of Christian social ethics, the study of Christian action in society. "His work had the most important impact on social thought and public policy of any Christian thinker of our time,"[5] writes Ronald Stone, an influential Niebuhr scholar, and his classic texts are still widely read in theology, history, social ethics, sociology, and political philosophy.[6]

Among theologians, Niebuhr was unusual for his wide influence in the secular political world. McGeorge Bundy called Niebuhr "probably the most influential single mind in the development of American attitudes which combined moral purpose with a sense of political reality."[7] His "Christian realism" (as

opposed to what he regarded as naïve or idealistic optimism) won the admiration of many secular intellectuals and politicians, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Hubert Humphrey, and Jimmy Carter. Even in the present time, President Barack Obama has called Niebuhr one of his favorite philosophers, and his name is invoked frequently by both liberals and conservatives, journalists and politicians, theologians and political philosophers.[8]

Best known for his realist approach in Christian social ethics, Niebuhr rejected pacifism (which he had once espoused), idealism, and perfectionism—the idea that individuals and groups could achieve the standard of love he saw revealed in Jesus' life, teachings, and death. Niebuhr taught that love is the absolute, transcendent standard that stands in judgment over what human beings can achieve in history. Because of human finitude and humanity's natural tendency to deny it (sin), we can never fully reach that ethical standard. The best that humans can strive for is justice, which is love approximated, a balance of power among competing groups. Unlike the advocates of the Social Gospel, who often suggested that we could through love build the Kingdom of God on earth, Niebuhr placed justice, rather than love, at the center of Christian social ethics. Since human beings are finite, Niebuhr reasoned that we can never do anything apart from our interests, especially when we act collectively. According to Niebuhr, democracy—"a method of finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems"—was the political system best adapted to the strengths and limitations of human nature. As he put it famously in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[9]

Since Niebuhr saw justice as a balance of power between groups, whether classes, races, or nations, he saw it always in a state of flux, never achieving perfection in history. To him this meant that we must approach what we do *practically*, knowing that

> Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.[10]

Niebuhr takes his starting point for Christian realism as "the facts of experience," the willingness to "take all factors . . . into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power."[11] This starting point has significant implications for the question of race. When one begins with the facts of experience and not, as in Karl Barth's theology, with God's revelation, the conversation must confront the brutal realities of racial injustice: slavery, segregation, and lynching. While Barth's theology starts with the Trinity, with a focus on the Word of God, Niebuhr's theology and ethics start with an emphasis on self-interest and power. This difference in starting point caused friction between Niebuhr and Barth for three decades, especially in the context of the World Council of Churches and in the pages of the *Christian Century*.

Niebuhr's realist approach to Christian ethics was deeply connected to the cross, which he identified as the heart of the Christian gospel. "If the divine is made relevant to the human," Niebuhr claimed, "it must *transvalue our values* and enter the human at the point where man is lowly rather than proud and where he is weak rather than strong. Therefore I believe that God came in the form of a little child born to humble parents in a manger. . . ." This "life in the manger ended upon the cross . . . [and we] might end there if we really emulated it."[12]

"Transvaluation of values," a term derived from Nietzsche (who derided Christianity's embrace of the weak), is the heart of

Niebuhr's perspective on the cross. He uses the phrase repeatedly in his writings. We find its meaning whenever he speaks about God's mercy and love in relation to Jesus Christ, especially in his sermons and several of his books. For Niebuhr the revelation of God's transcendent love hidden in Jesus' suffering on the cross is not simply the "keystone" of the Christian faith; it is the very key to history itself.[13]

"The crucified Messiah [is] the final revelation of the divine character and divine purpose." He was rejected because people expected a Messiah "perfect in power and perfect in goodness." But "the revelation of divine goodness in history must be powerless." If human power in history—among races, nations, and other collectives as well as individuals—is *self-interested* power, then "the revelation of divine goodness in history" must be weak and not strong. "The Christ is led as the lamb to the slaughter." Thus, God's revelation *transvalues* human values, turning them upside down.

For Niebuhr, "The cross [is] an ultimate point of illumination on the character of man and God."[14] People reject the cross because it contradicts historical values and expectations—just as Peter challenged Jesus for saying, "The Son of Man must suffer": "Far be it from You; this shall not happen to You." But Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16:21; Mk 8:31, 33). "In the course of a few moments," Peter went from being "the mouthpiece of God" to a "tool" of Satan, because he could not connect vicarious suffering with God's revelation. Suffering and death were not supposed to happen to the Messiah. He was expected to triumph over evil and not be defeated by it. How could God's revelation be found connected with the "the worst of deaths," the "vilest death," "a criminal's death on the tree of shame"?[15]

Like the lynching tree in America, the cross in the time of Jesus was the most "barbaric form of execution of the utmost cruelty," the absolute opposite of human value systems. It turned

reason upside down. In his sermon-lecture "The Transvaluation of Values" in *Beyond Tragedy*, Niebuhr turns to Paul to express what it meant to see the world from a transcendent, divine point of view.

> For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: That no flesh shall glory in his presence. (1 Cor 1:26-29)

The wise, the mighty, and the noble are condemned because their status in society tempts them to think too highly of their knowledge, power, and heritage. Mary's song, the Magnificat, makes a similar point: "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree." Jesus in the Gospels repeatedly makes the same claim: "The last shall be first and the first last." Or as Niebuhr put it, "The Christian faith is centered in one who was born in a manger and who died upon the cross. This is really the source of the Christian transvaluation of all values. The Christian knows that the cross is the truth. In that standard he sees the ultimate success of what the world calls failure and failure of what the world calls success."[16]

"The cross is the truth" because God is hidden there in Jesus' sacrificial, vicarious suffering. Only faith can see that which cannot be derived from the logic of history or reason. "Faith is able to sense and appropriate an ultimate truth too deep for human reason."[17] This faith is defined by humility and repentance.

"People without imagination," Niebuhr said, "really have no right to write about ultimate things."[18] Certainly it takes a special kind of imagination to understand the truth of the cross.

