THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE AND THE LYNCHING TREE: CROSS AND SALVATION AS HISTORICAL REALITIES IN THE THEOLOGY OF JON SOBRINO AND JAMES H. CONE

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The thesis focuses on two historical forms of oppression: economic and racial, as well as two attempts to theologize these phenomena: one by Jon Sobrino, an author writing from the perspective of El Salvador and Latin America, and the other by James H. Cone, the founder of black liberation theology.

Both theologians construct a link between the contemporary oppressed and the theological categories of cross and salvation. In Cone's and Sobrino's view, the perspective of historical victims allows for a better understanding of the biblical account of Jesus' death and resurrection. At the same time, the reality of oppression itself can only be fully understood in the light of Jesus' story, which creates a specific hermeneutical loop.

At the center of this thesis lies the category of the crucified people, essential to Sobrino's theology, and the analogy between the cross and the lynching tree introduced by Cone. The proposed analysis juxtaposes some key elements of the two authors' writings and the historical contexts of their reflections. It shows where their interpretations meet, in what elements they differ, and how they can aid each other in constructing the perspective of historical soteriology

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of injustice, oppression, and violence. No matter how much we marvel at our civilizational and cultural progress (and there are many reasons to do so), we cannot hide the fact that the world is fundamentally conflicted. Millions of marginalized people are unable to enjoy the goods and privileges that others take for granted. They are denied rights that, at the same time, at least on paper, are defined as natural and, therefore, inherent to every human being. Injustice is not accidental; it is deeply rooted in the very fabric of society, becoming a force that shapes almost all levels of our interactions. The oppressive structures and patterns of behavior that exclude some in the name of privileging others affect many different areas of people's lives. There is racial and ethnic violence; economic oppression, elitism, and classism; prejudice against sexual minorities; stigmatization of religious practices or cultural customs.

Modern theology cannot afford to ignore this particular aspect of our world. Any reflection on God's Revelation must consider the conditions faced by the millions of those to whom the Revelation is addressed. More than that - it should respond creatively to the situation of the historical victims and have the inner ability to relate to their experience. Otherwise, it will be unable to defend itself against accusations of excessive abstraction and an idealistic detachment from reality.

In this thesis, I want to focus on two contemporary attempts at the theological description of specific contexts of injustice, exclusion, and violence: one by Jon Sobrino, a theologian writing from the perspective of El Salvador and Latin America, and the other by James H. Cone, the father of black liberation theology. My goal is to show how the two authors derive their theology of the cross and soteriology from the situation of historical suffering and how their theologies seek to respond to this suffering. In my analysis, I want to juxtapose their respective contexts and their

theological propositions. I want to show where their interpretations meet, in what elements they differ, and how they can aid each other in constructing the perspective of historical salvation. In their writings, both Sobrino and Cone offer a unique theological vision in which the cross of Jesus and the suffering of modern victims can only be fully understood in relation to each other. They both stand as examples of theologians who are deeply concerned with the situation of the modern world and seek to find in Revelation a sincere and realistic response to the condition of the oppressed.

Jon Sobrino is one of the leading figures in Latin American liberation theology. As a young Jesuit from the Basque Country in northern Spain, he arrived in El Salvador at the age of 19 and remained there for the rest of his life, with minor interruptions - to study in the US and Germany. In El Salvador, he met the charismatic and socially committed Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría and Archbishop Oscar Romero. Most importantly, however: it was there that his eyes became more and more open to the reality of the poor. He himself describes the experience as an awakening from a dogmatic slumber, which, with regard to Third World countries, means "awakening to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world."[1] This awakening "from the sleep of inhumanity," which, he writes, happened to him and many others, resulted from an encounter with the suffering and the excluded of this world.[2] The poor determined the rest of Sobrino's life, having a decisive influence on his vision of the world and God. He sums up the years he spent in El Salvador this way: "I have had to witness many things: the darkness of poverty and injustice, of numerous and frightful massacres, but also the luminosity of hope and the endless generosity of the poor. What

[1] Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 1.
[2] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 2.

I want to stress, however, is the discovery which precedes all this: the revelation of the truth of reality and, through it, the truth of human beings and of God."[3]

James H. Cone experienced a similar awakening when, as a young black American theologian, he watched the news of the 1967 Detroit racial riots. As he recalls: "I could no longer continue quietly teaching white students at Adrian College (Michigan) about Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and other European theologians when black people were dying in the streets of Detroit, Newark, and the back roads of Mississippi and Alabama. I had to do something."[4] From then on, he began to seek inspiration for his theology not from German thinkers but from Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, James Baldwin, Franz Fanon, and Richard Wright. He began to read and understand Revelation through the lens of Black Power, black art and music, and the Black Consciousness movement.[5]

Thus, James Cone became one of the founders and most prominent representatives of black liberation theology - done from the perspective of the victims of racial violence and for the victims. His theological message, expressed over the years in many books, articles, and presentations, found its most personal and perhaps most mature articulation in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, published in 2011, in which Cone compares black lynching victims to the crucified Christ. It took him ten years of research, thinking, and writing to publish this book - but he claims that, in some deep sense, he has been writing it all his life. He considers this book his favorite - he put all of himself into it and "didn't hold back." As he states: "I didn't choose to write it. The cross and the lynching tree chose me."[6]

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[3] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 4.
[4] James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 13.
[5] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 18.
[6] James H. Cone, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," presentation at Saint Mark Presbyterian Church, March 30, 2017, video, 38:11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPM-AtBWHrI&t.

The essential idea behind The Cross and the Lynching Tree is that "if God of Jesus' cross is found among the least, the crucified people of the world, then God is also found among those lynched in American history."[7] The term "the crucified people" used by Cone is not of his authorship. It was used before him by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, among others. The latter made the crucified people the center of much of his theological writings. Cone's use of this terminology, however, is not accidental or superficial. On the contrary, it indicates - along with the entire content of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* - a deep affinity of thought between the two authors. Both Sobrino and Cone, looking at historical victims, saw the image of the crucified Christ in them. This dissertation will demonstrate the similarities and differences in how both develop this shared theological intuition.

The thesis will consist of three chapters. The first will focus on Jon Sobrino's theology of the cross within the realities of El Salvador and Latin America. In the second, I will present James Cone's theology of the cross and show how it relates to the context of racial violence in the United States. The two chapters will follow a parallel structure - I will begin both with a specific situation of violence before going on to show the broader social and historical background of the described problem; I will then demonstrate how a particular theological perspective emerged from the given context, and finally introduce specific elements of both authors' theology of the cross. The third chapter will include a comparison of the theological conclusions presented earlier and an analysis of how the two theologians construct a perspective of historical soteriology.

The departure point of the first chapter will be the martyrdom story of the Salvadoran Jesuits who, on the night of November 16, 1989, were murdered, along with two lay associates, on the Central American University's campus. It is a story of people who, by speaking out in the

[7] James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 23.

public debate, highlighting problems of social inequality, and taking the side of the excluded, became targets of the reigning regime and victims of organized violence. From this specific situation, I will move on to a brief presentation of Latin America's political and social context in the second half of the 20th century. I will point out the problems of marginalizing entire groups of people, lack of access to essential goods, and violence and state terrorism targeting the poorest and those who spoke out on their behalf.

After presenting the historical context, I will proceed to show how the Church in Latin America developed a Preferential Option for the Poor, placing the excluded and marginalized at the center of its attention. I will show the emergence of a particular hermeneutical sensibility in which the poor become the departure point for knowing God. I will also describe the rise of a theological vision granting the poor a vital role in God's salvific plan. I will go on to present elements of Jon Sobrino's theology of the cross - I will highlight his analysis of the historical circumstances of Jesus' death, especially the relationship between Jesus' crucifixion and his public activity. I will present the concept of the crucified people and the theological link Sobrino constructs between contemporary victims and the crucified Jesus. I will conclude these reflections by presenting how Sobrino creates a parallel between the historical victims and the Suffering Servant of Yahweh from the Book of Isaiah.

I will begin the second chapter by describing the lynchings of black Americans that occurred in the long post-Civil War period - well into the 20th century, especially in the deep South of the US. They represented a particularly cruel form of organized racial violence, terrorizing a huge part of the black community. I will go on to reconstruct the origins of the American racism phenomenon - showing how the concept of race was developed to justify the practice of slavery

and how it proved far more durable than slavery itself, leading to new forms of racial violence and exclusion.

I will then show how these circumstances shaped black American spirituality, with the cross playing a central role. I will present how this spirituality, in turn, gave rise to black liberation theology, recognizing the suffering of black Americans and their struggle to defend their dignity as a critical theological source. After that, I will move on to analyze elements of James Cone's Christology and theology of the cross - I will present his concept of the Black Christ and the special relationship Cone sees between the cross and the lynching tree. I will then turn to the specific parallels Cone shows between the crucified Christ and the black victims, as well as the central role he believes the cross played in the black Americans' struggle for equality. I will also show how much Cone emphasizes the historical experience of black women.

I will begin the third chapter by comparing how Sobrino's and Cone's social and historical contexts contribute to their understanding of the cross and how both theologians see the relationship between the cross of Christ and the situation of contemporary victims. I will then present white supremacy as an example of the forces of anti-Kingdom - I will show how the various aspects of white supremacy listed by Cone correspond to elements of the anti-Kingdom idea developed by Sobrino. I will also give examples of black Americans fighting for equality, invoked in Cone's writings, and describe them in light of Sobrino's concept of Jesuanic martyrdom.

In the second part of the third chapter, I will focus on the perspectives of historical soteriology - how Cone and Sobrino see the possibility/necessity of historical salvation and how they construct their soteriological reflection. I will show the similarities and differences in their approaches based on three elements of historical soteriology in Sobrino's writings: the ultimate victory of the victim, the paradoxical hope of the victims, and the transformative praxis. I will

conclude the third chapter with how both theologians see in practice the presence of salvation inside a tragic history and a suffering world.[8]

Although the social and historical circumstances from which Sobrino and Cone derive their theologies are very different, they share a fundamental similarity - the deeply structural nature of the injustice and oppression prevalent in these contexts. Both theologians recognize the need to address this situation authentically and honestly. And while they do so in different ways, their motivations and goals are generally the same: to understand the suffering world in light of Revelation, to rediscover Revelation in light of the suffering world, and to reveal to the suffering world the liberation that comes from Revelation.

[8] The observations and conclusions in this work will be based on a direct analysis of Cone and Sobrino's texts, supported on occasion by various interpretations provided by other scholars. Meanwhile, the historical part of the first two chapters will be based largely, though not exclusively, on authors writing from inside the contexts in question, such as Eduardo Galeano or Michelle Alexander.

1.0 JON SOBRINO AND THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE OF LATIN AMERICA

1.1 THE MARTYRDOM OF SALVADORAN JESUITS

In the late 1960s, the Jesuits of Central America Vice-province began to implement a new agenda, responding, on the one hand, to the teachings of Vatican II and the CELAM conference in Medellín in 1968 and, on the other, reacting to the social situation in the region. One of this agenda's elements was to offer a unique type of education within Jesuit institutions. Regional provincials called for all Jesuit "schools and universities [to] accept their role as active agents of national integration and social justice in Latin America."[9]

The Central American University (UCA), founded in 1965 in the capital of El Salvador, became a symbol of this approach. Its goal, as the Jesuits stressed from the beginning, was to prepare professionals capable of shaping the country's socio-economic future.[10] After 1970, the UCA Jesuits begun to understand their mission as the formation of a just and inclusive society, and this involved, as a starting point, devoting research attention to issues of structural inequality. The university was to analyze and expose different mechanisms of exclusion and the institutional nature of social injustice. In addition, it assigned itself the task of fostering public awareness regarding the civil rights to which all - including the poorest - were entitled.

One of the key figures co-creating - and later managing - the UCA was a Jesuit, Ignacio Ellacuría. He believed in developing social consciousness among the lower classes and enabling them to represent their interests vis-a-vis the country's political and economic elite. As the

[9] Robert Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink: Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014), 31.
[10] Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 25.

university's rector, he brought it into collaboration with various grassroots movements bringing together poor and excluded Salvadorans.[11]

However, the political situation in the country was making it increasingly difficult to advocate any social change. In the 1970s, following decades of rigged elections, political repression, and a lack of transparent and democratic methods of exercising political power, various insurgent and revolutionary organizations began to emerge, attracting many people. Deepening political tensions and increased social violence led to a full-scale civil war between the government and leftist guerrilla groups of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in 1980.

Soon the Jesuits of the UCA, actively speaking out on the country's social issues, found themselves targeted by the Salvadoran regime. For a long time, they had to face the full range of the state's apparatus of violence, leading to the brutal climax in 1989. Since March of that year, attacks on UCA, the Jesuits working there, and personally on Ellacuría increased significantly in intensity. They ranged in form - from grenade and bomb explosions on campus to aggressive media campaigns accusing the Jesuits of brainwashing young people ideologically or supporting terrorist organizations.[12]

On the night of November 16, three hundred Salvadoran soldiers surrounded the campus, some of them breaking into the grounds. Ignacio Ellacuría, five other Jesuits, a cook, and her daughter were murdered with firearms. Their massacred bodies were found the next day. At the time, this tragic event "seemed to symbolize the eclipse of dialogue and negotiation by the purveyors of state-sponsored violence against civil society and the voices of reform. Most of the top Jesuit leadership of the UCA was dead, with their friend, Elba, and her daughter Celina, who

[11] Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 155.
[12] Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 175.

had sought refuge with the Jesuit community that night."[13] However, the true meaning of that night of November 16 was much more profound. A bloodstained book - *The Crucified God* by Jürgen Moltmann - was found next to the body of one of the priests, Father López y López. Indeed, Christ suffering on the cross has somehow become historically present - not only in the Salvadoran martyrs but in millions of other victims of violence, poverty, and exclusion in Latin America.

1.2 POVERTY AND VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

The Jesuits of UCA were operating under specific socio-economic conditions: in a society characterized by extreme inequality. According to a Pentagon report in the early 1980s, "over 70% of the land [in El Salvador] was owned by only 1% of the population, while over 40% of the rural population owned no land at all and worked as sharecroppers on absentee owners' land or as laborers on large estates."[14] This situation was a result of the unabated expansion of Salvadoran oligarchs, responsible for the quadrupling of the number of landless villagers between 1961 and 1975.[15] For its part, the privileged position of the oligarchs was a legacy of Spanish colonialism and the result of an economic model based on the production and export of agricultural goods.

El Salvador is a vivid and painful example of the problems plaguing the entire Latin America. Deprivation, poverty, and marginalization have become a daily reality for countless people on the continent. At the end of the 20th century in Nicaragua, 54% of the population had no access to healthy drinking water. In Guatemala, 44% were illiterate, and the average life expectancy for Indians living there was 48 years. In Honduras, seven in ten residents lived in dramatic poverty, and in rural areas, only one in ten had access to electricity. The infant mortality

[13] Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 178-180.
[14] Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 143
[15] Juan Gonzales, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 133.

rate over there was 70 per 1,000 births in 1990, compared to the United States, where it was less than 9 per 1,000 at the same time.[16]

However, structural oppression in Latin America took the face of not only poverty and exclusion but also brutal violence and state terrorism. The U.N. Truth Commission, which was formed after the Salvadoran civil war to investigate crimes committed by the regime, stated: "Violence has formed part of the exercise of official authority…. A kind of complicity developed between businessmen and landowners, who entered into a close relationship with the army and intelligence and security forces."[17] The same commission recorded 22,000 major acts of violence committed in El Salvador between 1980 and 1991. According to the witnesses who testified, nearly 85% of these incidents were carried out by government-linked forces.[18] In the early years of the civil war, the country's authorities carried out mass killings, during which soldiers "executed peasants – men, women and children who had offered no resistance – simply because they considered them to be guerilla collaborators."[19]

Both systemic inequality and state violence in Latin America had their roots not only in the greed and corruption of local elites but also in international politics, controlled in the region by the United States. The U.S. activity south of its borders has been essentially neo-colonial in nature over the past century, strongly affecting the region's economic development.