"Ultimate religious truth," Niebuhr wrote, "can be grasped only in symbolic form, and the Christ of the cross is the supreme symbol of divine grace."[19] For that reason, Niebuhr said, "Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit."[20] In an article from 1929, he displayed his own capacity for that kind of poetic language when he speaks of "the 'terrible beauty' of the cross,"[21] an artful phrase that highlights the paradox of the cross—its power and futility. One needs a powerful imagination to see both tragedy and beauty, futility and redemption in the cross. "Christianity is a faith," Niebuhr wrote, "which takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by way of the cross to victory in the cross."[22]

Few could speak with such eloquence about the cross as Reinhold Niebuhr. When I read his sermons and other theological reflections on the cross, I could almost be listening to a black preacher who can take a congregation through the power of imagination to the foot of Jesus' cross.

> I can see Him as He mounted Calvary and hung upon
> de cross for our sins.
> I can see-eee-ee
> De mountains fall to their rocky knees and when He
> cried
> "My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?" . . .
> And about that time Jesus groaned on de cross, and
> Dropped His head in the locks of His shoulder and
> said, "It is finished, it is finished."[23]

Niebuhr writes with a similar poetic imagination, using symbols and myths to tell the terrible truth about the salvation offered in the cross to all who accept with a faith defined by humility and repentance.

And yet, in the end, was there not a limit to Niebuhr's imagination? For all his exquisite sensitivity to symbols, analogies, and the moral dimensions of history, was he ultimately blind to the

most obvious symbolic re-enactment of the crucifixion in his own time? Niebuhr's focus on realism ("facts of experience") and the cross (tragedy) should have turned his gaze to the lynching tree, but he did not look there, even though lynching trees were widely scattered throughout the American landscape. Why did Niebuhr fail to connect Jesus' cross to the most obvious cross bearers in American society?

Niebuhr has a complex perspective on race—at once honest and ambivalent, radical and moderate. On the one hand, he says that "in the matter of race we are only a little better than the Nazis"; and, on the other, he is urging "sympathy for anxious [white] parents who are opposed to unsegregated schools." In terms almost as severe as those of Malcolm X, Niebuhr speaks about "God's judgment on America." He calls "racial hatred, the most vicious of all human vices," "the dark and terrible abyss of evil in the soul of man," a "form of original sin," "the most persistent of all collective evils," "more stubborn than class prejudices," and "the gravest social evil in our nation." "If," he concluded, "the white man were to expiate his sins committed against the darker races, few white men would have a right to live."[24]

But, unlike Malcolm, Niebuhr also says that the founding fathers, despite being slaveholders, "were virtuous and honorable men, and certainly no villains." "They merely bowed to the need for establishing national unity" based on "a common race and common language." He even says that the 1896 Supreme Court doctrine of "separate but equal," which made Jim Crow segregation legal in the South, "was a very good doctrine for its day," since it allowed "the gifted members" among ex-slaves, a "culturally backward" people, to show, as a few had done in sports and the arts, "irrefutable proof that these deficiencies were not due to 'innate' inferiorities." In my view these latter views amount to a moral justification of slavery and Jim Crow.

Niebuhr praised the 1954 Supreme Court decision ending segregation in public schools, which he claimed "initiated the first

step in the Negro revolt." Yet he was also pleased by the Court's added phrase, "with all deliberate speed," which "wisely" gave the white South "time to adjust" (while also opening a loophole to delay integration). "The Negroes," Niebuhr said, "will have to exercise patience and be sustained by a robust faith that history will gradually fulfill the logic of justice."

Niebuhr's call for gradualism, patience, and prudence during the decade when Willie McGee (1951), Emmett Till (1955), M. C. "Mack" Parker (1959), and other blacks were lynched sounds like that of a southern moderate more concerned about not challenging the cultural traditions of the white South than achieving justice for black people. He cited the distinguished novelist William Faulkner and Hodding Carter, a Mississippi journalist "with a long record of fairness on the race issue," in defense of gradualism, patience, and prudence, so as not to push the southern white people "off balance," even though he realized that blacks were understandably smarting under such a long history of injustice: "We can hardly blame Negroes for being impatient with the counsel for patience, in view of their age-long suffering under the white man's arrogance." Yet, Niebuhr continued in the same essay, "The fact that it is not very appealing to the victims of a current injustice does not make it any less the course of wisdom in overcoming historic injustices."[25]

Niebuhr chose to listen to southern moderates like Faulkner and Carter on race, rather than to civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., who regarded Faulkner's counsel to "go slow, pause for a moment" as a "tranquilizing drug of gradualism." "It is hardly a moral act to encourage others patiently to accept injustice which he himself does not endure," King wrote, in a response influenced by Niebuhr himself. Because Niebuhr identified with white moderates in the South more than with their black victims, he could not really feel their suffering as his own. When King asked him to sign a petition appealing to President Eisenhower to protect black children involved in integrating

schools in the South, Niebuhr declined. Such pressure, he told his friend and Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, would do more harm than good. Niebuhr believed that white ministers from the South would be more effective.[26]

What accounts for the contradictions in Niebuhr's perspective on race? In part they are due to his failure to step into black people's shoes and "walk around in them,"[27] to use the words of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was easy for Niebuhr to walk around in his own shoes, as a white man, and view the world from that vantage point, but it takes a whole lot of empathic effort to step into those of black people and see the world through the eyes of African Americans.

Niebuhr himself analyzed this dilemma, having persuasively pointed out in his classic, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that groups are notoriously selfish and have limited capacity to step outside of their interests and see the world from another group's standpoint. The will-to-survive is so strong that it transmutes easily into the will-to-power. Niebuhr expands on this point in the first volume of his theological masterpiece *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. All human beings are finite and free. Our freedom creates anxiety and insecurity, causing us both as individuals and as groups to seek security among our own kind through various forms of power over others in politics, religion, and knowledge. Groups use both religion and reason to advance their own interests and find it nearly impossible to "feel the pain of others as vividly as they do [their own]."[28]

From a rational and intellectual standpoint, however, Niebuhr did attempt to walk in black people's shoes, recognizing how they had been victims of white racist violence throughout American history. He knew about the brutality of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and lynching. When he was a pastor in Detroit, the Ku Klux Klan was very active politically, nearly capturing the mayor's office in 1925. There was a near-lynching the same year when Ossian Sweet, a black dentist, bought a house in

a white neighborhood and nearly caused a riot after he and a few relatives and friends moved into the dwelling. When a crowd of hundreds of whites assembled, throwing rocks and threatening the occupants, Sweet's brother, Henry, panicked and shot and killed a white man. That led to the arrest of all eleven occupants who were subsequently charged with murder.

During the first trial, with Clarence Darrow as the lead defense attorney, the jury could not reach a decision. But, in a second trial that involved only the shooter, Darrow was able to convince the jury to put themselves in Henry Sweet's shoes, and they brought back a "not guilty" verdict, which surprised many blacks and whites. What made Darrow so effective was his capacity to empathize with blacks and to persuade others to do so, arguing that blacks have as much right as whites to defend themselves when their home is under attack. According to Niebuhr, Darrow "made everyone writhe as he pictured the injustices and immoralities of our present industrial system." But, Niebuhr continued, "The tremendous effect of his powerful address was partially offset by the bitterness with which he spoke. . . ." When Niebuhr thought a little more deeply about Darrow's empathy with black suffering, however, he said, "I suppose it is difficult to escape bitterness when you have eyes to see and heart to feel what others are too blind and too callous to notice."[29]

Niebuhr had "eyes to see" black suffering, but I believe he lacked the "heart to feel" it as his own. Although he wrote many essays about race, commenting on a variety of racial issues in America and in Africa and Asia, the problem of race was never one of his central theological or political concerns.

It has always been difficult for white people to empathize fully with the experience of black people. But it has never been impossible. In contrast to Niebuhr and other professors at Union Seminary, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during his year of study at Union (1930-1931), showed an

existential interest in blacks, befriending a black student named Franklin Fisher, attending and teaching Bible study and Sunday School, and even preaching at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Bonhoeffer also read widely in African American history and literature, including Walter White's *Rope and Faggot* on the history of lynching, read about the burning of Raymond Gunn in Maryville, Missouri (January 12, 1931), in the *Literary Digest*, "the first lynching in 1931," and expressed his outrage over the "infamous Scottsboro trial." He also wrote about the "Negro Church," the "black Christ" and "white Christ" in the writings of the black poet Countee Cullen, read Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, and regarded the "spirituals" as the "most influential contribution made by the negro to American Christianity." Some of Bonhoeffer's white friends wondered whether he was becoming too involved in the Negro community.[30]

Niebuhr, in contrast, showed little or no interest in engaging in dialogue with blacks about racial justice, even though he lived in Detroit during the great migration of blacks from the South and in New York near Harlem, the largest concentration of blacks in America. He attended socialist and leftist meetings when W. E. B. Du Bois and A. Philip Randolph were present and included such writers and artists as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen of the Harlem Renaissance in his course Ethical Viewpoints in Modern Literature (a course that Bonhoeffer attended). But Niebuhr cites no black intellectuals in his writings. He repeatedly writes about "our Negro minority" (not "our brothers," as he referred to Jews), a phrase that suggests white paternalism. Although Niebuhr allowed his name to be used for the support committee of the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP (1943), he did not join the organization or attend any of its conferences dealing with racial justice. He often used the word "negro" in the lower case, at a time when the NAACP fought hard to establish its capitalization. He seemed only marginally concerned

about justice for black people, even though he firmly opposed racial prejudice in any form.

Unlike his "long love affair with the Jewish people," Niebuhr's lack of a strong empathy with black suffering prevented him from speaking out passionately for justice on behalf of black people, as did Clarence Darrow and many others in the NAACP and the Communist Party. He headed Mayor John Smith's Inter-racial Committee to study racial problems in Detroit and acknowledged "a rare experience to meet with . . . white and colored leaders and talk over our racial problems," which was perhaps the only time he would engage racial issues with black and white leaders together. While serving on the "race commission," Niebuhr saw that "the situation which colored people of the city face is really a desperate one, and no one who does not spend real time in gathering facts can have any idea of the misery and pain which exists among these people. . . ." When Niebuhr saw suffering, he described the facts as he saw them: "Thousands in this town are really living in torment while the rest of us eat, drink and make merry. What a civilization!"[31]

After Niebuhr left Detroit to teach theology and social ethics at Union Seminary in New York, a racial controversy arose at Bethel Church when two African Americans tried to join the congregation and were opposed by a significant number of members. Niebuhr's successor, Adelbert Helm, correctly insisted that racial inclusiveness was a test of the Christian identity of the church. However, when advocates on both sides of the controversy attempted to enlist Niebuhr's help, he apparently criticized the new pastor for his "unpedagogical methods," which led to his dismissal. While Niebuhr was no supporter of racism, he stated, "I never envisaged a fully developed interracial church at Bethel. I do not think we are ready for that," he wrote in a letter to the church council at Bethel. He contended that no congregation "at the present time" is ready to face the "ultimate test." "But," Niebuhr continued, "I do not see how any church can be

so completely disloyal to the gospel of love as to put up bars against members of another racial group who apply for inclusion in its fellowship."

Niebuhr knew that denying membership to persons merely on the basis of race was also a denial of the church's Christian identity. Yet he also knew that white churches were not prepared to include blacks, a minority they truly despised, and he was not prepared to deny the Christian identity of white churches on that basis. Reading his letter to the church council at Bethel, one can feel Niebuhr's deep spiritual struggle with this issue, as he blames himself and Bethel at the same time. He correctly surmised that the controversy reflected a failure of his ministry, a profound theological failure; for while he spoke many times against racial prejudice, there is no evidence that he endeavored to address race in a practical way by trying to lead Bethel toward racial inclusion. Even in the race commission report to the mayor, which he chaired, Niebuhr, as Ronald Stone said, "gave no hint of the churches' role in combating segregation."[32] "All religions have an element of ethical universalism in them," Niebuhr wrote later in a column for the *Detroit Times*, which in my view exposes the hypocrisy of his inaction at Bethel. "If this element does not operate to mitigate racial antagonisms there is something the matter with the interpretation of religion. If religious idealism does not help us to live together decently with members of other races and groups, it is not producing the kind of social imagination without which religion becomes a sounding brass and a tinkling symbol."