In addition, leaders in Washington, such as Ronald Reagan, looked at Latin America as one of the critical areas in the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. Thus, Latin American regimes would receive financial as well as "organizational and logistical" assistance from the

[16] Gonzales, *Harvest of Empire*, 130.
[17] United Nations, *Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador* (March 15, 1993), 132-133.
[18] United Nations, *Report of the Commission on the Truth*, 43.
[19] United Nations, *Report of the Commission on the Truth*, 126.

North, involving, among other things, the training of military or paramilitary units. One example is El Salvador's notorious Atlacatl Battalion, whose unclear origins raise serious suspicions about the involvement of U.S. personnel. During the civil war, Atlacatl committed a series of massacres and crimes against human rights, starting with the El Mozote massacre in 1981- when more than 811 civilians were killed, going on to the murder of 100 people near Lake Suchitlan in 1983 and ending with the killing of six Jesuits and two women on the UCA campus in 1989.[20]

1.3 PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

In response to the social situation on the continent, the Latin American Catholic Church, previously firmly tied to the local oligarchy, was undergoing a significant renewal in the late 1960s. Many priests, nuns, and missionaries threw themselves into work with the poor, including politically charged ministry. This collective transformation resulted from an institutional conversion toward what was later called the Preferential Option for the Poor.

The Preferential Option emerged from the spirit and letter of the Second Vatican Council, especially the *Gaudium et Spes* constitution, which advocated the need to recognize the signs of the times ("the church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them…. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics,"[21]) considering socio-economic inequality as one of them ("never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the whole world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy."[22])

[20] Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 169.
[21] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes (December 7, 1965), 4.
[22] Gaudium et Spes, 4.

Three years later, in the summer of 1968, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín took up the path charted by the Council, bringing to light the scale of poverty on the continent and recognizing that the struggle against it was one of the fundamental tasks of the Church. And although the term "Preferential Option for the Poor" was not explicitly formulated until the 1979 Puebla Conference, the centrality of the poor in the Church's thought and practice could already be seen in the Medellín documents. *The Document on Poverty of the Church* begins by stating: "the Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent in the face of tremendous social injustices… which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness."[23] The bishops emphasize that such a situation requires the Church to make the problems of the poor its own problems and to take specific actions: "This has to be conretized in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation which a poor person often has to tolerate."[24]

That historical moment can be described with Gustavo Gutiérrez's earlier term: "irruption of the poor". It was an arrival on the stage of the history of those who previously had been overlooked and unnoticed in both society and the Church.[25] Jon Sobrino defines who the poor actually are - they are those who cannot be sure of their survival, for whom life is not something to be taken for granted. He writes: "humanity is divided between those who cannot take life for granted, the poor, and those who do take it for granted, the noonpoor."[26] Gutiérrez, in turn, stresses

[23] Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America, Document on Poverty of the Church (Medellín: September 6, 1968), 1.
[24] Document on Poverty of the Church, 10.
[25] Gustavo *Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," trans. Robert R. Barr, in Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology, ed. Ignacio* Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 235.
[26] Jon Sobrino, "Death and Urgency of the Option for the Poor," trans. Margaret Wilde, in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 29.

that an essential part of the poor's condition is the constant struggle against institutional violence devastating individual people, families, and entire communities.[27]

The Preferential Option, however, does not simply boil down to sociological analysis and compassion-driven pastoral response but also implies the development of a particular hermeneutical perspective and theological vision that places the poor at the center of God's salvation plan. The Medellín conference gave an impulse to the emergence of this vision – the one known as the Latin American Liberation Theology. According to Sobrino, both Medellín and liberation theologians uncovered a new dimension to the Christian perception of the poor, for in addition to making clear that God is particularly the God of the excluded, they proposed a much more far-reaching epistemological breakthrough. It involved the claim that God makes Godself the most clearly known through the poor. "In them the mystery of reality breaks through [irrupts], and as the liberation theologians have repeatedly said, in them the very reality of God breaks through."[28]

This way, the poor become a theological *locus* for a deeper understanding of the mysteries of salvation. Theologizing from this *locus* opens up unique cognitive perspectives and provides new hermeneutical tools for interpreting the most important biblical texts - for example, those that speak of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Moreover, Sobrino highlights the existence of a hermeneutical circle crucial to the Preferential Option: from the perspective of the poor, we come to know Christ better, and in turn, the Christ known in this way directs our attention back to the poor.[29]

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[27] *Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 236.*
[28] Sobrino, "Death and Urgency," 21.
[29] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 35.

However, granting the poor such a central position requires a particular trifold manner of engaging reality, which Sobrino describes as the dispositions of honesty with the real, fidelity to the real, and being led by the real. Honesty with the real, in its cognitive dimension, means discerning the presence of sin and grace in historical reality. Hence, it demands that we face the uncomfortable truth of structural injustice. Doing so requires overcoming the tendency to avoid, twist or run away from this truth. Fidelity to the real emphasizes how honesty is not a one-time exercise but something that must be continuously sustained, resisting the temptation to return to the status quo and overcoming the danger of despair. Being led by the real, on the other hand, allows one to see that concrete reality is more than only negativity - that it can be a place of hope and possible transformation.[30] This way of engaging the world brings a person closer to the truth of a situation and help them overcome any ideological mediation. As such, it enables the human person to confront both sin and grace in the world.

The Preferential Option for the Poor, conceived from the signs of the times recognized in Latin America, takes the people who were marginalized in the society and places them at the very center of Christian reflection and practice. It makes them the *locus* of experiencing God's presence and the source of theological reflection. Moreover, it draws into the poor's orbit those who are willing to challenge oppressive structures and institutional violence, even at the cost of their own lives - such as Ignacio Ellacuría. Most importantly, however, it reveals the special theological connection between today's victims and Jesus of Nazareth.

[30] Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following Jesus," trans. Robert R. Barr, *in Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology, ed. Ignacio* Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 681-685.

1.4 JON SOBRINO AND THE HISTORICAL CROSS OF JESUS

This unique link between the poor/historical victims and Christ is at the center of Jon Sobrino's theology. To build a bridge between the biblical narrative about Jesus and the social reality of contemporary Latin America, the Jesuit uses the methodological model of Christology from below. He analyzes the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, along with the social context of his activities and the circumstances of his death. The term "historical Jesus" requires clarification at this point. Sobrino explains precisely how he understands it: "By 'historical Jesus' we mean the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his words and actions, his activity and his praxis, his attitudes and his spirit, his fate on the cross (and the resurrection). In other words, and expressed systematically, the history of Jesus."[31]

The crucifixion stands at the center of Sobrino's link between the historical Jesus and the historical victims. The Spanish Jesuit's theology of the cross addresses the two-fold question: about the saving efficacy of Jesus' death and about what is revealed in it. The efficacy of the cross is expressed in two ways. The first is the example of Jesus' actions which found its climax on the cross. Within an inherently conflicted and hostile reality, Jesus displayed a genuinely human way of being. Faithfulness, mercy, and service to others guided Jesus' actions all the way to the cross, becoming a model of Christian *praxis*. "This saving efficacy is shown more in the form of an exemplary cause than of an efficient cause. But this does not mean that it is not effective: there stands Jesus, faithful and merciful to the end, inviting and inspiring human beings to reproduce in their turn the *homo verus*, true humanity."[32] The second way the efficacy of Jesus' death manifests itself is the full clarity with which God's love is revealed on the cross. The cross becomes its

[31] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 50.
[32] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 230.

greatest affirmation. Sobrino admits that "this affirmation does not explain anything, but says everything."[33] The cross is an emphatic articulation of God's love having no limits or restrictions. Moreover, it presents a God who is close to the conflicted world, relies on its mercy, and shows solidarity with its suffering. Such love is credible and can become a source of authentic hope.

Another question concerns what is being revealed in the cross. Sobrino argues that the crucified God is a constant reminder that liberation from sin is not possible without bearing it, "that injustice cannot be eradicated unless it is borne."[34] Jesus' radical solidarity with tormented humanity causes him to become affected by the same sin that brings suffering to others. This, in turn, shows that sin cannot be fought from a comfortable distance but that one must fully enter the reality of those who suffer the consequences of sin. In other words: to overcome sin, one must take on its results.

Sobrino's theology of the cross engages in an analysis of the historical circumstances of the crucifixion and a close examination of the connection between Jesus' cross and his *praxis*. This connection is apparent already at the level of the narrative structure of the Gospels. The crucifixion account is not an episode detached from the rest of the story but rather represents the climax of Jesus' life. As such, it can only be understood in the light of what precedes it: Jesus' proclamation of God's reign, his siding with the victims, and his consistent criticism of their oppressors.

The Jesuit pays special attention to the latter, seeing in Jesus' actions a prophetic confrontation with the reality of structural sin. He writes: "Jesus is addressing collectivities, whether one calls them groups or classes. Jesus denounces the scribes, the Pharisees, the rich, the

[33] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 231.
[34] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 246.

priests, the rulers…. The factor common to all of them is that they represent and exercise some kind of power that structures the society as a whole."[35]

The listed groups attract Jesus' critical attention because they occupy a specific place in what Sobrino describes as the theologal-idolatric structure of reality. According to the Jesuit, history involves specific "actors": the true God of life, God's mediation (the Kingdom), and the mediator, Jesus. However, it also introduces the idols of death, their mediation (the anti-Kingdom), and its mediators (oppressors).[36] The anti-Kingdom is represented by the power elites entangled in sin - primarily the sin of exploitation and oppression, from which inequality, exclusion, and death result.

Jesus publicly exposes the politico-religious elite as those who side not with God and the Kingdom but with the anti-Kingdom. His death on the cross is, in fact, a consequence of precisely this prophetic *praxis* enacted in an oppressive world. The story of the Holy Week shows that Jesus was killed because he posed a radical threat to the then-elites, getting in their way by defending, in the name of God's Reign, the victims of their politics.[37] However, the crucifixion of Jesus, orchestrated by the forces of the anti-Kingdom, turned out to be the pivotal moment in exposing their complete corruption and moral bankruptcy. By becoming a victim of sinful structures, Jesus fully revealed the existence of the oppressors and the scale of their impact.

Jesus' unmasking of the forces of anti-Kingdom is relevant not only to the historical context of ancient Palestine but to history as a whole. The scandal of the cross, involving an unjust death inflicted on an innocent person, reveals a social disease that continuously consumes the fabric of civilization. Sobrino does not hesitate to describe this disease in almost metaphysical terms:

[35] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 160.
[36] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 162
[37] Robert Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: The Contextual Christology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 364.

"Things change, paradigms change. But we may wonder if there is not something trans-paradigmatic, if there are not principles of evil and sinfulness that run throughout history, with a dynamic of crucifixion that takes different forms but still produces death."[38]

Jesus of Nazareth, both in life and in death, unveils to the world the true face of this "principle." He challenges the social establishment responsible for the existence of poverty and the suffering of victims. He brings to light the *modus operandi* of the anti-Kingdom, showing how it fights to preserve its position even at the cost of killing a defenseless person.

By reconstructing the context and the circumstances of Jesus' death and placing them within the thematic framework of anti-Kingdom and structural sin, Sobrino builds a theological bridge between the crucifixion and the dying of contemporary victims. As a result, he presents the cross not as an extra-historical symbol but as a painfully repetitive historical reality. This represents the first step toward an analogous identification of Christ's passion with the suffering of the Latin American poor of the 20th century.

1.5 THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

The theological connection between Christ and modern victims finds its full expression in the concept of the Crucified People, created by Ignacio Ellacuría and developed by Jon Sobrino. As the latter recalls, Ellacuría coined the term to give a name to the great multitude of people who face death - not a natural death, but one that takes the form of crucifixion, murder, or the slow degradation of life caused by injustice, cruelty, and contempt.[39] The term points to the victims but, at the same time, serves to prophetically describe the negativity that exists in the world and to

[38] Jon Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty," trans. Margaret Wilde, in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 13.
[39] Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty," 11-12.

radically expose it. According to Sobrino, with these words, one can touch on a particular truth that eludes other ways of describing reality. The chosen term does not "express a random negativity, but a specific one. Economists and sociologists talked about a world of poverty and misery, of dependency, injustice, and oppression. But hardly anyone… described that reality as deeply as did the term 'crucified people.' "[40]

Sobrino states that the Crucified People are one of the main signs of the times, without which the world cannot be adequately described. He also allows the gospel to be reread from the piercing perspective of what has been recognized and experienced in history. Referring to his own experience in El Salvador, including the deaths of fellow UCA members, the Jesuit writes: "the gospel's finest and most original phrases – often taken for granted in christologies – resound here with real power, as something real."[41] Sobrino describes the existence of the Crucified People - the "flogged Christs" - as a historical fact that allows us better to understand Christ as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. A similar fact is the existence of a vast number of martyrs (that's what the Jesuit calls them) who gave their lives out of love for the poor - this, in turn, allows us to better understand Jesus as a martyr lifted from the dead. Finally "it is fact that 'in Monsignore Romero, God passed through El Salvador,' as Ignacio Ellacuría said, and this helps us understand that in Jesus, God passes through this world."[42]

It is in the Crucified People of Latin America - millions of victims of poverty, violence, and structural injustice - that the *analogatum princeps* of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth should be sought, according to Sobrino.[43] For him, their role as a unique theological - and even sacramental - *locus* has a strong legitimacy. From the victims' perspective, there is no

[40] Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty," 11.
[41] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 8.
[42] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 8.
[43] Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People," 348.

doubt about the existence of crosses - especially the collective cross of all those who suffer. The poor experience it at every turn, disguised in various forms: injustice, cruelty, contempt, and denial of the right to speak and advocate on their own behalf. Both the severity and scope of repression condemn entire social groups to the life below the level of human dignity while denying them the most basic rights. In Sobrino's eyes, the existential situation of the Crucified People emerges as a "theological situation" in which God becomes recognizable and present. "The victims of this world are the place where God is known, but sacramentally. They make God known because they make him present…. To stand at the foot of Jesus' cross and to stand at the foot of historical crosses is absolutely necessary if we want to know the crucified God."[44] It is worth noting that the roots of the theme of Jesus' presence in those who suffer can be found in the Gospel itself, e.g., in the Judgment of the Nations in Matthew 25, where Jesus enumerates: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me," emphasizing at the end: "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Mat 25:35-36, 40)

Sobrino explains why he specifically uses the term "crucifixion" to describe the collective suffering of the victims - including what it means in practice and its theological purpose. He points to three factors that justify the choice of exactly this word. First, the cross signifies death – a reality that the poor face daily in war, marginalization, and exclusion. Second, the cross points to the very act of crucifixion and thus to the existence of executioners and torturers. Finally, the cross links the dying of the poor to the death of Jesus and thus reminds us of his presence among the victims. The image of the crucifixion makes one aware "that the people are: a) really dead, not merely hurt, impaired, or deprived; b) 'killed,' not dead of natural causes; c) 'a shameful, undeserved death'; d)

[44] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 251.

connected to Jesus and his fate, which is important from the perspective of faith because it makes an ultimate – theologal – reality of the reality lived by a large part of a human race."[45]

According to Sobrino, the historical victims of structural sin should be seen as a tangible manifestation of the suffering Jesus. This manifestation is determined by the essential similarity between their situation and his cross. Therefore, anyone seeking today a path to God should turn their eyes precisely in the direction of this despised and rejected part of humanity. The already mentioned back-and-forth connection takes place here - on the one hand, Christ makes himself present in the victims, thus revealing the theological dimension of their situation; on the other hand, crucified humanity makes it possible to better know and understand the historical Jesus, especially in the context of his passion. "We can say that the crucified people are Christ's crucified body in history. But the opposite is also true: the present-day crucified people allow us to know the crucified Christ better."[46]

For Sobrino, it remains essential that the reality of contemporary victims not only enables one to experience the actual presence of Christ but also provides precise insight into the historical circumstances of his death. Writing about Jesuanic Martyrs (a concept that will be presented in more detail later in the thesis), he states that from a hermeneutical point of view, they are crucial to understanding the figure of Jesus. Moreover, he points out that they provide the best mystagogical introduction to Christology.[47] Their situation is a historic-theological reconstruction of what once happened to Jesus.