On the one hand, Niebuhr wrote in *Leaves:* "if a gospel is preached without opposition it is simply not the gospel which resulted in the cross." Yet on the other hand, he avoided controversy at Bethel, especially regarding race: "Here I have been preaching for thirteen years, and crying, 'Woe unto you if all men speak well of you,' and yet I leave without a serious controversy in the whole thirteen years."[33] This indicates that he did not

engage the race issue—the greatest moral problem in American history—in any practical way. During most of Niebuhr's life, lynching was the most brutal manifestation of white supremacy, and he said and did very little about it. Should we be surprised, then, that other white theologians, ministers, and churches followed suit?

As a professor at Union Seminary, Niebuhr expressed concern for racial justice not by seeking to establish it on the faculty and among the students but by working with the Delta Cooperative Farm, and also supporting the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. The Delta Farm was a collection of poor white and black farmers laboring together "to throw off the tenant farming system." All of these organizations focused on justice with an accent on racial and economic issues, and received support from the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, which Niebuhr founded. In his essay "Meditations from Mississippi," Niebuhr said, "The Delta Cooperative Farm seems to me the most significant experiment in social Christianity now being conducted in America." "The theological outlook which most of us found congenial," said Sam Franklin, the director of the Delta Farm in Rochdale, Mississippi, "was that of the 'Biblical realism' of the president of our board of trustees, Reinhold Niebuhr."

Niebuhr's work with his theological admirers and former students in the Delta ministry was the closest, and, perhaps, the only time he would engage the black struggle for justice. He had a firm grasp of economic issues, writing several persuasive essays and books on the theme and participating in many socialist organizations, even running for the New York State Senate on the Socialist Party ticket in 1930 and for Congress in 1932. But the issue of race was another matter, as indicated in the controversy at Bethel in Detroit and in his reflections on his visits to the South. Niebuhr discovered that talking about race was a divisive issue, even, or, shall we say, especially among white ministers in Mississippi, who were more concerned about the

mixing of the races than about justice for whites and blacks. In the name of "justified pedagogical expediency," Niebuhr said, "we told the ministers the farm would not unnecessarily challenge the prejudices of the south. That is a matter of expediency. Economic cooperation is so necessary that it is worth establishing it *even if scruples must be sacrificed to prejudices in the matter of social and educational relationships.*"

Yet while Niebuhr assured southern ministers that the Delta ministry would not challenge white supremacy, he nevertheless noted at the same time "the public gallows in the city of X" (why not name the city?) where "a hanging is a general fete to which men, women and children are invited." As Niebuhr boarded a train to depart Mississippi, he stated, "a newspaper falls in my hands with an account of a public hanging of two Negro boys, sixteen and eighteen years old." Was not that lynching alone enough for Niebuhr to know that white supremacy could not be ignored in searching for economic justice, or explicating the meaning of the Christian gospel in America? Niebuhr himself preserved class solidarity at the expense of racial justice, which many liberal white-led groups were inclined to do when fighting for justice among the poor.[34]

The public gallows Niebuhr saw and read about in the media in Mississippi should have reminded him of the tree on which Jesus hung and "the involuntary cross" he preached about at Bethel in 1915. In that sermon, he spoke about Simon of Cyrene, the African, bearing Jesus' cross. Black ministers, searching for ways to identify racially with the story of salvation in the scriptures, have since slavery times liked to preach about "Black Simon" (as they called him) who carried Jesus' cross. The Reverend James T. Holly, who wrote "The Divine Plan of Human Redemption in Its Ethnological Development" in the *AME Church Review* (1884), said:

> A son of Ham, Simon the Cyrenian, bore the cross of our Lord to the place of crucifixion when this dear Savior was no longer physically able to carry it. . . . When, therefore, our Savior shall be crowned and seated upon His Throne of Glory, He will doubtless remember in a peculiar manner the race whose son carried His cross for Him and choose from that race the crown nobles who shall minister around His Person in His Royal Palace.[35]

Black literary figures like Countee Cullen and James Weldon Johnson wrote about Black Simon:

> That twisted tortured thing hung from a tree,
> Swart victim of a newer Calvary.
>
> Yea, he who helped Christ up Golgotha's track,
> That Simon who did *not* deny, was black.

In a poetic rendition of the Negro sermon on "The Crucifixion," Johnson wrote:

> Up Golgotha's rugged road
> I see my Jesus go.
> I see him sink beneath the load,
> I see my drooping Jesus sink.
> And then they laid hold on Simon,
> Black Simon, yes, black Simon;
> They put the cross on Simon,
> And Simon bore the cross.[36]

Unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spent time in black communities despite only being in America for about a year, Niebuhr, in his sermon on Simon and the cross, missed an opportunity to move into the river of the black experience.

I remember ministers preaching about Black Simon when I was a teenager in Arkansas. Although blacks like to think that Simon volunteered to carry Jesus' cross, he did not; it was, as Niebuhr said, an involuntary cross. The Gospel of Mark says that "they compelled" Simon "to carry his cross" (15:21), just as

some African Americans were compelled to suffer lynching when another could not be found. Niebuhr could have explored this story with theological imagination, seeing blacks as crucified like Jesus and forced like Simon to carry the crosses of slavery, segregation, and lynching. But he did not.

In the end, Christian realism was not only a source of Niebuhr's radicalism but also of his conservatism. This is especially true of the struggles of the oppressed in the black community for racial justice; for even during his most radical period (1930s), when lynching resurged with a vengeance, he was, at most, a moderate on racial justice. Rather than challenging racial prejudice, he believed it must "slowly erode." Although he did not believe that African Americans could achieve proximate justice without the help of liberal whites, he did not choose to be among those to support actively and passionately the black struggle for justice.[37] He put most of his intellectual energies into other issues, especially injustices in the industrial system in his work with Norman Thomas and other socialists. The riots of the 1960s in the cities surprised him because, like most whites and many black middle-class leaders,[38] as he himself later acknowledged, he failed to see that the 1964 Civil Rights Bill did not "seriously affect the status of unemployed Negroes in Northern ghettos." Despair ensued, and "I, for one," Niebuhr acknowledged, "was slow to gauge its import" (though he could have seen it by looking out his window at Union Seminary near Harlem in New York). Struggling with his own failure and that of his group, Niebuhr reflects, "One wonders how we slept that long."[39]

Like most whites, Niebuhr did not realize the depth of black despair because he did not listen to Malcolm X and other Black Nationalists, who were speaking at Temple No. 7 and in the streets of Harlem, only a few blocks away. Had he turned on the radio or television, he could have heard the eloquent and powerful voice of Malcolm talking about the limits of the bourgeois civil rights movement and its leaders. Malcolm was not interested in proximate justice defined by liberal whites. "The price of freedom is death," he told Harlem blacks. Niebuhr probably heard Malcolm (who could be in New York City during the 1950s and 1960s and not know about Malcolm?) and thought he was just another "crazy Negro." Mike Wallace's 1959 television documentary series "The Hate that Hate Produced" was a media event that few people with even a marginal interest in race missed. Since Niebuhr did not heed Martin King on race but preferred Faulkner and Carter, it is very unlikely that he would have listened to the fiery message of Malcolm X. "While Dr. King was having a dream," Malcolm told a reporter shortly after King's 1963 March on Washington address, "the rest of us Negroes are having a nightmare."[40]

Niebuhr could have heard of the nightmare in the black community from many people. While spectacle lynching was on the decline in the 1950s, there were many legal lynchings as state and federal governments used the criminal justice system to intimidate, terrorize, and murder blacks. Whites could kill blacks, knowing that a jury of their peers would free them but would convict and execute any black who dared to challenge the white way of life. White juries, judges, and lawyers kept America "safe" from the threat of the black community. Thus, the nightmare in black life continued to deepen as progressive whites like Niebuhr remained silent about lynching.

Niebuhr often read poetry. "Religion is poetry," he wrote in his diary. "The truth in the poetry is vivified by adequate poetic symbols and is therefore more convincing than the poor prose with which the average preacher must attempt to grasp the ineffable."[41] There were many voices he might have heard during his time in New York. Before Malcolm, the famous anti-lynching poem "If We Must Die" exploded from Jamaican writer Claude McKay during the "Red Summer" of 1919. It was later recited by Winston Churchill, one of Niebuhr's heroes, in a speech against the Nazis, and it was found on the body of an American soldier

killed in action in 1944. McKay, however, was speaking to blacks who were being lynched by whites in northern riots.

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While around us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
> O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
> Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back![42]

The writer Richard Wright wrote short stories about the nightmare in black life in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938); told a story about it in his landmark novel *Native Son* (1940), which he hoped "would leave his readers 'without the consolation of tears'"; wrote a "lyrical essay on the story of the Negro in America" in *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941); and then gave an autobiographical account of the nightmare in *Black Boy* (1945), "which created almost as much of a sensation when it appeared . . . as had *Native Son*."[43]

Langston Hughes, another New Yorker and poet laureate of Black America, also articulated black dreams not realized.

> What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> Like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> Like a syrupy sweet?
> Maybe it just sags
> Like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?*[44]

Lorraine Hansberry's New York Critics Award–winning Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), whose title was taken from Hughes's poem, was a powerful portrayal of a Chicago black family trying to realize their dream of moving out of the ghetto to a place where few blacks ever lived. Niebuhr saw Marc Connelly's play *Green Pastures* (1930) and even wrote a review, praising its "warmth and beauty of Negro faith," depicting "a sense of awe for the dignity with which simple men meet the ultimate mysteries of life."[45] *Green Pastures* was a dramatic rendition of black faith seen through white eyes, thus hardly a good source for understanding religion in the nightmare of black life.

Finally, Niebuhr wrote four books on American history but did not deal with racial issues in any substantive manner. When he sent a manuscript of *The Irony of American History* to his historian friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Schlesinger called Niebuhr's attention to the glaring omission of the Negro:

> One irony deserving comment somewhere perhaps is the relationship between our democratic and equalitarian pretensions and our treatment of the Negro. This remains, John Quincy Adams called it in 1820, "the great and foul stain upon the North American Union"; and I think you might consider mentioning it.[46]

But Niebuhr did not mention it, finding it apparently not a substantial concern. This was a serious failure by an American religious leader often called this nation's greatest theologian. How could anyone be a great theologian and not engage

America's greatest moral issue? Unfortunately, white theologians, then and since, have typically ignored the problem of race, or written and spoken about it without urgency, not regarding it as critical for theology or ethics.

Niebuhr, by contrast, did acknowledge that "we have failed catastrophically only on one point—our relations to the Negro race." But what about the native people in this land? He claimed that North America was a "virgin continent when the Anglo-Saxons came, with a few Indians in a primitive state of culture."[47] He wrote about Arabs of Palestine and people of color in the Third World in a similar manner, offering moral justification for colonialism. Niebuhr even justified U.S. imperialism, referring to America as being elected by God: "Only those who have no sense of the profundities of history would deny that various nations and classes, various social groups and races are at various times placed in such a position that a special measure of the divine mission in history falls upon them. In that sense God has chosen us in this fateful period of world history."[48]

There is a great difference in the way Niebuhr wrote about Jews, on the one hand, and blacks and other people of color, on the other. When he wrote about Jews, he had engaged in a dialogue with them that began in Detroit and continued throughout his life, culminating in his great address, "The Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization," at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he urged Christians to stop trying to convert Jews to Christianity. Yet his essay "Justice to the American Negro from State, Community and Church," in *Pious and Secular America*, which spoke of the white fear of the Negro's "cultural backwardness," was not written in conversation with blacks.[49] In contrast to his friend Abraham Heschel, a close friend and supporter of Martin Luther King Jr., Niebuhr made no effort to engage in dialogue with black religious leaders and scholars or to develop friendship with black people with whom he could learn about race as he did with Jews.[50]

The only dialogue Niebuhr is known to have had on race with a radical black intellectual was with James Baldwin, following the September 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that killed four little girls. Niebuhr's former student Thomas Kilgore, then pastor at Friendship Baptist Church in Harlem and the New York director of Martin King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), asked Niebuhr to appear on the Protestant Council radio program with Baldwin to discuss "the meaning of the Birmingham tragedy." It was not clear from the audio tape whether Baldwin had read Niebuhr, but Niebuhr let Baldwin know that "I've read almost everything you've written."