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[45] Jon Sobrino, *Where is God: Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 2004), 51-52. The term "theologal" used by Sobrino categorizes a given element of historical reality as filled with God's grace. It designates the area where God is present in the world.

[46] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 264.

[47] Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 129.

Looking more broadly: the current situation of structural injustice may shed some light on the reality of social relations under which Jesus of Nazareth was sentenced to death. What the two historical moments - and essentially all the others - have in common is the activity of anti-Kingdom forces. The structural dimension of sin remains unchanged through the ages. The same forces that were behind the trial, sentencing, and execution of Jesus are responsible for today's oppression and violence against millions of people. Moreover, as Christ in the event of the cross focused these mechanisms on himself - thus fully exposing them - so do today's victims focus them on themselves, following the example of Christ in exposing the destructive power of evil.

The concept of the Crucified People occupies a special place in Jon Sobrino's theology, becoming one of the major Christological categories for him. The relationship between the Crucified People and Christ is multi-dimensional. The above considerations have focused primarily on the hermeneutical aspect – the one that shows that to gain a solid insight into the events that led to Holy Week, it is first necessary to know the situation of the contemporary victims, and the texts describing the death of Jesus should be read precisely from their perspective; at the same time, to acquire a deeper understanding of the reality of the poor themselves, it is necessary to turn to the person of Jesus, his teaching, and - which is especially important - his death on the cross. Another critical dimension that should be discussed at length is a sacramental-soteriological one: the salvific significance of Jesus' passion, as well as his presence in history, is manifested today through the existence of the Crucified People. This second aspect is most vividly demonstrated in Sobrino's interpretation of the Song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

1.6 THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF YAHWEH

Jon Sobrino's intuition about the Crucified People has evolved over the years. The high point of his reflection on historical victims is linking their predicament to the Song of the Suffering Servant

of Yahweh found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.[48] What is important is that identifying the modern-day victims with the content of the passage was not some intellectual extravagance done by the Spanish Jesuit but a significant part of the theological task of studying the signs of the times.[49] By recognizing this particular sign: God's presence in the victims, Sobrino constructs a historical axis connecting the suffering Servant, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Crucified People. Just as the first Christians discovered the person of Jesus behind the description of Servant, so should contemporary believers, argues the Jesuit, see in this image the face of the poor and excluded.

It should be noted here that Sobrino's interpretation differs significantly from the findings of most biblical scholars. Historical-critical exegesis of the Song of the Suffering Servant usually interprets this mysterious figure as an individual or the community of Israel. According to Richard J. Clifford "the word 'servant' occurs twenty-one times in chapters 40-55, in all but eight instances clearly referring to the people Israel. Several occurrences of the term, however, seem to refer to an individual rather than a group."[50] Clifford notes that today most scholars gravitate toward the "individual" Servant, identifying him as a prophet. However, Sobrino seems to have fundamentally different goals - instead of a critical evaluation of a historical text, he offers a prophetic view of the present reality.

In analyzing the parallels between Isaiah's prophecy and the situation of the Third World, the Spanish theologian focuses on two fundamental aspects of the Servant of Yahweh - being, on the one hand, an innocent victim and, on the other, the mystery of redemption. Through their experience of oppression, humiliation, and dying, the Crucified People are considered a historical

[48] Strurla J. Stalsett, *The Crucified and the Crucified: A Study in the Liberation Christology of Jon Sobrino* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 131.
[49] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 26.
[50] Richard J. Clifford, "2 Isaiah," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century: Third Fully Revised Edition*. Edited by John J. Collins (New York: t&tclark, 2022), 846

extension of the suffering Servant. However, salvation, which is brought by the Servant in Isaiah's account, and which in Sobrino's theory is available also through contemporary victims, is equally important here. The theology of the Crucified People as Yahweh's suffering Servant is not solely about historical victimhood but also, crucially, about historical soteriology.[51]

The Crucified People express the mystery of salvation in two ways: first, they carry the consequence of the sins of their oppressors, the burden of which destroys them in the same way it destroyed the Servant of Yahweh; second, they fulfill the Servant's role of being the light to the nations: by their suffering they expose the evils and lies of this world; third, they have the power to justify others through the virtues such as solidarity, simplicity, service, and hope.[52] The Spanish theologian discovers a deep correlation between the suffering Servant's role and the victims' historical situation. He also emphasizes the fundamental relationship between the two and Jesus of Nazareth, who stands at the center of history. Between the suffering Servant of Yahweh, Jesus Christ, and the Crucified People, there is a particular continuity that, because of its intrinsic theological meaning, cannot be reduced to mere similarity. Just as the early Christians understood the suffering Servant as foreshadowing and prefiguration of Christ, so contemporary believers should look at the Crucified People as the historical continuation of the Lord's suffering.[53] The theological implications of these assertions cannot be overstated. By so clearly evoking the prophecy of Isaiah - which in turn is exegetically applied to Christ - the Crucified People become a representation of the Savior.

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[51] Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 51.
[52] Todd Walatka, "Uniting Spirituality and Theology. Jon Sobrino's Seeking Honesty with the Real," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13, no. 1 (2013): 89.
[53] Stalsett, *The Crucified and the Crucified,* 164.

Contemporary participation in the reality of the suffering Servant takes place essentially in two ways: active or passive. The active one is that of those who fight for justice and in defense of the poor, suffering repressions and persecutions as a result. However, most of the crucified do not suffer because of their chosen mission but simply because of who they were born to be. The only reason for their cross is their social position, and that they ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. They represent the "passive" Servant: "They are children, women and old people who die in massacres, simply because they live in conflict zones or because their deaths will terrorize and paralyze the poor even more."[54] Notably, Sobrino states that the active and passive dimensions complement each other. In his view, they form an organic whole from which it is impossible to uproot one element without weakening the other. "Without the active Servant, the passive Servant would have no voice and unless the passive Servant existed, the active Servant would have no reason to exist."[55]

However, in some of his writings, Sobrino clearly distinguishes the two of them, emphasizing the special role of the active Servant and giving them a new name. In doing so, he constructs a unique theory of martyrdom. Within its framework, the Jesuit describes those who stand up for the poor and bear the highest price with the term "Jesuanic Martyrs." He writes: "the violent death of many Christians, especially in the Third World, has led to a rethinking of the meaning of martyrdom. Martyrs are those who follow Jesus in the things that matter, live in dedication to the cause of Jesus, and die for the same reasons that Jesus died."[56] In Latin America, many Christians chose this exact path, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom to the poor and prophetically exposing the oppressive powers of the anti-Kingdom, for which they eventually had

[54] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 259.
[55] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 259.
[56] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*, 122.

to pay the ultimate price. The concept of Jesuanic martyrdom, though developed by Sobrino in separate deliberations, is a parallel explication of the theme of the active Servant of Yahweh who suffers like Jesus in defense of the passive Servant.

In turn, in an essay on "primordial saintliness,"[57] Sobrino once again brings the two types of Servants together, even claiming that a passive Servant can also be called a martyr ("primary martyrs"). He writes: "that we call them 'primary martyrs' requires some additional explanation. Their death can be compared with that of the Jesuanic martyrs, including Jesus. In comparison with Jesus' death, the massacre victims' deaths are less reflective of Jesus' praxis of defending the poor and actively struggling against the anti-kingdom…. On the other hand, they express historical innocence more exactly, for they have done nothing to deserve death except to be poor … and they represent defenselessness more fully, for they often did not have even the physical possibility of avoiding death."[58] The measure of the passive Servant's martyrdom, in this case, proves to be not their life praxis - as in the case of the active Servant - but their innocence and vulnerability in the face of death. It is evident in all these passages that Sobrino's ultimate goal is the theological appreciation of both the active and passive Servant. Regardless of the conceptual dialectics practiced at times, the Jesuit, in each case, wants to highlight the similarity between the Crucified People (in all their manifestations), the suffering servant of Yahweh, and Christ.

In analyzing the various aspects of the similarity between the Crucified People and the suffering Servant, it is helpful to remember the distinction between the active and passive Servant. Some features describe exclusively the passive Servant, others primarily the active one. However, this is not an "either-or" situation since many similarities can be attributed to both types, especially

[57] In the cited work, Sobrino understands this term as a particular explication of the sanctity of Life itself. This sanctity manifests itself through the victims, for example, through their unyielding will to fight for survival and their desire to continue giving life.
[58] Sobrino, *Where is God*, 77.

as the active Servant's *praxis* brings them fundamentally closer to the existential situation of the passive Servant, thereby including both of them in the category of the Crucified People (at least in the interpretation presented by Sobrino in *Jesus the Liberator*).

Like Yahweh's servant, the Crucified People are "acquainted with infirmity" (Isa 53:3 NRSV). In the case of the poor, it takes the form of their day-to-day living conditions. The diseases and hunger ever-present in the slums, as well as illiteracy, lack of education or employment opportunities, are not occasional extremes but a permanent environment in which the marginalized are born, live, and die.[59]

The victims of history have "no form or majesty" (Isa 53:2). "To the ugliness of daily poverty is added the horror of torture, when some are beheaded, some burned with acid..."[60] This tragedy of the crucified is not symbolic; it is grievously and thoroughly physical. The humiliation they experience at the hands of their torturers, especially in conflict zones, often involves permanent bodily mutilation or even brutal public execution.

Due to the barbarity of their persecutors and the decline of their living conditions, the poor are those "from whom others hide their faces" (Isa 53:3). "They are disgusting to look at, and [...] they might disturb the false happiness of those who have produced the Servant, unmask the truth covered up by the euphemisms we invent every day."[61] The ugliness of existence on the social margins contrasts with the aesthetic standards of contemporary culture to such an extent that a face-to-face encounter with the victims often requires overcoming a particular psychological barrier. Many people, therefore, prefer to pretend that the victims' world either does not exist at all or is a very small-scale phenomenon.

[59] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 256.
[60] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator, 256.*
[61] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 257.

Despite all the humiliation their oppressors inflict on them, the Crucified People are themselves "numbered with the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). According to Sobrino, the boundary between compassion for the victims and simultaneous condemnation of some of their deeds can be extremely thin and even marked by hypocrisy:

> And what is said about the crucified peoples? If they bear their sufferings patiently, we acknowledge they have a certain goodness, simplicity and above all, religious sense – unenlightened and superstitious in first-world terms – but nevertheless religious. But when they decide to live, when they become aware of their crucifixion, protest against it and struggle to escape from it, then they are not even recognized as God's people and the well-known litany is intoned against them: they are subversives, criminals, Marxists, terrorists, even atheists, they who invoke the God of life…[62]

Sobrino refers to the situation of the Latin American liberation movements and various grassroots initiatives, which in the past have faced harsh criticism. His aversion towards similar accusations becomes understandable because their authors too often did nothing to heal the tragic reality of Latin America and sometimes even took political advantage of the conflicts taking place there.

Like the Suffering Servant, the Crucified People "had done no violence" (Isa 53:9). The suffering that crushes them is not retribution for some past evil deeds. The poor are the scapegoat of civilization, crushed by an unjust world ruthlessly governed from the top of the social ladder. Sobrino writes:

> And truly, what crimes were committed by the Guatemalan Indians who were burned alive inside the church of San Francisco, in Huehuetenango, or by the peasants murdered at the River Sumpul or the children dying of hunger in Ethiopia, Somalia or Sudan. What guilt do they have for the greed of those who rob their land or the geopolitical interests of the great powers.[63]

[62] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 257.
[63] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 258.

The victims' innocence emphasizes even more clearly the tragedy of their fate. Unjust suffering will always remain one of the phenomena that people rebel against most intensely and in the face of which they feel most helpless.

These elements of Jon Sobrino's exegesis show how the fate of the Crucified People mirrors the description from the book of Isaiah. The historical victims suffer similarly to the Servant of Yahweh - they resemble him in their abandonment and their dying. Just as importantly, by recreating the Servant's experience, they show their similarity to Christ, whom the suffering Servant prefigures. Interestingly, according to Sobrino, they also help to make an exegetical connection between Jesus of Nazareth and the mysterious figure in the Servant Song. If both the face of Christ and the image of Yahweh's Servant can be recognized in the Crucified People, then the very relationship between the crucified Jesus and the suffering Servant becomes much more transparent and accessible to the present faith.[64]

These three actors share a profound historical and theological bond that is fully revealed within the horizon of suffering, and even more so in the light of its sinful causes. Indeed, the sin that led to the Servant's death continues to inflict death on God's children. That very sin has multiplied the number of victims throughout the ages. Its destructive power is equally responsible for the Passion of Yahweh's Servant, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the modern killing of the innocent. In each of the three historical manifestations, the Suffering Servant is just as insignificant in the eyes of the world and just as easily crushed by reality.

The similarity between the Isaiah account and present-day Latin American history has more than one dimension. According to Jon Sobrino, the Crucified People resemble the Servant of Yahweh not only by mimicking a specific suffering pattern but also by being mediators of

[64] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 258.

salvation. The cross is neither a senseless tragedy nor a goal in itself - it is the starting point of an entirely new reality. By revealing the contemporary face of the suffering Servant, the Crucified People also bring a new life based on his example. Sobrino remains fully aware of how theologically controversial this concept is. He believes, however, that it fits perfectly into the specific modus of God's action in the world. "Those who bring salvation to the world today, or at least those who are the principle of salvation, are the crucified poor peoples. And this, in historical language, is as scandalous as accepting God's choice of the Servant and the crucified Christ to bring salvation."[65]

Similarly to the element of suffering, mediating salvation has several different aspects. The Crucified People make redemption possible - first of all - by taking upon themselves the world's sins (Isa 53:5-8). According to Sobrino, Isaiah perfectly recognizes the nature of sin and how to respond to it. Sin is above all what causes death, what produces victims as real and visible as the Servant. "Sin is what caused the death of Jesus and sin is what continues to cause the death of crucified people."[66] The only attitude toward sin that opens the prospect of salvation is to take on its burden. Carrying their tormentors' sins on their shoulders (in the form of the dire consequences of these sins), the Crucified People take them off from the tormentors' backs. "They become - through a scandalous paradox [...] - bearers of 'historical soteriology' in and through their innocent suffering."[67] For Sobrino, it is a vital element of the discussed similarity, theologically significant and visibly present in social reality.

> Third World carries what the other worlds have laid on it. This load destroys them and they die like the Servant. The disfiguring of the Third World's face is the price for the

[65] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 260.
[66] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 260.
[67] Stalsett, *The Crucified and the Crucified,* 157.

> other world's make up. Third-World poverty is the price of their abundance; Third-World death is the price of their life.[68]

The Crucified People carry the sins of their persecutors; the falling of one becomes the rising of another. Only the one who bears the sins of others can become the life and liberation of the world. The Spanish Jesuit remains aware of the great paradox or even scandal that salvation comes through death - especially death brought by sin (a radically anti-saving reality). Nevertheless, this is precisely the message conveyed by Isaiah's hymn, and, according to Sobrino, it has a historical extension in the current situation of the poor and the excluded.

Moreover, according to the prophet, the Servant's condition of a slave brings not only salvation for others but also elevation for himself. It is no different with the Crucified People. By bearing the world's sins, the poor acquire a special status - they become the ones who bring "historical soteriology." It is worth noting that for Sobrino, this unique role is the main point and distinguishing feature of the specifically Latin American interpretation of the Suffering Servant.[69]

Another salvation aspect that the Crucified People bring forth following the model of the Servant is light. It can be a "negative light," exposing the presence of the anti-Kingdom, and a "positive light," showing how to build the Kingdom of God in the world.[70] Although a "humanizing truth" of equal importance is revealed in both instances, Jon Sobrino focuses primarily on the first variant. According to him, the Crucified People can be compared to a crooked mirror, revealing in its deformed image the very truth to which most people close their eyes.[71] This is not even the strongest comparison. Mentioning Ellacuría, Sobrino cites his "metaphor of corpoanalysis, an examination of feces" - the existence of the Crucified People reveals here the true state of health

[68] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 261.
[69] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 261.
[70] Stalsett, *The Crucified and the Crucified,* 157.
[71] Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty," 5.

of the First World.[72] The poor shed light on the deep-rooted evil of the world. That light makes the elusive reality of structural sin a perfectly evident offense against specific historical victims. Sobrino stresses that everyone should regularly look at the Crucified People to embrace the truth about themselves. "As in a mirror, we can see what we are by what we produce."[73]

Concealing the truth about systemic injustice is, for Sobrino, one of the cardinal sins of both individuals and entire nations. The sheer existence of the Crucified People allows the possibility of uncovering this particular lie shrouding society.[74] Hence the unique theological role of the victims. According to Sobrino, any light that helps to reveal the truth is somehow salvific. Even more so is the light that, by exposing the presence of sin, calls for a profound transformation of humankind. The historical victims offer "the possibility of conversion as nothing else in the world can. If the crucified people are not able to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, nothing can."[75] This power of the powerless is unparalleled by anything else. The light emanating from the very core of darkness is the more visible, the more it contrasts with the darkness surrounding it. It is the poor and the excluded, those living at the bottom of society, who more than anyone else expose the concealed reality of human affairs. However, confronting the truth will never be an easy task. Sobrino remains aware of the age-old temptation not to face the light (not to be honest with reality.) He states, nevertheless, that while people will always tend to look away from the crucified, they will no longer be able to say that there is no light in the world to open their eyes and direct their steps to the right path.[76]

[72] Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty," 12.
[73] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 53.
[74] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 261.
[75] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 262.
[76] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 262.

Another similarity between the Crucified People and Yahweh's Servant regarding their soteriological role involves the mission of introducing law and justice. The theme appears in the first Song of the Servant (Isa 42). This time it concerns the active Servant, manifests itself in working on behalf of the victims and risking one's life in the struggle against the oppressive system. Sobrino emphasizes the role of so many people who, against all odds, do not stop working to save the victims from their oppressors. For him, they are much more than a group of social activists or idealistic fighters for a just cause. They are, as mentioned above – the Jesuanic Martyrs. However, from a theological perspective, they are also the Crucified People on an equal footing and in communion with those for whom they sacrifice themselves.

> In fact today too many die formally like the Servant for trying actively to establish justice: all kinds of prophets, priests and bishops, nuns and catechists, peasants and workers, students and lecturers. They try to establish right and justice and end up like the Servant. Their death is formally like the death of Jesus.[77]

The effort to build a more just world counts among the soteriological elements of the similarity between the Crucified People and the Suffering Servant. Isaiah explains that salvation is inextricably linked with the pursuit of justice throughout history. The involvement of the contemporary active Servant perfectly expresses the redemptive character of their presence in the world.

Having listed so many similarities between Yahweh's Suffering Servant and the Crucified People, indicating their theological affinity, it is nevertheless necessary to make some comments. First, the salvation offered to the world by the Crucified People is rather historical than eschatological, meaning that it is not about the eschatological Kingdom of God, expected to come at the end of time, but about God's Reign in history. Moreover, one cannot accuse Sobrino of

[77] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 258.

assuming the incompleteness of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ and the necessity of its supplementation. The Jesuit clearly states: "I want to stress that I mean historical salvation, because their crucifixion is historical and so is their carrying the sin of the world."[78] However, it does not mean that this salvation is somehow unimportant or secondary. Sobrino continues to emphasize the essential and indispensable role of historical liberation.

It should also be noted that the Crucified People participate in the suffering and destiny of the Servant analogously. Although they embrace the fundamental characteristics of a particular theological reality, they do not entirely merge with it. While they can share many of its aspects, they can also move beyond it. Sobrino does not hide the differences between the Crucified People and the suffering Servant of Yahweh. He states, for example, that not all the crucified are silent on the way to their doom - some of them loudly protest, resist, or even take up arms against their tormentors. "It is said of the servant that 'he was oppressed and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth,' that he died in total meekness. Today not all the crucified die like this."[79] He cites as examples Archbishop Romero, Ignacio Ellacuría, other Jesuits, priests and nuns, as well as ordinary people who choose to take an active form of resistance and fight for their rights.

Despite these remarks - which Sobrino does not try to avoid - it is clear that in his opinion the Servant of Yahweh who is suffering today - the Crucified People - becomes an agent of salvation. It is worth emphasizing that this is not one of many theological concepts for him, but that it represents, in his own words: "the marrow of liberation theology."[80] Moreover, according to the Jesuit there is nothing surprising in this "salvation from below" mediated by the poor and the excluded. Such is the nature of God's love that "what is weak and little in this world has been

[78] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 262.
[79] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 52.
[80] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 53.

chosen to save it."[81] This way, God also makes a mockery of the notion expressed by a large part of society that the poor can only take and give nothing in return. It turns out that the gift they bring is more valuable than anything the world of glamour and wealth can offer.[82]

For Sobrino, the salvation offered by the poor has an integral nature, uniting spiritual, personal, and social dimensions. It begins with the whole package of positive values that the Crucified People bring to the world – what counts as the aforementioned positive light brought by the Servant. This package could be briefly defined as the restoration of people's humanity. "In historical language, the poor have a humanizing potential because they offer community against individualism, co-operation against selfishness, simplicity against opulence, and openness to transcendence against blatant positivism."[83] This, of course, does not apply to absolutely all the poor and not to everyone in the same way. But according to Sobrino, they can offer this to an incomparably greater degree than the so-called First World.

Another salvific element is hope. Considering the existential experience of the Crucified People, it has a special dimension: "That it is hope against hope is obvious, but it is also active hope that has shown itself in work and liberation struggles."[84] The poor can also bring a radical change in the dynamics of social relations. "The crucified peoples are ready to forgive their oppressors. They do not want to triumph over them but to share with them."[85] In this way, they introduce the possibility of breaking out of the spiral of class struggle and the revolutionary loop of successive regimes. From the depths of their misery, they can also bring the gift of solidarity –

[81] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator,* 259.
[82] Sobrino, "The Crucified People and the Civilization of Poverty," 6.
[83] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 55.
[84] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 55.
[85] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 56.

"human beings and Christians mutually supporting one another, in this way and that, open to one another, giving and receiving one another's best."[86]

In the eyes of Jon Sobrino, the Crucified People - Yahweh's new Servant - become the light of the world and the beginning of historical salvation. Being defined on the one hand by the situation of their own cross, they constitute, on the other hand, the promise of its transcending. It seems that for the Jesuit, the cross acquires complete theological meaning only within the horizon of the awaited resurrection. Similarly, from the victims' perspective, the Crucified People can only be correctly interpreted in light of the possibility/necessity of liberation. Though he pays so much attention to the cross, Sobrino never stops at it. His reflection is internally moving toward a reality where the cross does not have the last word. Importantly, this inner movement is not a purely intellectual construct but a reflection of Christian praxis enacted by those who are struggling against the forces of anti-Kingdom – Ignacio Ellacruía, the Jesuits of the UCA, and hundreds of other Jesuanic martyrs.

[86] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 56.

2.0 JAMES H. CONE AND THE LYNCHING TREE

"*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,*
blood on the leaves and blood at the root.
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,
strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees."[87]

2.1 LYNCHINGS IN AMERICA

"Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root," sang Billie Holiday. Her song was a loud lament over the countless victims of a new kind of racial violence in the United States. Public lynchings became widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, becoming a new method of terrorizing and controlling black Americans[88] after the Civil War. The most recognizable image associated with lynchings is the bodies of black men and women hanging from trees. But the actions of white perpetrators also included torture, mutilation, decapitation, and even burning their victims alive.[89]

Although incidents of lynchings occurred across nearly the entire US, they were most widespread in the south of the country. The extent of lynchings was not similar in all southern states: most murders took place in the deep South - primarily in Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas, as well as in Louisiana, Alabama, and Arkansas. Despite differences in how often lynchings occurred within each state, they all had essentially the same policy, equally approving the killings. All the states spoke with one voice defending lynchings - especially when faced with incoming federal anti-lynching initiatives. In none of the listed states were the lynchings prosecuted, and

[87] "Strange Fruit," written by Abel Meeropol and recorded in 1939 by Billie Holiday.
[88] In this thesis, I use the terms "black Americans" and "African Americans" interchangeably.
[89] "History of Lynching in America," NAACP, accessed February 11, 2022, https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america.

their authors were never identified by name. The coroner's note stated each time: "death at the hands of persons unknown."[90]

A typical lynching had the following pattern: gathering a crowd, capturing the victim, inflicting physical abuse, and, ultimately, committing murder. These were often public spectacles for a white audience, with the appearance of a community celebration. Photos of the lynchings were later sold as souvenir postcards.[91] Although these events were presented by whites as spontaneous civic actions, they rather resembled grim and violent rituals with the roles scripted beforehand. Men and boys would bring a rope or gasoline and incapacitate the victim; behind them would stand a "cheering" party: men and women with a particular grudge or an interest in getting rid of that specific person; a representative of the local authority or another person who gave everything a semblance of legality might have also been present; further back would stand a passive and fascinated crowd of onlookers - some of them may not even have supported the lynchings in their own conscience, but never dared to speak out against them.[92]

The most common argument made by whites - including journalists and publicists - in defense of the practice of lynchings was an appeal to a collective sense of justice. According to them, lynchings were supposed to be an administration of due punishment to those blacks who were reasonably suspected of having committed a grave crime, e.g., the rape of a white woman. In this argumentation, lynchings were not depicted as white citizens' violence against blacks but as an unpleasant yet necessary self-defense of whites themselves against brutal violence. The phoniness of this narrative was proven by Ida B. Wells - a leader of the anti-lynching movement

[90] Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), IX.
[91] NAACP, "History of Lynching in America."
[92] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, IX-X.

– who, in the early 20th century, examined official documentation of recorded lynchings. Her conclusions were unequivocal:

> In the case of Negroes lynched the mobs' incentive was race prejudice. Few white men were lynched for any such trivial offenses as are detailed in the causes for lynching colored men. Negroes are lynched for 'violating contracts,' 'unpopularity,' 'testifying in court,' and 'shooting at rabbits.' As only Negroes are lynched for 'no offence,' 'unknown offenses,' offenses not criminal, misdemeanors, and crimes not capital, it must be admitted that the real cause of lynching in all such cases is race prejudice, and should be so classified.[93]

Ida B. Wells estimated in the 1880s that since the end of the Civil War, approximately ten thousand black Americans had been slaughtered in this racially motivated manner in the South.[94] According to data collected by the NAACP, there were another 4743 lynchings in the US between 1882 and 1968.[95] However, establishing a conclusive and precise number is impossible, as many lynchings have never been documented. Many historians, therefore, believe that official figures are heavily understated.

Regardless of the statistics, for most black Americans today, the lynchings of their ancestors represent a stark memory and a deep wound in their collective consciousness. Many black families still keep stories of someone who was killed in this manner, as well as a vibrant recollection of the fear that they could lose their loved ones at any moment.[96] James Cone himself remembers his childhood in Arkansas in the first half of the twentieth century to be a life of daily insecurity, from which no black person was free, but of which, at the same time, none of them ever wanted to talk - so paralyzing was their fear.[97] He also confesses that when he first heard the song

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[93] Ida B. Wells, "Lynching and the Excuse for It," in *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 413.
[94] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, XI.
[95] NAACP, "History of Lynching in America."
[96] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, XI.
[97] James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 15.

Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday, he couldn't shake off the thought that he himself, his mother, father, and brothers could also have become one of those hanged bodies.[98]

2.2 THE NATURE OF AMERICAN RACISM

Lynchings represent only one chapter in the history of American racial violence. Of course, racism as a socio-cultural phenomenon is much older than the political project of the United States. However, the U.S. represents a specific example of a country where racism has underpinned the entire social and economic fabric from the very beginning, having a fundamental impact on the historical development of the state and the identity of its citizens.

According to Michelle Alexander, the idea of race emerged in the American context as a way of reconciling the project of slavery (based on kidnapping black persons from Africa and transporting them through the Middle Passage to Americas) - and also the practice of exterminating the indigenous population - with the ideal of universal freedom proclaimed by European settlers in their new colonies. The concept of race and racial gradation was intended to impair the ontological and anthropological status of specific groups of people, thus denying them the "real" humanity and the rights they were entitled to. In the case of indigenous peoples, "eliminating 'savages' is less of a moral problem than eliminating human beings, and therefore American Indians came to be understood as a lesser race – uncivilized savages – thus providing a justification for the extermination of the native peoples."[99] The same ideological process has been applied to enslaved black people - to morally justify the enslavement of someone in the "land of the free," it must first be shown that this person is not, in fact, fully human.

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[98] James H. Cone, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," presentation at Saint Mark Presbyterian Church, March 30, 2017, video, 38:11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPM-AtBWHrI&t

[99] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), 29.

To this end, various pseudo-theories were produced, describing white supremacy and black servitude as a result of the natural order. A case in point is the American School of Ethnology - cited by many pro-slavery politicians and columnists - which claimed that there were different "types of mankind," inherently distinct and unequal.[100] Consequently, the attitude of white colonists toward enslaved people from Africa was "scientifically" and "morally" justified on the grounds that, like the Indians, the Africans constituted an uncivilized inferior race, deficient in intelligence and other qualities indicative of human dignity. Ultimately, from the perspective of white Americans, "there was no contradiction in the bold claim made by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence that 'all men are created equal' if Africans were not really people."[101] The concept of race in the American context has proven to be a valuable means to serve two objectives: first, territorial expansion and economic gain, and second, disposing of the collective cognitive dissonance arising from the fact that vast numbers of people were being enslaved in a country seemingly born of ideals of freedom and equality. In other words: the ideology of race has become an effective tool for rationalizing oppression.