As the moderator, Kilgore started the dialogue by asking Baldwin, "Does the missing face of Christ on the stained glass window, which survived the bombing . . . suggest to you a meaning of the Birmingham tragedy?" At first Baldwin responded with irony: "The absence of the face is something of an achievement, since we have been victimized so long by an alabaster Christ." Then he turned serious, and suggested that "it sums up the crisis we're living through. If Christ has no face, then perhaps it is time that we, who in one way or another, invented and are responsible for our deities, give him a new face . . . and make . . . the whole hope of Christian love a reality. And as far as I can tell," he continued, "it's never been a reality in the 2000 years since his assassination."

Niebuhr agreed with Baldwin that the missing face of Christ represented a deep moral crisis, "the failure of the church" to "give the Christian message the real content . . . the real face of Christ." But he was careful to emphasize that, in contrast to Baldwin's accent on love, groups don't love. "The Negro doesn't love the white man collectively or the white man the Negro collectively," Niebuhr said. We, therefore, must see that "love is the motive, but justice is the instrument." Both agreed that "the white church has failed," and that "the Negro church has really realized itself in

this crisis." Niebuhr proclaimed that "Martin Luther King is one of the great Americans of our day."

Although the Baldwin–Niebuhr dialogue did not reveal sharp disagreements, it did reveal different levels of passion in their responses, a gulf of emotional orientation to the racial crisis, reflected in the bombing. Baldwin, identifying with a powerless black minority, was seething with rage, ready to say anything to get white Americans to stop such violence, while Niebuhr, identifying with the powerful white majority, was calm and dispassionate in the face of what most blacks regarded as an unspeakable evil. Baldwin was relentless in his critique of white Americans for failing to live up to their own political and religious traditions about love and justice, even saying that Negroes were the only Christians and the only hope for the country.

> The only people in this country at the moment who believe either in Christianity or in the country are the most despised minority in it. . . . It is ironical . . . the people who were slaves here, the most beaten and despised people here . . . should be at this moment . . . the only hope this country has. It doesn't have any other. None of the descendants of Europe seem to be able to do, or have taken it on themselves to do, what Negroes are now trying to do. And this is not a chauvinistic or racial outlook. It probably has something to do with the nature of life itself. It forces you, in any extremity, any extreme, to discover what you really live by, whereas most Americans have been for so long, so safe and so sleepy, that they don't any longer have any real sense of what they live by. I think they really think it may be Coca-Cola.

While Niebuhr agreed, he did not want to throw out "the white man as white man," and asked "whether there is not a leaven in the other classes that would correspond to the light of truth in the despised minority." Baldwin replied that "I don't mean to say the white people are villains or devils or anything like that," but what "I do mean to say is this: that the bulk of the white . . . Christian majority in this country has exhibited a really staggering level of irresponsibility and immoral washing of the hands, you know. . . . I don't suppose that . . . all the white people in Birmingham are monstrous people. But they're mainly silent people, you know. And that is a crime in itself."

Baldwin's condemnation of the silence of the Birmingham white majority in the face of the killing of children was similar to the speech of Rabbi Joachim Prinz (a refugee from Germany) at the March on Washington. "When I was a rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime . . . the most important thing I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most urgent and most disgraceful, the most shameful, the most tragic problem is silence."[51]

When Baldwin said, "there is something wrong with the economic structure," Niebuhr quickly said, "But that gets us way *beyond* the racial issue, that becomes a very complex economic issue." "Indeed," Baldwin replied. However, Baldwin had no intention of engaging in a theoretical discussion about socialism and communism or Marx and Lenin. "What is called the racial issue never is a racial issue as it turns out anyway . . . [but] simply the fact that I, visibly, am the descendant of slaves, and a source of cheap labor," which "Americans used 'pathological rationalizations' to defend themselves." As an artist and ex-preacher, Baldwin wanted to shake America out of its complacency about race. "I never believed I was happy down on the levee; I never said I was a happy, shiftless, watermelon-eating darky; the country did. And what is worse, the country believed it. And it still does. They thought I was happy in my place. I was never happy in my place."

Niebuhr missed completely much of what Baldwin was saying. Baldwin was dealing with what Niebuhr had written about thirty years earlier in *Moral Man* when he was Baldwin's age, expressing a similar passion against injustice. Baldwin embodied

what Niebuhr called "a sublime madness in the soul," when he wrote that "nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and 'spiritual wickedness in high places.'" Of course, this madness is dangerous, but yet necessary because without such madness "truth is obscured." Yet in his dialogue with Baldwin thirty years later, Niebuhr was speaking with a "rationality" that "belongs to cool observers," and Baldwin was speaking to what "ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted."[52]

Despite all Niebuhr's writing and speaking about racism, he expressed no "madness in his soul," no prophetic outrage against lynching. Even when confronted with the tragedy of the Birmingham bombing, he showed no anger. What Niebuhr said about liberalism could be applied to his own perspective on racism: Liberalism, he said, "lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. It is too intellectual and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history." When Niebuhr wrote against liberalism, pacifism, communism, and the easy conscience of American churches, he expressed outrage; but when it came to black victims of white supremacy, he expressed none.[53]

"Mr. Baldwin," Niebuhr asked, trying to move the conversation away from too much focus on race and back to class, "aren't you saying that racial prejudice has aggravated the class . . . of American society?" Baldwin did not take the bait. "No, I'm not saying that," Baldwin rejoined. "Racial prejudice . . . is endemic to human life. . . . Everybody hates everybody. . . . It's about power. . . . I don't care whether Senator Eastland [of Mississippi] or Barry Goldwater [of Arizona] likes me. . . . I do care that they have the power to keep me out of a home, out of a job, and to put my child on a needle. . . . I don't care what they think or what they feel; I care about their power." This, of course, is a theme about which Niebuhr wrote persuasively and extensively.