Also, Michelle Alexander interprets the roots of American racism from a class struggle perspective. She describes how the ideology of race has served the purpose of social engineering, specifically the mutual antagonization of oppressed blacks and poor, underprivileged whites, who were very numerous in young American society. As an example, she discusses the well-known phenomenon of the "racial bribe". "Deliberately and strategically, the planter class extended special privileges to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves…. These measures effectively eliminated the risk of future alliances between black slaves and poor whites. Poor whites suddenly had a direct, personal stake in the existence of a race-based system

[100] George M. Fredrickson, *Racism. A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 79.
[101] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 33.

of slavery."[102] Although their condition did not improve much, whites, no matter how low they themselves stood on the social ladder, could always feel privileged over blacks. For many of them, this became, over time, a source of racial pride and a heightened sense of superiority. Thus, a possible coalition of excluded whites and blacks no longer appeared to pose a threat to the country's economic and political elite.

Racist ideology embedded itself so firmly in the fabric of young American society that even the radical political changes that followed the Civil War and the abolition of slavery could no longer change the way many whites looked at blacks. According to Michelle Alexander, the racial divide was, in fact, not a cause but a consequence of slavery, specifically the ideological structures constructed to justify the slave system. The concept of racial inequality - and white supremacy in particular - proved far more powerful than the institution that conceived it. Over time, it broke away from its original context, acquiring its own social potency. Although slavery died, the idea of race survived, ready to take on new external forms.[103] According to George Fredrickson, American society was already so infected with racism at the time of slavery's demise that further escalation of racial violence was virtually inevitable. "Emancipation could not be carried to completion because it exceeded the capacity of white Americans – in the North as well as in the South – to think of blacks as genuine equals… Efforts to extend the meaning of emancipation to include black civil and political equality awakened the demons of racism to a greater extend."[104]

Opposition to effective equality was swift and decisive in the Reconstruction era. The march of black Americans for their right to political self-determination was met with radical

[102] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 31.
[103] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 32-33.
[104] Fredrickson, *Racism*, 81-82.

resistance from whites, reflected in new racist legislative initiatives, subtle mechanisms of isolation, as well as outright intimidation and brutal terror.[105] The new political reality proved to be no less of a nightmare for many blacks than 250 years of slavery. Racism has revealed itself not as a temporary political problem but as the original sin of American society, passed down from generation to generation. The United States has on its conscience a long history of systemic institutional violence against its black citizens. It has taken various forms - from slavery to lynchings, segregation, Jim Crow laws, racist propaganda, social marginalization, and mass incarceration. Embedded in the collective consciousness, racism proved immune to all social and political changes and always found a way to reemerge in a new form.

2.3 FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOSITY TO BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

"What is the meaning of this unspeakable black suffering – suffering so deep, so painful and enduring that words cannot even begin to describe it?", asked James Cone on behalf of the entire community of black Americans.[106] The answer he sought was not meant to be a philosophical justification of suffering or another attempt at theodicy but was supposed to have a deeply existential appeal. He wanted to know how and where blacks could find meaning in their own lives, stolen from them by their oppressors, and how they could spiritually survive in a situation that seemed deprived of any hope.

Cone was convinced the answer had to be sought in the historical experience of black Americans' faith. According to him, it was faith in God that allowed them to remain spiritually and

[105] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 38.
[106] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 124.

emotionally wholesome enough to fight for their lives in a brutal and hostile environment. Moreover, their faith allowed them to love themselves and even their oppressors.[107]

The places for communal living and expressing faith were primarily black churches. Cone recalls his childhood church, where "people shouted, clapped their hands, and stomped their feet, as if a powerful, living reality of God's Spirit had transformed them from nobodies in white society to somebodies in the black church."[108] It was during communal prayer in churches that people were finding hope and regaining an integral experience of their own humanity. There they could truly be themselves.[109]

The fact that black Americans' religiosity was born inside a historical situation of repression and a struggle for survival determined some of its constitutive elements. Two in particular emerge from Cone's writings: the prominent presence of the cross in the black religious imagination and the unique role of racial identity within the Christian discourse.

From the beginning, the cross has played a vital role in the religious life of African Americans, which manifested itself, for example, during their prayer gatherings. "There were more songs, sermons, prayers, and testimonies about the cross than any other theme. The cross was the foundation on which their faith was built."[110] Nothing dominated black worship quite as much as talking about Calvary and Jesus dying on the cross; people listening to black preachers were only waiting for the ministers to take them to Golgotha.[111] No aspect of Jesus' life and ministry aroused

[107] Cone, presentation at Saint Mark.
[108] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, XV.
[109] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 18.
[110] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 21.e
[111] James H. Cone, "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 148 (March 2014): 11.

as much interest as his gruesome death. According to Cone, the cross spoke to people in a way that neither Jesus' teaching nor even his resurrection could.[112]

Black Americans looked at the cross not abstractly but from the perspective of their historical experience. For them, racial oppression became the essential hermeneutic lens of all Christian revelation and the starting point for their unique expression of faith. Their religiosity emerged from their struggle with suffering and from their endless attempts to understand the meaninglessness of what was happening to them. According to Cone, the experience of racial injustice became the founding element of perceiving race as a unique community of religious experience, transcending even the difference between denominations and professed confessions.[113]

At the center of the faith, which had been formed in this way, was a spiritual effort to reconcile the message of God's love and justice with the daily reality of pain and humiliation. This effort, shared by African American Christians for centuries, was eventually reflected in theological discourse. Coming from the perspective of victims of racial oppression, theology faced the same fundamental challenge as popular religiosity: "to explain from the perspective of history and faith how life could be made meaningful in the face of death."[114]

The historical situation of black Americans, however, required a particular kind of theological project. According to James Cone, people experience God through their own social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Since the formal theology in the United States, up to that point, was a product of the historical experience of white people (Cone calls it "white theology"), it had nothing to do with the existential situation of black Americans and could not in

[112] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 26.
[113] James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 152.
[114] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 3.

any way respond to their spiritual needs. Cone, therefore, demanded a theology that engaged with the black experience and was thus a true black theology.[115]

Thus, in the late 1960s, Black Liberation Theology was born. Its unique character is best reflected in the theological sources adopted, the most important of which - as in the case of black popular religiosity - are black experience and black history. James Cone states: "there can be no black theology which does not take seriously the black experience – a life of humiliation and suffering."[116] According to him, theology addressed to victims of racial oppression can only be credible if the truth of the theological message takes into account the truth of the black American experience. He even makes it a condition for the validity of theological discourse: "There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience. Truth in this sense is black truth, a truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people."[117] Since Black Theology draws from the black experience of oppression in order to say something about God to the victims of that oppression, it must take seriously what all of them have gone through. Only then can God-talk become authentic black-talk rather than the disconnected discourse of privileged white theologians.

Of the entire body of black Americans' experience, Cone engages not only with their passive suffering but also with the history of black resistance to social injustice. And while he considers the entire spectrum of liberation initiatives and organizations with the Civil Rights Movement at the forefront, he remains fond of Black Power's ideas in particular - especially in his early works. He believes that the deepest sense of Black Power's proposition corresponds in a certain way with the essential elements of Christianity: "It would seem that Black Power and

[115] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 24.
[116] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 24.
[117] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 16.

Christianity have this in common: the liberation of a man! If the work of Christ is that of liberating men… then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity."[118]

Another theological source, essentially related to the experience of oppression, is black culture. "Black culture consists of creative forms of expression as one reflects on history, endures pain, and experiences joy. It is the black community expressing itself in music, poetry, prose, and other art forms."[119] For Cone, black culture is one of the most critical elements of both black history and the theology inspired by it. Its role in shaping black spirituality cannot be overstated. It represents, according to him, a means of divine communication within African American reality. It is through the black culture that God reveals Godself and speaks from the very heart of racial oppression.[120]

The other theological sources mentioned by Cone are revelation, Scripture, and Tradition. Although they seem to have a more classic character at first glance, in the context of Black Theology, they receive a unique interpretation. According to Cone, divine revelation must necessarily involve black liberation. He finds support for this claim in the overarching message of Scripture, which regards the problem of human liberation as one of its central issues. Moreover, in his view, the Bible inspires an effort of historical liberation, which means that it can be considered an instrument in the struggle against oppression.[121]

The essential goal of the Black Liberation Theology project was to answer the question of how the Christian Tradition and theology itself can address racial oppression in the United States. The method adopted was to recognize the experience of black Americans - their suffering, their struggle for survival and justice, and their culture - as a particular theological locus and a focal

[118] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021), 46.
[119] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 28.
[120] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 30.
[121] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 33-34.

point for reflecting on Revelation. By proceeding this way, Black Theology systematized what already had its natural expression in the popular religiosity of black Americans, whose faith and how it was articulated was closely tied to their existential predicament. Applying such a perspective meant, among other things, that one of the central issues of the new theological discourse became Jesus' affinity with black victims, expressed most notably in his cross.

2.4 THE BLACK CHRIST, THE CROSS, AND THE LYNCHING TREE

The Black Liberation Theology does not analyze Christological themes in an abstract way but approaches the question of Jesus Christ from the concrete perspective of victims and survivors of racial oppression. Indeed, the very fact that the person of Jesus becomes a subject within black theology stems, according to James Cone, primarily from the critical role that he played for black Americans: "Jesus Christ is the subject of Black Theology because he is the content of the hopes and dreams of black people. He was chosen by our grandparents."[122] Christ is relevant to black theology because he is significant to black Americans.

Cone builds his interpretation on the religious experience of many generations, constructing a Christology and theology of the cross that originate from the situation of historical victims and, at the same time, are addressed to them. As a result, a special theological bond between Christ and black Americans emerges from his writings. Black experience acquires a Christological interpretation, while Christology becomes immersed in the black experience.

For black suffering to be reinterpreted in this manner, one needs a Christology that deeply emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. What is also necessary is a theology of the cross that sees in the cross, first and foremost, a lynched body, which in turn allows one to see the resemblance and

[122] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 30.

build an analogy between Jesus' particular body and thousands of other lynched bodies. Cone is aware of how often Jesus' suffering becomes abstracted and thus lost within the symbol of the cross without a body on it. Therefore, he approaches Jesus' individual corporality and physical torment on the cross with the utmost gravity. According to him, only by treating Jesus' humanity and his Passion in this way can one meaningfully approach the incarnation as God's identification with the victims and place the cross from Golgotha and today's modern crosses - the lynching trees - side by side.[123]

This correlation advocated by Cone between the bodiliness of the tormented Jesus and the bodies of black victims has its most prominent expression in the Black Christ theme he develops. It seems that, in his understanding, the proposed blackness of Christ serves basically two purposes. First, it is meant to concretize the incarnation and the passion of Jesus to a black cognitive perspective. "For Cone, to speak of Jesus as 'black' is to speak of him as 'concrete.'"[124] This, in turn, aims to build a bridge between the victims of racial oppression and Jesus, giving his incarnation a legible meaning and special significance just for them. Cone states: "What need have we for a white Jesus when we are not white but black?"[125] The community of black Americans experiences suffering because of the color of their skin. The concept of the Black Christ - the Christ that is just like them - concretizes his presence among contemporary black victims and makes it more credible and accessible.[126]

Cone takes the blackness of Jesus very seriously, which does not mean that he takes it literally. Jesus did not look like African American (just as he did not look like a white European),

[123] Ryan Tafilowski, "The Body upon the (Lynching) Tree: The Humanity of Jesus in James Cone and Reinhold Niebuhr," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (October 2020): 771-772.
[124] Tafilowski, "The Body upon the (Lynching) Tree," 773.
[125] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 117.
[126] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 130.

but that is not the point here. What matters to Cone is that Jesus identifies with black victims at the level of the flesh and physical suffering.[127] This identification is of paramount importance for the victims themselves, being a clear sign of God's solidarity with them. It also makes Christ accessible to all contemporary people via the mutilated black bodies. "When we encounter the crucified Christ today, he is a humiliated Black Christ, a lynched black body."[128]

Similarly to practicing Christology from the perspective of black victims, Cone builds his theology of the cross exclusively in the context of black suffering, especially the lynching tree. He never writes about the cross in isolation from specific situations and images of racial injustice, and the theological sense of the cross he constructs is always the sense for the victims. In his writings, the lines between a soteriological reflection on Jesus and the historical reconstruction of American racism remain firmly obscured.

Cone challenges the existing theological tradition for its failure to meaningfully link the cross to the experience of historical suffering. The one exception he cites is Ignacio Ellacuría and his term: "the crucified peoples of history."[129] He even states that Christian culture has detached the cross from historical pain and transformed it into a cheap grace (Cone invokes the term coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer[130]) and a harmless symbol that can be worn around the neck as jewelry.[131]

This "semantic neutralization" meant that the analogy between the cross and the lynching tree, self-evident, according to Cone, was never brought to light and adequately described. "Despite the obvious similarities between Jesus' death on a cross and the death of thousands of

[127] Tafilowski, "The Body upon the (Lynching) Tree," 774.
[128] Cone, "Strange Fruit," 15.
[129] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, XIV.
[130] Cheap grace is a concept that Bonhoeffer develops in his work *The Cost of Discipleship*. In the broadest terms, it describes a Christianity devoid of uncomfortable elements such as suffering, sacrifice, discipline, or repentance. For the pursuers of cheap grace, the Good News has an almost fairy-tale character and does not confront them with the stark reality of the cross.
[131] Cone, presentation at Saint Mark.

black men and women strung up to die on a lamppost tree, relatively few people, apart from black poets, novelists, and other reality-seeing artists, have explored the symbolic connections."[132] Cone admits that while black pastors did not ignore the lynching tree - as no black person could - they still failed to explicitly connect it to the cross.[133] This impotence has also affected theological discourse. Even though crucifixion can essentially be described as an ancient form of lynching, the modern lynching tree does not appear in any theological reflection on the cross.[134]

According to Cone, it requires a special kind of imagination to relate the message of the cross to one's own social realities. Such imagination was undoubtedly wielded by black artists: "When black artists and writers looked at the cross and the lynching tree… they saw a Black Christ hanging and burning on a white cross."[135] In the field of theology, such a unique insight came only with James Cone himself, who demonstrated how the cross and the lynching tree should be considered in relation to each other.

In Cone's view, "the cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, shameful events, instruments of punishment reserved for the most despised people in society."[136] The juxtaposition of these two is not just to show a few external similarities and potentially shock the audience - the cross and the lynching tree need each other, as the meaning of one can only be recognized in light of the other. If the crucifixion of Jesus is not presented as lynching, it becomes abstract, harmless, and undisturbing.[137] The lynching tree liberates the cross

[132] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, XIII.
[133] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 95.
[134] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 30.
[135] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 109.
[136] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 161.
[137] John Nilson, "Introducing James Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree," review of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, by James H. Cone, *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 6, 2012, 103.

from the cozy and comfortable devotion, reminding Christians of the actuality of suffering and keeping them from falling into a sentimental faith based on abstract symbols.

However, the lynching tree itself also needs a cross to acquire an additional interpretation. The cross points beyond itself, paving the way for the hope of resurrection; it also brings a sense "that there is a dimension of life beyond the reach of the oppressor."[138] Cone even states that the cross has the power to redeem the lynching tree and endow the lynched black bodies with a new eschatological meaning.[139] However, he does not specify how this redemption works. It seems that he is primarily concerned with the possibility of transforming the perception of the lynching tree. When the lynching tree gets associated with the cross, its sense no longer comes down to a cruel death but is enriched by a redemptive perspective. Perhaps, this perspective involves the special place of the present-day crucified within God's Reign. It is also possible that Cone has in mind the redemption of the victims in the eyes of history. Lynching ultimately served as a tool for the social, cultural, and historical dishonoring of black Americans in the eyes of the world; it was meant to portray them as rapists and criminals that the civilized community must effectively eliminate. By identifying the lynching tree with the cross, this distorted historical narrative can be transformed, and the victims can receive their rightful place in people's memory.

Just as the lynching tree protects the cross from becoming an unchallenging piece of glamorous jewelry, so the cross saves the lynching tree from falling into the abyss of despair - something that black Americans intuitively sensed, turning to the cross whenever they had to face the drama of their sufferings. Thus, one can say that in Cone's view, the cross of Christ, at the level

[138] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 162.
[139] Cone, "Strange Fruit," 15.

of faith and meaning, redeems the lynching tree (enriches its interpretation),[140] while at the level of history, it provides the lynching tree with "a liberating political message."[141]

In James Cone's writings, the cross and the passion of Christ acquire the dimension of a political commentary aimed at the social relations in the United States. On this point, he displays the distinctive liberation theology notion that at the center of the biblical narrative stands a loud cry for the liberation of the victims and a strong condemnation of their oppressors. According to Cone, what occurred during the death and resurrection of Jesus is an explicit message to both. The cross reveals a God who takes upon Godself the entirety of human oppression. The resurrection shows that oppression does not defeat God; on the contrary, God transforms it into the possibility of freedom. "For men and women who live in an oppressive society this means that they do not have to behave as if death were the ultimate."[142]

Moreover, the crucified God completely reverses the social order, turning the existing hierarchy on its head. In Cone's view, the cross goes against the grain of dominant historical narratives and all ideologies and structures of supremacy - including those found in state and government institutions.[143] The cross makes no room for pride, strength, and might, no room for thinking about enslaving others. It, therefore, does not provide any good news for the powerful. For the disadvantaged, on the other hand, it reveals itself as God's critique of all kinds of oppressive power - especially of white power.[144] That's why, notes Cone, "the more black people struggled

[140] J. Cameron Carter, "Apocalyptic Blues: On James H. Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Theology Today* 70, no. 2 (2013): 215.
[141] Gerald O. West, "The Bible and/as the Lynching Tree: A South African Tribute to James H. Cone," *Missionala* 46, no. 2 (2018): 244.
[142] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 125.
[143] Carter, "Apocalyptic Blues," 215.
[144] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 2.

against white supremacy, the more they found in the cross the spiritual power to resist the violence they so often suffered."[145]

James Cone's theology, especially his reflection on the cross and the lynching tree, is in many respects an uncompromising indictment of European colonial Christianity. Cone makes that accusation on behalf of generations of black Americans and based on the entire history of injustices they have experienced at the hands of white Christians. He writes that when blacks were thinking about the lynchings that so many of them faced, then they "refused to believe that white Christianity was the true Gospel."[146] The lynching tree exposes white Christianity's absurdity, hypocrisy, and internal incoherence.[147] Cone asks how whites could reconcile their religion with what they were doing, how they could conflate their adoration of a tree-hung God with the hanging of innocent blacks: "how could white Christians, who say they believe that Jesus died on the cross to save them, then turn around and hang blacks on trees and lynch them just as the Romans crucified Jesus?... Whites even did lynchings on church grounds, and ministers and seminary professors defended it."[148]

For James Cone, the lynching tree is a metaphor for how white America crucifies black people.[149] As such, then, it provides the best insight into the meaning of the cross (or point of entry into the mystery of the cross) – not a cross understood as some universal abstract symbol, but the one that is perceived form within the context of the United States and its painfully racist history. Cone's tendency to avoid abstract deliberations makes his theology of the cross - or rather,

[145] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 22.
[146] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 133.
[147] By white Christianity, James Cone understands the body of Christian culture created by white colonists (and also their European ancestors) and, more broadly, the way of life and daily conduct of white Americans who identified as Christians.
[148] James H. Cone, "Wrestling with The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Theology Today* 70, no. 2 (2013): 226.
[149] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 166.

theological reflection around the subject of the cross – seem lacking a systematic character. Cone does not attempt to establish a context-independent and objective structure of meaning regarding the cross. Sometimes it even seems that he is not interested in the cross of Jesus separated from its implications for black Americans - it interests him as far as it has something to say about their reality. Cone does not ask what the cross is but what the cross offers to the lynched. He does not inquire about what happened on the cross but how this event sheds light on the situation of the victims of American racism. He writes about the cross for the oppressed and because of the oppressed - they are at the center of his thinking, and the cross is there to the extent that it somehow relates to them. This is not to say that James Cone treats the cross dismissively. Instead, it indicates how deeply immersed he is in the reality he writes about.

2.5 THE CROSS AND BLACK AMERICAN SUFFERING

According to James Cone, black Americans identified themselves with the crucified Jesus, whom they saw as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh from Isaiah 53 - one who, like them "was despised and rejected by others," "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities," and who "did not open his mouth."[150] At the level of popular religiosity, they sensed a deep affinity between their own suffering and the passion of Jesus, intuitively interpreting their situation in a Christological way. Cone recalls that when ministers preached about the crucifixion, it felt like they were talking about the current tragedy of blacks. Like Jesus, black Americans knew what torture and abandonment were. When they sang in the churches about blood, "they were wrestling not only with the blood of the crucified carpenter from Nazareth but also with the blood of raped and castrated black bodies in America – innocent, often nameless, burning and hanging bodies."[151]

[150] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 123.
[151] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 75.

This religious intuition found its theological development in the writings, lectures, and public speeches of James Cone, who was not afraid to say out loud that whites crucified (he used the exact word) blacks in the same way that Jesus was crucified.[152] Cone builds a broad analogy between the tragic events of Jesus' Passion and the situation of black Americans, demonstrating the essential similarities between one and the other. In his interpretation, the suffering of the victims of racial oppression in America seems to acquire a character of the historical reconstruction of the events from Jerusalem and Golgotha, and the victims themselves receive a distinctive Christological mark.

> Like Jesus, who prayed to his Father 'let this cup pass from me' (Mt 26:39), blacks also prayed to God to take away the bitter cups of slavery, segregation, and lynching. Just as Jesus cried from the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' many lynched victims made similar outbursts of despair to God before they took their last breath, hoping for divine intervention that did not come.[153]

Like Jesus, who did not deserve his ordeal, black Americans suffered even though they were not guilty of anything.[154] Just as Jesus, handed over to his executioners, had no choice on his climb to Golgotha, the blacks had no choice when the lynch-hungry mob took them as their target.[155] They were both defenseless against the torturers leading them to slaughter; both were overpowered by the brute force and ruthless violence of those ready to crush an innocent person without even blinking an eye.

By drawing an analogy between the cross and the lynching tree, Cone also seems to suggest some similarity between the Roman Empire and the "American empire" - at least in the context of institutionally legitimized violence against certain social groups. "Jesus and other subject people

[152] Cone, presentation at Saint Mark.
[153] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 124.
[154] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 22.
[155] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 166.

suffered punishment under the Roman Empire as blacks suffered in the United States. He was tortured and humiliated like blacks."[156] Jesus was an innocent victim of mob hysteria and Roman imperialist violence, while black Americans were victims of white blood-thirsty mobs defending segregation, white supremacy, and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race. In both political realities (in both empires, Cone would probably say), the cross and the lynching tree, respectively, were symbols of terror and instruments of torture and death, reserved primarily for social outcasts - criminals, slaves, and insurrectionists.[157]

Black Americans, just like Jesus, were considered a political threat and classified as criminals by their oppressors. Those, on the other hand, as Cone mockingly notes, belonged to the "good citizens" who did not feel they should be ashamed of their actions and did not even see the need to hide their identity - on the contrary, they were proud of what they were participating in.[158] In the presence of self-satisfied crowds and for their grim amusement, both Jesus and black Americans were publicly humiliated and ridiculed, exposed, paraded, spat upon, and tortured for hours. "In both cases, the purpose was to strike terror in the community. It was to let people know that the same thing would happen to them if they did not stay in their place."[159]

Cone also draws attention to the tragedy of black women - "the oppressed of the oppressed," he calls them - while acknowledging that, unfortunately, the image of "Christ as a black woman" has not yet been adequately developed in the Christian imagination.[160] He stresses that although women accounted for no more than 2 percent of the blacks lynched, it does not mean that the violence directed at them was not widespread and equally cruel. Black women, like men, were

[156] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 158
[157] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 31.
[158] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 159.
[159] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 31.
[160] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 121.

intimidated, beaten and tortured, mutilated and hanged, burned and shot, stabbed, whipped, and raped by an angry white mob. What's more, while black men were being lynched, black women had to suffer not only the loss of their husbands, sons, brothers, uncles, nephews, and cousins, but in the aftermath, they faced the struggle for economic survival and the drama of raising their children in a patriarchal and racist society where all of them could be lynched at any moment.[161]

Womanist theologians shed even more light on the suffering of black women. Kelly Brown Douglass describes how vulnerable they were to racial violence. In a culture defined by white men, black women were utterly dehumanized by them. On the one hand, they were denied their femininity - which was attributed only to white women - and on the other, they were described as deceptive seductresses. The latter justified any sexual assault by a white man on a black woman. Under such logic, "a black woman could never be raped since she was an unabashed temptress and thus responsible for any such assault against her body."[162]

There is no doubt that for James Cone, the similarities between Christ and the lynched - both men and women - are not coincidental but that there is a historical and theological bond between them. He calls Jesus "the first lynched," killed by the same powers that centuries later were responsible for lynchings in America.[163] According to him, the analogy between Jesus and the victims of lynchings is so profound and striking that it is difficult to understand how it could remain unnoticed for so long.[164]

However, some recognized this parallel and communicated it to the American public. Cone cites the account of the mother of Emmet Till, a 14-year-old boy lynched in 1955 in Mississippi.

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[161] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 122-123.
[162] Kelly Brown Douglas, "More Than Skin Deep: The Violence of Anti-Blackness," In *Anti-Blackness and Christian* Ethics, ed. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 12.
[163] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 158.
[164] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 31.

She heard a voice speaking to her: "Mamie, it was ordained from the beginning of time that Emmet Louis Till would die a violent death. You should be grateful to be the mother of a boy who died blameless like Christ. Bo Till will never be forgotten."[165] For his mother, Emmet Till's death has *par excellance* Christological dimension.

Mentioning once more the role that black artists played in revealing to the world the connection between Jesus and the lynched, Cone analyzes one of Countee Cullen's texts from the volume *The Black Christ and Other Poems:*

> How Calvary in Palestine,
> Extending down to me and mine,
> Was but the first leaf in a line
> Of trees on which a Man should swing
> World without end, in suffering
> For all men's healing, let me sing.[166]

Cone points out that by calling Christ "the first leaf in a line of trees on which a man should swing," the poet reveals that Christ was the symbolic first in a long line of the lynched.[167] Similarly, when visual artists presented Christ on the cross as a black person, they were, in fact, depicting him as a lynching victim. "Simply turning him from white to black switched the visual signifiers, making him one with the body of lynched black people in America."[168] In the eyes of African American artists, Christ - the Suffering Servant of Yahweh - had a black face and black body, identical to thousands of black bodies mutilated in the American South. He was one of them, recognizable in their humiliation, suffering, and death.

[165] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 68.
[166] Countee Cullen, *The Black Christ & Other Poems* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), 69.
[167] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 96.
[168] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 101.

2.6 THE CROSS AND BLACK AMERICAN RESISTANCE

The theme of suffering, while central to the symbolism of the crucifixion, did not exhaust the meaning of the cross in the religious and social experience of black Americans and in Black Liberation Theology. Indeed, the cross of Jesus did not merely serve them as a religious reinterpretation of their suffering but became a source of strength to fight against that suffering and those responsible for it. Moreover, the faith derived from the experience of being crucified proved vital to the collective resistance against contemporary crosses. Interpreting one's own suffering as a historical crucifixion gave impetus to the liberating struggle for historical salvation.

James Cone does not doubt the decisive role that the faith of black Americans and their unique relationship with the crucified Christ have played in the history of the struggle against racial injustice in the United States. He affirms that "it was Jesus' cross that sent people protesting in the streets, seeking to change the social structures of racial oppression."[169] Their struggle for equality cannot be fully understood outside of its religious context. Having witnessed historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement, Cone recalls seeing firsthand the transformative power of faith among many black Christians actively fighting against white supremacy. Although they knew that the oppressors had an apparatus of state violence on their side, they walked forward convinced that the transcendent reality they experienced was more potent than the oppressive, hostile structures.[170] In their resistance to oppression and in their struggle for justice, they discovered God's saving presence. Through this, they revealed another aspect of God's connection to the historical suffering: just as Christ was recognizable in the black victims, he also became

[169] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 28.
[170] Cone, "Wrestling with The Cross," 226.

identifiable in those who undertook a relentless struggle in their defense, sometimes at the cost of their own lives.

James Cone gives many examples of people whose struggle to liberate black Americans can only be understood from this perspective. According to him, their solidarity with the victims did not stem from purely humanist motives but from their understanding of that particular solidarity between the crucified Christ and the crucified of today. Taking a stand for the crucified, they were ready to fight against the structures of white supremacy, thus becoming agents of historical soteriology in the context of the United States.

The most prominent example of this attitude, often invoked in Cone's writings, is Martin Luther King Jr. According to Cone, King identified suffering blacks - enslaved, lynched, and segregated - in the Christological manner described above, seeing them as Christ-like crucified. "That was the truth that King accepted early in his ministry, and why he was prepared to give his life as he bore witness to it in the Civil Rights Movement."[171] Solidarity with the crucified guided all of King's public actions, ultimately leading to his death. King was always aware of what it might cost him to speak up for the victims and was willing to pay the price. For Cone, there is no doubt that during all the years of his leadership, from January 1956 to April 1968, King lived with the awareness, even the imminent certainty, that he would be assassinated sooner or later.[172] In the theologian's opinion, King's death itself bears similarities to the death of Jesus. The very decision to go to Memphis in April 1968 has a Christological mark for Cone: just as Jesus knew that he could be executed in Jerusalem, King was similarly aware that all threats on his life could eventually be carried out in Memphis. Moreover, people around King warned him against this

[171] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 73.
[172] John Nilson, "Introducing James Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree," review of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, by James H. Cone, *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 6, 2012.

trip, just as the disciples advised Jesus against going to Jerusalem to die. "But King, like Jesus, felt he had no choice: he had to go to Memphis… He had to go because his faith demanded it."[173]

In King's passing, therefore, one can recognize elements of Jesus' death. His resemblance to the crucified Savior, however, has a slightly different dimension than the one which characterizes the victims of lynchings. Being a black American, King belongs as such to the community of white supremacy's victims. Yet the decisive element of his identity is the active struggle for liberation. Martin King chooses this struggle and the possibility of crucifixion that comes with it - he chooses it out of love for those who did not choose their suffering but were brutally burdened with it. Cone writes that two crosses have defined King's life: one is the cross of white supremacy imposed on him by others, and the other is the cross of black leadership, voluntarily adopted.[174] It is this second cross that is most significant in the case of Martin King - and all the other fighters against racial injustice - allowing people to consider him not only a powerless victim but somebody who gave his life in the active fight for liberation.