When Niebuhr spoke about the "horrible lack of communication between the white man and the Negro in Birmingham" and spoke with apparent approval of President Kennedy's "two special representatives," which included a former West Point football coach and a former Army Secretary, whose task was to begin a conversation between the races, Baldwin refused to engage the issue rationally, instead repeating, "It's an insult"—a widespread sentiment in the black community. But Niebuhr seemed not to understand the insult of sending a football coach and Army Secretary to heal the deep wounds of racism in Birmingham. This suggests why it is so hard for whites and blacks to talk about white supremacy; even among progressive intellectuals like Niebuhr, there is too little empathy regarding black suffering in the white community. Lacking empathy, he lacks the passion to engage the unspeakable evil of killing black children.[54]

Had Niebuhr initiated more interchange with radical black intellectuals like Baldwin, as he did with Jewish intellectuals, his theological perspective could have achieved a broader and deeper understanding of race in America. How otherwise can one grasp the complexity of race? Following his dialogue with Baldwin, Niebuhr's perspective showed some signs of growth and deepening. In one of his last essays, entitled "The Negro Minority and Its Fate in a Self-Righteous Nation," Niebuhr, reflecting on the 1967 summer riots and the Kerner report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, begins to sound surprisingly like Malcolm X: "For our Negro minority the American 'Dream' of justice has become a 'Nightmare.'" He challenged the white church to be the conscience of the nation, reminding it of its responsibilities—"its sins of omission and commission."[55]

If white Protestant churches failed to be a beacon of leadership in America's racial crisis, part of the responsibility for the failure was due to the way its leading religious spokespersons ignored race in their interpretation of the Christian faith. Niebuhr made

a sharp contrast between denominational responses to school integration and other racial issues, praising Catholics for being more progressive and forward looking and criticizing Protestants for their often reactionary backward approach, and reserving his highest praise, rightly, to the Jewish community.

Finally, a personal comment. As a graduate student at Garrett Biblical Institute (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) in the late fifties and early sixties, I read Niebuhr; but I focused my study primarily on Karl Barth because I was interested in systematic theology, not ethics. Christian ethics at Garrett was taught by one of the most blatantly racist professors there. By contrast, systematic theology was taught by William Hordern, a Barthian from Canada, who treated me as a human being, capable of thinking theologically. Furthermore, I liked Barth's unrelenting focus on Jesus Christ as God's Word, which resonated with the image of Jesus as Friend and Savior, the most dominant motif in the black Christian experience.

I realize now that I should have ignored the separation of theology and ethics in the Garrett curriculum, as well as Niebuhr's modest claim of not being a theologian. It was not until I left seminary and began to deal with the "facts" of the black struggle for justice in society that I returned to Niebuhr, especially his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Reading Niebuhr's reflections on power and self-interest among individuals and collectives in the context of the black liberation struggle was an intellectual revelation. "The white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so," Niebuhr wrote. "Upon this point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies."[56] What Niebuhr said about love, power, and justice helped me to understand that moral suasion alone would never convince whites to relinquish their supremacy over blacks. Only Black Power could do that, because power, as Frederick Douglass said long before Niebuhr was born, concedes nothing without struggle.

Though I seldom referred to him in the text, I wrote my first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), with Niebuhr on my mind and (along with Barth) as one of my intellectual guides in theology. Both Barth and Niebuhr were necessary. Barth helped me to understand the complexity of the Western theological tradition while Niebuhr helped me to relate it to the struggle for justice in society.

When I came to Union Seminary in 1969, I was in awe of its liberal theological tradition, largely because Niebuhr's spirit was still there, challenging me to be the best I could be. Although I never met him, since he had retired nine years earlier, I do remember that when I first walked in the halls of Union Seminary to interview for a position, Larry Jones, dean of students and the first black to serve on the staff, turned to me and said, "You should be grateful to have the opportunity to teach at the place where Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich taught theology." Had he been white, I would not have ignored the negative implications of that comment. When one considers that Union Seminary was founded in 1836 and that no blacks had served on its faculty until the 1960s, that no black student had been accepted into its doctoral program until the 1970s, and that only a small number of black Master of Divinity students were graduates, Union could not have escaped criticism on matters of race. Like most seminary professors, those at Union did not say much, if anything, about episodes of lynching. Instead, they chose to focus on academic theology that could defeat fundamentalism, especially in support of Professor Charles Augustus Briggs (whose chair I occupy), who was tried for heresy for using historical criticism in his interpretation of the Bible. Why, then, didn't Union faculty and board make a similar stand against slavery, segregation, and lynching?

I looked at Dean Jones with a smile on my face and said, "I am very pleased to be walking in the same academic halls that Niebuhr and Tillich walked."

Today I teach a course on Niebuhr because of his profound reflections on human nature, the cross, and creative social theory, focusing on justice, self-interest, and power. My understanding of the cross is deeply influenced by his perspective on the cross. Thus, I have never questioned Niebuhr's greatness as a theologian, but instead admired his intellectual brilliance and social commitment. What I questioned was his limited perspective, as a white man, on the race crisis in America. His theology and ethics needed to be informed from critical reading and dialogue with radical black perspectives.

Niebuhr's close friend and former colleague in theology and social ethics, John Bennett, was the president of Union when I was called to teach there. Bennett sent him a copy of my newly published book, *Black Theology and Black Power,* telling him of my recent appointment as assistant professor of theology and warning him that "you will find this book in many ways difficult to take." But, Bennett continued, "Though one may be very critical of much in this book, I think it is an excellent statement of the mind of a thoughtful young black militant." When Niebuhr sent Bennett his response to my book, Bennett called me in his office and read Niebuhr's letter to me.

At the time, I tended to shield myself from white theological perspectives, since they had shown no appreciation for a theological voice like mine, both black and radical. I listened respectfully as Bennett read his letter. "Thank you for sending Professor Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power,*" Niebuhr wrote. "I was tremendously interested in the book, and am not as critical as you anticipated that I would be. After all, the negroes are the most genuine proletarians that we have in our middle class culture, and there is bound to be some resentment in our negro minority which he expresses adequately."

I was surprised that Niebuhr had such a clear and sympathetic understanding of the meaning of black rage, something few whites ever grasp. But Niebuhr had "two points of criticisms." Appropriately, one had to do with the influence of Barth, and the other, more serious point, had to do with my tendency to dismiss the progress of integration, especially my silence on "the negro politician and statesman—Senator [Edward] Brooks of Massachusetts . . . or Thurgood Marshall of the Supreme Court, and the whole slew of negro mayors. . . ." He concluded his letter with a statement that surprised me: "I think he will be an excellent man on your faculty."[57] Niebuhr's affirmation of my presence at Union meant much to me then and still means much to me today.