Another person Cone mentions, who was willing to sacrifice everything to defend black victims, was the leader of the anti-lynching movement, Ida B. Wells. In her view, Christian identity - individual and communal - in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America had to be affirmed through resistance to the mindless violence of lynch mobs targeting innocent people.[175] Cone has no doubt what was her source of strength and courage when she was the first one to speak out publicly about lynchings, risking her own life in the process: "Well's trust in God sustained her when her anti-lynching activity was dangerous and when many blacks shunned her. She did not claim credit for her work but gave it all to God."[176] Her actions were seen by herself

[173] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 90.
[174] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 81.
[175] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 132.
[176] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 130.

from the perspective of her personal experience of faith and can be understood in terms of the cross (the cross of Christ as a source of strength) and liberation (from historical crosses). Few people in American history have stood as courageously and uncompromisingly on the side of crucified black Americans as Ida. B. Wells.

Cone strongly emphasizes the role of many black women both in the anti-lynching campaign and in the entire history of the struggle for equality. Besides the daily grassroots work that consumed most of their energy, they also formed various organizations of their own, e.g., in 1895, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), dedicated to the issue of lynching. "They linked the lynching of black men with the rape of black women," thus drawing attention to those victims of racial oppression who were often overlooked or forgotten.[177] The commitment and spiritual strength of black women were the driving force behind the struggle against racial injustice. It is impossible to understand the history of black resistance without black women's faith - deep and authentic on the one hand but sensible and practical on the other. Cone mentions National Baptist leader Nannie Burroughs, recounting how she "urged blacks to resist the temptation of spiritual passivity, as if God would liberate them without their own participation."[178] He quotes her words delivered in 1933 at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Washington, DC, where she pointed out that historical salvation/liberation requires the active participation of those who need it most: "Don't wait for deliverers…. The Negro must serve notice to the world that he is ready for justice…. We are a race on this continent that can work out its own salvation."[179] Burroughs demanded the kind of attitude that Martin King presented three decades later - overcoming passive suffering by actively fighting historical crosses, even at the cost of ending up on one of them.

[177] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 140.
[178] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 142.
[179] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 142.

In his writings, Cone sheds light on the obvious truth that although organizations like the Civil Rights Movement were led primarily by men (such as Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Andy Young, and others), the struggle for racial justice would not have achieved any success without the courageous work of many women - including Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Jo Anne Robinson, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and more.[180] However, it was not only well-known activists who played an important role. Cone explains how in numerous cases, ordinary oppressed women almost automatically decided to fight against oppression, ready to pay the highest price for standing on the side of the victims. He interprets their behavior similarly to Martin King's attitude - as resembling Christ in giving their lives out of love for the oppressed.

> Like Jesus, black women… sacrificed their lives for others, especially their children, as in the case of Laura Nelson, who was lynched for defending her fourteen-year-old son, accused of stealing meat. Dying for others was not unusual for black women, and they taught their sons and daughters to give back to the community, to give even their lives for freedom.[181]

According to Cone, in the words of black women, even when they did not speak in explicitly religious terms, one could sense a deep spirituality that gave them the strength to face oppression. Words, however, were not that important. Cone concludes that black women did not have to teach about the cross through theological arguments - although they could do that too - because they taught the lesson of the cross by carrying it and sometimes dying on it.[182] The most important lesson from the testimony of black women's lives, which Cone included in his writings, is that the cross, properly understood, does not lead to passive acceptance of suffering but to active opposition against it.[183] The historical experience of crucifixion identifies black victims with the

[180] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 142.
[181] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 147.
[182] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 147-148.
[183] Nilson, "Introducing James Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree."

suffering Christ. The practice of black women shows that such identification - which implies being Christ-like and having God on one's side - can give victims a foundation to successfully defend themselves against despair and offers them daily strength to fight those responsible for producing modern crosses.

Black women and men fighting against racial injustice have a "double claim" to Christ's cross. Being victims themselves - like all black Americans - they also chose to fight in defense of other victims and thus face possible additional victimization and even death that they might otherwise have avoided. In this way, they became an outstanding example of God's solidarity. And "God's loving solidarity, Cone urges, can transform even the hideous ugliness of imperial crucifixion and American lynching into occasions of beauty."[184] Black Americans fighting their oppressors understood that when facing the cross, a person is called to more than just contemplation or adoration. As Cone writes: "We are faced with a clear challenge: as Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino has put it, 'to take the crucified down from the cross.'"[185]

Taking the crucified from their cross is the high point of Christian *praxis* and the possible beginning of the transformation of sinful history towards God's Reign. In the context of Black Liberation Theology and racial oppression in the United States, it can be broadly understood as a path to the historic salvation offered to America by its black victims. Although James Cone does not often use strong soteriological statements, similar intuitions are scattered throughout his writings, such as when he calls black Americans "God's instrument to save the soul of America."[186]

[184] Gary Dorrien, "Black Liberation Theology and the Lynching of Jesus," review of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, by James H. Cone, *Tikkun* 27, no. 4, Fall 2012.
[185] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 161.
[186] Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America, 71.*

Similarly, invoking the figure of Martin King, he states that the leader of the Civil Rights Movement always believed that his active suffering, along with the suffering of all African Americans, would somehow liberate America from the sin of white supremacy. Cone himself subscribes to this belief and finds real historical confirmation for it: "Who can doubt that those who suffered in the black freedom movement made America a better place than before? Their suffering redeemed America from the sin of legalized segregation."[187] In this statement, the theologian gives a soteriological edge to the tangible political results of the struggle for equality.

Also, when he writes about black women involved in grassroots movements, he attributes a redemptive dimension to their activities - and even to themselves. He states that in their lives, they embodied faith in God's presence in the black freedom movement and that they redeemed America with their suffering. However, he immediately emphasizes that suffering in itself has no salvific value and that such value lies in the human willingness to pay any price to save the victims out of love for them. He writes: "To say that black women 'transformed America through their suffering' is not intended to valorize their suffering or suggest that God willed it. I intend only to acknowledge the great sacrifice my mother and other black women made to ensure a better future for their children and their community."[188]

For Cone, the black women, Martin Luther King Jr., and many other black Americans who fought against racial injustice illustrate the faith that enabled the historical transformation of America - to benefit not only black people but all Americans, including whites. According to him, their redemptive actions had a certain Christological quality, being, in fact, a response to Jesus' invitation to follow him all the way to the cross.[189] Emulating Jesus in his defense of the victims,

[187] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 89.
[188] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 146-147.
[189] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 148.

they showed a willingness to suffer alongside them the way he did. By doing so, they revealed with their own lives that the cross is not only an image of oppression and victimization but also an instrument of liberation, a symbol of solidarity, and a sign of hope.

3.0 JON SOBRINO AND JAMES H. CONE: CROSS AND SALVATION IN HISTORY

3.1 THE CROSS AND HISTORICAL VICTIMS

Jon Sobrino's and James Cone's theologies of the cross emerged in different social and historical circumstances. The context of the former was poverty, exploitation, economic oppression, and terror in El Salvador and throughout Latin America. The latter arose in response to racial injustice and violence in the United States - slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynchings. However, despite such different historical circumstances, one cannot help but notice fundamental similarities in both theologians' approach to the cross.

The most basic similarity is the very model of conducting theological discourse, which involves linking it to a concrete social context. Neither Cone nor Sobrino engages in abstract deliberations on the symbolic structure of the cross. Their reflections on the crucifixion are entirely immersed in specific historical realities, conditioned by them, and carried out from that perspective. As importantly, despite their apparent differences, both contexts share a critical common denominator: suffering, victimization, and an active effort to overcome them. Consequently, in both cases, the cross of Jesus is shown in the horizon of contemporary suffering and interpreted from the victims' perspective.

According to Cone and Sobrino, these historical contexts should be considered a theological source and hermeneutical point of departure. In their view, they are neither random nor arbitrarily selected but constitute a distinctive location for contemporary theological pursuits. Sobrino, recognizing the Latin American situation as a sign of the times, writes: "so much tragedy and so much hope, so much sin and so much grace provide a powerful hermeneutical backdrop for

understanding Christ and give the gospel the taste of reality."[190] Cone goes even further, arguing that without considering the context of racial oppression, Christianity in the United States remains largely obscure: "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we identify Christ with a 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America."[191] In this view, properly attending to the historical context in theology, as well as in the broader Christian imagination, is not only functional but virtually indispensable. It makes revelation more cognitively accessible and enables a person, immersed in and shaped by concrete reality, to have a better understanding of both revelation and reality itself in light of revelation. More importantly, it allows Christians to properly respond to the demands of reality.

For Cone and Sobrino, however, the social context is not merely a tool for theological reflection but constitutes its central theme. Constructing a theology of the cross within the horizon of historical suffering leads to interpreting the victims' situation as a contemporary crucifixion. This, in turn, results in theological reflection acquiring a double focus. It is simultaneously concerned with the cross of Christ and with the reality that Sobrino calls the Crucified People - which Cone sees in the black victims of lynchings. One can even say that for Sobrino and Cone, the theology of the cross becomes a theology of crosses focused on developing a close connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and the suffering of contemporary victims.

For both theologians, there is a specific back-and-forth loop at work when interpreting the person of Jesus and the contemporary crosses. Sobrino describes it as a hermeneutical circle, with the poor providing cognitive access to Jesus while knowing Jesus always leads back to the poor.

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[190] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 8.
[191] James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), XV.

He states: "From the standpoint of the poor we think we come to know Christ better, and it is this better-known Christ… who points us to where the poor are."[192] Similarly, in Cone's view, the lynching tree allows a more accurate interpretation of the cross of Jesus, while the cross gives the lynching tree a new and unique meaning. He admits: "The cross helped me to deal with brutal legacy of the lynching tree, and the lynching tree helped me to understand the tragic meaning of the cross."[193] The two realities cross-reference each other, thus offering a new cognitive perspective for both.

In this perspective, the cross of Jesus is shown through the prism of historically observable suffering present in particular contexts. Thus, both theologies emphasize the concrete reality of Christ's experience, moving away from any idealism. Suffering is not symbolic but very literal, and the "metaphysics" of the cross plays little role, yielding in both cases to the stark reality of Jesus' incarnation. Both theologians, however, approach the cross-incarnation link from a different angle: Sobrino analyzes the circumstances of the crucifixion and what led up to it, while Cone focuses on the physicality of suffering on the cross.

For Sobrino, the cross is essentially related to the life and actions of Jesus. As for the incarnation, it must be considered in the context of the kind of world in which it took place and the laws governing that world. Jesus' death is due, first, to his praxis and, second, to the fact that this praxis took place in a specific reality. "He was killed – like so many people before and after him – because of his kind of life, because of what he said and what he did."[194] With his activity, Jesus got in the way of the dominant anti-Kingdom forces, which he loudly spoke out against. This caused the anti-Kingdom, defending its position, to react to Jesus' activity in a typical way - by

[192] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 35.
[193] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, XVIII.
[194] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 209.

removing a person who posed a potential threat. The analogy between the crucified Jesus and today's victims in this regard is primarily that they are subjected to the same historical forces.

James Cone approaches the cross - explored from the incarnation perspective - slightly differently. He focuses primarily on the very corporality of Jesus and the fleshiness of his tortured body. By doing so, he builds an analogy between the crucified Jesus and the lynched bodies of black Americans. This analogy expresses itself most vividly in the figure of the Black Christ - an image that is intensely physical and meant to epitomize the suffering that binds Jesus to the lynched. According to Cone, in the context of racial injustice, suffering comes in the form of a lynched black body. He asks: "What is the form of humanity that accounts for human suffering in our society? What is it, except blackness?"[195] Jesus had a body that was also subjected to suffering. Therefore, in this context, the incarnate, crucified Christ must be the Black Christ in solidarity with the victims of lynchings.

Sobrino considers the cross and the incarnation more broadly (the praxis of Jesus and the anti-Kingdom reaction), while Cone approaches them more point-wise - yet by doing so, he seems more visceral and forceful. Sobrino draws out from the cross the sinful laws of history - the same as those operating in Latin America; Cone sees on the cross a tormented body - the same as the bodies of lynched black Americans. For Sobrino, Jesus' cross is the result of the incarnation lived authentically; for Cone, the corporeality of the crucifixion is the focal point of Jesus' identification with the victims.

The hermeneutical circle between Jesus and contemporary victims de-mythologizes the cross, restoring it to its first and original meaning - an instrument of execution, and, at the same time, confronts today's Christians with the fact that in the world they co-create, there are victims

[195] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 129.

similar to the crucified Jesus. Sobrino and Cone challenge Christians to come face to face with the troubling reality of the crucifixion. Only a sincere confrontation with the suffering that happens on the cross - both the cross of Jesus and the crosses of modern-day victims - legitimizes the eventual talk of salvation, redemption, and grace.

James Cone emphasizes how difficult it is for the Christian imagination to look at the cross from the victims' perspective - with all the literalness of physical torture. He states: "We today don't want any part of Jesus' cross… not the real cross that looked more like a first century lynching than images we display in our churches."[196] However, in Cone's view, grappling with what really happened on the cross may save Christians from shallow and abstract piety and from turning the cross into a pleasing decorative token.

It is equally difficult for many Christians to acknowledge that the cross is not just a distant, almost mythological event but also a modern-day phenomenon - that the new crucified exist for real. It requires a particular insight, which Sobrino describes as honesty with reality. To be honest with reality is to recognize the presence of sin - specifically, the structural sin responsible for producing new crosses. According to Sobrino, this attitude requires overcoming not only ignorance and indifference but also the typical human tendency to turn away from the uncomfortable truth.[197]

Cone demands such honesty from white Americans declaring their Christianity. He insists that they should acknowledge the enormity of the tragedy and crimes of lynchings and confront with the existence of structures of racial violence. He states that only if America finds the courage to account for its ongoing legacy of racism can it look forward to the future with some hope.[198] It

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[196] James H. Cone, "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 148 (March 2014): 14.
[197] Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following Jesus," trans. Robert R. Barr, *in Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology, ed. Ignacio* Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 681.
[198] Cone, "Strange Fruit," 17.

seems that honesty with the reality that Cone is suggesting essentially boils down to America recognizing how much the phenomenon of white supremacy resembles what Jon Sobrino identifies as the anti-Kingdom.

3.2 ANTI-KINGDOM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

James Cone does not address the historical circumstances and social context of Jesus' death in the same elaborate way as Sobrino. Nor does he develop a systematic reflection on the structures of sin exposed by the crucified Jesus and similarly unmasked today by modern victims. He mentions only briefly, writing about the lynching tree, that Christ was crucified by the same powers later responsible for black Americans' deaths.[199] He takes the examination of Jesus' context for granted and turns his attention to examining the implications of Jesus' cross in the American setting. However, his writings strongly and consistently point to a particular organized reality of evil persecuting black US citizens.

The historical events of slavery, segregation, lynchings, and dozens of other forms of racial oppression are clear evidence of this reality. It is expressed at the level of culture, state and private institutions, and the general arrangement of society, shaping the American mentality and the system of social conventions. This reality is best described by the term white supremacy, often used by Cone himself. The features of white supremacy that Cone points to in various writings are often analogous to the key elements of anti-Kingdom described by Sobrino. It seems, therefore, that the reality of white supremacy, about which Cone writes so much, can be interpreted as a particular historical example of how anti-Kingdom operates.

[199] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 158.

Anti-Kingdom manifests itself at the level of social structures that are fundamentally unjust and oppressive in nature. Sobrino writes that social elites "represent and exercise some kind of power that structures society as a whole."[200] The anti-Kingdom constitutes a framework that manages social processes in a way that favors privileged groups and victimizes the underprivileged.[201] It is not one of many elements in the social matrix but the overarching organizing principle of that matrix. It is omnipresent at the level of laws, institutions, and social mechanisms.