I wish that my time at Union had coincided with Niebuhr's. I would have enjoyed engaging race and theology with him as I did with John Bennett, Paul Lehmann, Tom Driver, Roger Shinn, Beverly Harrison, and other members of the Union faculty. I would have granted some validity to his criticism of the Barth influence, which is less today. But the critique about integration is another matter. It would have been challenging to engage him on my failure to appreciate the progress in integration. What most whites call "integration" (or in the language of today, diversity) is often merely "tokenism." There is very little justice in any educational institution where black presence is less than 20 percent of the faculty, students, and board members. There is no justice without power; and there is no power with one, two, or three tokens.

Although Niebuhr is often called a "prophet," and he claimed that "all theology really begins with Amos," he was no prophet on race. Prophets take risks and speak out in righteous indignation against society's treatment of the poor, even risking their lives, as we see in the martyrdom of Jesus and Martin King. Niebuhr took no risks for blacks. On the one hand, "Courage is the primary test of prophesy," Niebuhr said. "There is no national community today in which the genuine word of God does not place the prophet in peril." But, on the other hand, Niebuhr acknowledged his prophetic limits in *Leaves,* especially appropriate regarding

his views on race: "I am a coward myself . . . and find it tremendously difficult to run counter to general opinion."[58]

Niebuhr was by no means alone in his failure to express prophetic rage against racial injustice and his silence on lynching. In 1935, John Bennett wrote a book on *Social Salvation* and did not even mention the need to be saved from racial injustice, especially lynching, which was resurgent during that decade. Bennett and I talked about his blindness, and he responded with *The Radical Imperative: From Theology to Social Ethics* (1975), addressing social issues he omitted to mention in his earlier text, especially race.[59]

Before Niebuhr and Bennett, Walter Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel movement's greatest theologian, expressed his frustration: "For years the problem of the two races seemed to me so tragic, so insoluble that I have never yet ventured to discuss it in public."[60] The Social Gospel advocates held conferences on the status of the Negro in Mohonk, New York, in 1890 and 1891 and felt no need to invite any blacks, because, as Lyman Abbott said, "A patient is not invited to the consultation of the doctors on his case."[61]

In contrast to Niebuhr and many Social Gospel theologians, there were a few white preachers who did oppose lynching and who noted the connection between the lynching of African Americans and the crucifixion of Jesus. Among these was Episcopalian Quincy Ewing, who served parishes in Louisiana and Mississippi, participated in the founding of the NAACP, and was widely praised by black leaders. He preached and wrote against the lyncher as "a murderer in the eyes of Almighty God." Andrew Sledd, a professor of Latin at Emory College, ended his silence with an essay, "The Negro: Another View," after seeing the lynching of Sam Hose. Like nearly all whites who opposed lynching, he did not deny whites were a superior race, but that alone did not justify lynching blacks. His dissent cost him his job at Emory, which was later restored. E. T. Wellford wrote a book entitled *The Lynching of Jesus* (1905).

"Lynch law is usually credited as an American product," he wrote. "The most awful application of it, however, belongs to the first century." In a sermon (1903), Atlanta minister John E. White of Second Baptist Church asked a penetrating question but did not develop it: "Will it be considered 'one-sided' if I suggest that Christ was lynched by a legalized mob, and coming out of that stupendous event was a divine force and truth which will cure the lynching evil and settle all problems of evil in the world?"[62]

Niebuhr was a Christian theologian of the cross who knew all about Jesus' solidarity with the poor and the consequences he suffered for that from the Roman Empire. If the American empire has any similarities with that of Rome, can one really understand the theological meaning of Jesus on a Roman cross without seeing him first through the image of blacks on the lynching tree? Can American Christians see the reality of Jesus' cross without seeing it as the lynching tree? How could Niebuhr make the tragedy of the cross the central theme in his theology while ignoring the obvious tragedies of slavery, segregation, and lynching in the United States? Even confronting the death of four children in a Birmingham church and a dialogue with James Baldwin about the event, Niebuhr did not summon the language and passion to speak adequately to that event. What is missing in his language about Calvary was the racial context that defined the actual cross bearers in American society. Unless we look at the "facts of experience," as Niebuhr's own realism demanded, what we say about the cross remains at the level of theological abstraction, like Karl Barth's Word of God, separated from the real crosses in our midst.

One who made the connection real was Billie Holiday, with "Strange Fruit," her signature song about southern lynching. When she sang that song, in the words of Elijah Wood, "You feel as if you're at the foot of the tree." Upon hearing another singer, Josh White, sing "Strange Fruit" in Chicago, Brigitte McCulloch,

a German woman who grew up in "war-torn Hamburg, Germany," did with her imagination what Niebuhr did not do, even though he identified with the Jews there: "On those southern trees, along with black men, hung the murdered Jews," she said, "hung all the victims of violence. And one survived to tell the story, to tear our hearts apart, to make us feel and remember."[63] Niebuhr's heart and those of most white religious leaders unfortunately remained unmoved.

Just as Martin Luther King Jr. learned much from Reinhold Niebuhr, Niebuhr could have deepened his understanding of the cross by being a student of King and the black freedom movement he led. King could have opened Niebuhr's eyes to see the lynching tree as Jesus' cross in America. White theologians do not normally turn to the black experience to learn about theology. But if the lynching tree is America's cross and if the cross is the heart of the Christian gospel, perhaps Martin Luther King Jr., who endeavored to "take up his cross, and follow [Jesus]" (Mark 8:34) as did no other theologian in American history, has something to teach America about Jesus' cross.

3

Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Struggle to Redeem the Soul of America

I will die standing up for the freedom of my people.
—Martin Luther King Jr.

If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.
—Martin Luther King Jr.

Only a year after twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. began to preach at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis "Bo" Till in Mississippi shook the black community in the South and the nation. In a sermon at Dexter, King called the Till lynching "one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes in the twentieth century."[1] Although the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision had outlawed segregation in public schools, the Till lynching was a shocking reminder of the enduring power of white supremacy. Because he had whistled at a white woman and reportedly said "bye baby" as he departed from a store on August 24, 1955, Emmett Till was picked up four days later around 2:00 A.M., beaten beyond recognition, shot in