Cone writes similarly about the pervasiveness of white supremacy. American racism has never been about individual incidents of racist abuse and isolated, unrelated stories. Black Americans have experienced it for centuries as organized, systemic oppression. Cone himself recalls: "White supremacy was so pervasive that everywhere I went it was there staring me in the face – in the North as well as the South."[202] Moreover, white supremacy has always expressed itself through social structures and institutions like slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow laws. Today it is visible in the criminal justice system and mass incarceration of black Americans. Cone wrote in 2011: "nearly one-third of black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight are in prisons, jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. Nearly one-half of the more than two million people in prisons are black. That is one million black people behind bars, more than in colleges."[203] For almost the entire U.S. history, white supremacy, acting in the manner of the anti-Kingdom, has created structures of oppression responsible for the mass production of victims.

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[200] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 160.

[201] In Sobrino's description, the anti-Kingdom is a mediating structure of what he calls "idols of death" - power, wealth, exclusion, etc. These idols actively oppose God, the Kingdom of God's Reign, and its mediators - such as Jesus and those who seek to imitate his *praxis*.

[202] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 154.

[203] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 163. Writing about the problem of mass incarceration, Cone refers to Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*.

According to Sobrino, among the essential elements of the anti-Kingdom's operating method is the practice of masking the sinful nature of its actions. The anti-Kingdom seeks to portray sin as its opposite.[204] This is precisely the method many white Americans have adopted from the beginning in their attempts to justify white supremacy and racial violence in the US. It was the case when they explained slavery as a practice consistent with the natural hierarchy of the races. Similarly with lynchings, which they justified by the necessity of defending white women from the criminal behavior of black men. No different was the excuse given for aggression against black women, who they tried to portray as shameless seductresses who threatened decent white marriages. Cone recalls this image of black men and women created by white Americans to legitimize their crimes: Men were "menacing 'black beast rapists,' the most serious threat to the virtue of white women and the sanctity of white home. The image of black women was… salacious Jezebels, nearly as corrupting to white civilization as black men."[205] In such a distorted light, racial violence appeared as the implementation of the natural order and legitimate defense of decent white citizens - consequently, sin was presented as a virtue.

In justifying structural sin, however, the anti-Kingdom appeals to an even higher authority - it "seeks to justify itself in God's name."[206] It does this by creating/using a false image of God that serves to defend its interests. Sobrino notes that "we are capable of producing false and oppressive images of God and passing them off as the true God."[207] Interpreting Revelation in a way opposite to its authentic meaning, the anti-Kingdom presents itself as the Kingdom of God's Reign, introducing ideas, norms, and laws that are not in line with Christianity and disguising them as the tenets of faith. As a result, Sobrino notes, some human-created religious traditions pursue

[204] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 168.
[205] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 6.
[206] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 161.
[207] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 167.

goals fundamentally different from those presented in the Gospel and introduce and sustain mechanisms of oppression on behalf of God.[208] In Cone's description, this is exactly how white Christians in America used to behave. He explains: "The claim that whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of 'white over black.'"[209] According to Cone, these types of false ideologies were used to justify lynchings in the eyes of many white Americans. He cites as an example a two-term governor and senator from South Carolina, who even proclaimed that lynchings were the "divine right of the Caucasian race to dispose of the offending blackamoor."[210] What was one of the most gruesome crimes in the history of American racism was portrayed through typical anti-Kingdom mechanisms as a way to fulfill God's plan for America.

The historical examples of white supremacy recounted by Cone reveal it as a perfect example of anti-Kingdom. The omnipresence of racism, its structural nature, the mechanisms of oppression, and how they are justified are almost identical to what Sobrino presents as the essential elements of anti-Kingdom. Indeed, both theologians, although in different ways, recognize the existence of the same forces responsible for creating new historical crosses.

3.3 JESUANIC MARTYRS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

In all its historical manifestations, the anti-Kingdom is responsible for the suffering and dying of millions of victims. However, there are also those who, following Jesus, take up an active struggle

[208] Jon Sobrino, "Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology," trans. Robert R. Barr, *in Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology, ed. Ignacio* Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 365.
[209] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 7.
[210] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 7.

against its forces, exposing the existence of sinful structures, loudly demanding justice, and risking their own lives in the process. Some of them consequently have to face a ruthless response from the anti-Kingdom, which, in the name of defending its interests, is ready to silence them at any cost. Thus, those who stood up for the victims often become one of them - giving their lives out of love for the oppressed. Both James Cone and Jon Sobrino offer many examples of such people - the latter calls them "Jesuanic martyrs."

In Sobrino's terms, the essence of being a Jesuanic martyr is to recreate in one's life the prophetic *praxis* of Jesus and thereby share his fate. Sobrino explains what this *praxis* consists of: "Jesus' basic stance is defending the oppressed, denouncing the oppressors and unmasking the oppression that passes itself off as good" – in response to which "the anti-Kindgdom reacts and puts him to death."[211] According to Sobrino, those who follow Jesus in prophetically denouncing the anti-Kingdom, dedicate their entire lives to this struggle, and in the end die as Jesus did, are martyrs precisely in the special sense conveyed by the term "Jesuanic martyrs."[212]

An example Sobrino often refers to is Archbishop Oscar Romero, who vocally defended the poor and exposed their oppressors. Sobrino remembers the bishop: "Romero's hope was to evangelize the structure of society…. He always acted in country's best interest. Sometimes he uttered threats of punishment, like the prophets of ancient Israel, but never against this or that person, but rather against an entire class of people guilty of oppression."[213] Romero was fully aware that in becoming the face of the struggle for social justice in El Salvador, he risked a violent response from the regime. However, he believed that it was an integral part of his mission - faithful

[211] Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 179.
[212] Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 122.
[213] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*, 174.

following Christ involved, in his view, a willingness to bear the cross.[214] On March 24, 1980, Oscar Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass, which established him as a martyr not only in the eyes of Sobrino but, more importantly, for many Salvadorans.

Although James Cone does not develop a concept of martyrdom similar to the one found in Sobrino's writings, his reflection on several figures from the history of the struggle for racial justice in the US shows them as *de facto* meeting the criteria for Jesuanic martyrdom. Imitating Christ, out of love for the victims, they stood up for them and, like him, ended up on the cross. However, the difference between the two theologians lies in a slightly different placement of emphasis. Where Sobrino focuses on prophetic praxis, Cone emphasizes, above all, the distinctive role of the cross. In his interpretation, it is the cross that occupies a central position in the lives of those who dedicated themselves to the fight for racial justice. The cross of Christ was their inspiration and source of strength, as well as their interpretive key to their own experience. Cone presents their lives and battles framed by the cross, which consequently leads him to recognize them as martyrs.

One of the leading figures frequently invoked by Cone is Martin Luther King Jr. The story of his struggle against white supremacy provides one of the finest examples of Jesuanic martyrdom. In *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, however, Cone focuses not so much on King's prophetic actions as on his affirmation of the cross. He concludes that it is the cross of Jesus that provides the key to understanding King's willingness to give his life for the freedom of black Americans.[215] "King saw the cross as a source of strength and courage, the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity. The more he suffered, the more he turned his eyes to Golgotha."[216] For

[214] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*, 176.
[215] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 82.
[216] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 86.

King, his struggle on behalf of the victims reflected what happened at the cross - as did his suffering, which became a permanent part of the struggle. The Civil Rights Movement leader understood the battle for equality as carrying the cross. Moreover, he saw the cross as the only path toward historical liberation. Cone writes that King "challenged white religious leaders who hesitated to support the civil rights movement to take up the cross of fighting for racial justice, even though it may mean walking through the valley of shadow of suffering" – he emphasizes at the same time that "Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear."[217]

Cone also mentions Fannie Lou Hamer of the Civil Rights Movement, who, in an effort to mobilize black Americans in Mississippi to fight for their rights, encouraged them to "take the cross on their shoulders." – she "used a familiar evangelical hymn, popular in black churches, to make her point about our responsibility to become an agent of change… Thousands of poor blacks were inspired by her reflection and followed her throughout Mississippi, many to endure jail, beatings and even death."[218] Hamer herself experienced the cross in her activities – "being beaten and shot at and nearly lynched for her civil rights work."[219] Both she and those inspired by her to join the struggle imitated Jesus in their fight against structural sin and also became like him in drawing the wrath of the anti-Kingdom.

The history of the struggle for racial justice in the United States has its Jesuanic martyrs - those whose actions may be interpreted in light of Sobrino's concept. Although James Cone emphasizes, above all, the central role of the cross in their praxis, it does not modify the theological meaning constructed by Sobrino. On the contrary, it further highlights the martyrological

[217] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 84.
[218] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 144.
[219] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 144.

dimension of what they had to go through because of their love for the victims. The contemporary struggle against anti-Kingdom, seen by Sobrino as an imitation of Jesus' prophetic praxis, is presented by Cone as a reflection of Christ's love revealed on the cross - at the climactic moment of Jesus' own confrontation with the structures of evil. However, what is equally important is that the very existence of the Jesuanic martyrs - in both the Latin American and US contexts - signals the historical presence of a particular soteriological perspective.

3.4 PERSPECTIVES OF HISTORICAL SOTERIOLOGY

There is a clear parallel between how Sobrino and Cone link contemporary contexts of suffering and oppression to the Passion of Jesus. For both of them, the situation of historical victims - poverty and terror in Latin America and racism in the United States - can be interpreted as a historical crucifixion. For both, it becomes an integral part of the theology of the cross.

However, presenting historical suffering as part of the theology of the cross leads to the question of the possibility of historical soteriology. If the contemporary victims suffer and perish as Jesus did, can they also expect to resemble him in the resurrection - one that will also have a historical dimension meaningful to their context? Sobrino himself formulates this question: "What possibility is there of living as already risen people in history and how much of the dimension of triumph, as it appears in Jesus' resurrection, can be actualized in history? What hope – and how realistic a hope – has a crucified people of becoming a risen people?"[220] For James Cone, the perspective of historical soteriology is not only a possibility but rather an absolute necessity and a criterion for verifying any soteriological claim. In his view, Christian reflection "that fails to take

[220] Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 15.

seriously a people's freedom in history is not biblical and is thus unrelated to the One who has called us into being."[221]

In the search for such a soteriology, Sobrino returns to the biblical account of Jesus' resurrection, approaching it from the same contextual perspective as he did with the crucifixion. He argues that the resurrection, just like the crucifixion, is best understood from the perspective of the oppressed. Consequently, the unique resemblance between the historical victims and the crucified Jesus may be followed by their resemblance to the resurrected Christ. In Cone's writings, on the other hand, elements of soteriology are already included in the reflection on the cross itself. When he analyzes the meaning of the cross - as will be shown in the following pages - he often emphasizes its paradoxical nature - although the cross is essentially an instrument of execution, it also becomes a sign of hope and salvation for modern victims. Another soteriological locus Cone point to is the sheer phenomenon of the historical struggle of black Americans for justice and liberation. He demonstrates how firmly that effort was rooted in faith and how a sense of bond with the crucified Christ provided the impetus for the victims to fight for historical resurrection/liberation. James Cone's reflection on historical salvation is built from actual images of the struggle for social justice.

However, despite these differences, there seems to be some underlying analogy between Cone and Sobrino's soteriological perspectives. What for the former is already implied in the analysis of the cross and the historical examples of the liberation struggle, for the latter finds an explication in the relationship between the risen Jesus and the historical victims. This analogy can be shown through the three aspects of the resurrection that Sobrino presents: the ultimate triumph

[221] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 141.

of the victim, the hope of the victims, and the transformative praxis. Though formulated differently, all three can also be found in Cone's writings.

The comparison below will have the following pattern: the three aspects of the resurrection will be presented successively, each in two parts - first soteriological elements found in James Cone's writings, and then the same soteriological intuition as seen by Jon Sobrino.

3.4.1 The ultimate triumph of the victim

To see how Cone finds salvific elements already within the reality of crucifixion itself, it is worth looking at how he describes people's reactions to the brutal lynching of Emmet Till. He mentions the decision of the boy's mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, to hold a funeral with an open casket, which showed to the world, on the one hand, the brutality of the white torturers and, on the other, the innocence and faith of the victims. "Six hundred thousand people viewed his bruised body and attended the funeral, and many millions more saw the *Jet* magazine photos that traveled around the world."[222] Cone shows how this lynching became the spark for the civil rights movement in Mississippi; he cites accounts of people admitting that they were not protesting just for themselves but also on behalf of Emmet Till - so profoundly were they affected by his death and moved to action. He concludes that while lynchings were meant to silence black Americans, this particular event had the opposite effect, as it inspired them to take action and resist white oppression.[223]

The previous chapter mentioned the words of Emmet Till's mother, in which, referring to a mysterious voice she heard, she compared her son to Christ. According to Cone, the voice belonged to the resurrected Jesus and spoke of the hope that even though the torturers had killed

[222] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 67.
[223] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 66.

her son, they could not, in the end, take away the ultimate meaning of his life. In the story of the lynched Emmet Till, as in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, "God could transmute death into triumph, ugliness into beauty. Despair into hope, the cross into the resurrection."[224]

The people's reaction to the lynching of Emmet Till is a testament to such a transformation. It shows that the oppressors do not have the last word and that they cannot ultimately appropriate the lives and fate of their victims. Lynching does not conclude the course of history but rather opens its next chapter, further mobilizing the oppressed to fight for dignity and justice. According to Cone, black victims can find new urge and thirst for life amid death. He points out at the same time that it is by no means a sentimental and romantic story but the brutal reality of the struggle against oppression. This reality corresponds to what happened to Jesus himself: "The gospel of Jesus is not a beautiful, Hollywood story. It is an ugly story, the story of God snatching victory out of defeat, finding life in death."[225] Ultimately, in James Cone's view of history, the victims triumph over the executioners - by their very resistance and struggle, by the fact that they do not allow themselves to be broken, and that they keep finding new life every time their oppressors send them death.

The victory of the victim is precisely what Jon Sobrino recognizes in Christ's resurrection. Just as he linked Jesus' death to his life's *praxis*, he also connected the resurrection to the crucifixion and what led to it. He notes that "not just everyone was resurrected, but Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the kingdom of God to the poor and defended them, who denounced and unmasked oppressors, and who was persecuted by them, condemned to death and executed."[226] In this light, he presents the resurrection not only as returning life to a dead body but, above all, as

[224] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 69.
[225] Cone, "Strange Fruit," 16.
[226] Jon Sobrino, "The Resurrection of One Crucified," trans. Margaret Wilde, in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 101.

God's taking the side of Jesus and the other victims and unequivocally condemning the actions of their tormentors.

For Sobrino, the resurrection of Jesus becomes a visible sign that there is a possibility of reversing the order of the anti-Kingdom. It is a prologue of social renewal, announcing the ultimate victory of justice over injustice.[227] God's raising of Jesus from the dead opens up hope for historical change and for the final word in history belonging not to the oppressors but to their liberated victims. Jesus' Paschal journey from an unjust death to a renewed life brings a whole new perspective for the humanity trapped by the anti-Kingdom. It brings an assurance that God does not remain silent forever and that the oppressor achieves no victory over the victim in the final reckoning. Beyond the historical pain and suffering, there is a possibility of victory over structural sin and liberation from oppression. Sobrino depicts the resurrection not as a one-time historical moment but as an introduction of a new historical ordinance. The promise initiated in Christ fosters the notion that a just future is indeed attainable.

Both Sobrino and Cone write about the ultimate victory of the victim. What the former reveals as a promise emerging from the resurrection, the latter sees as a reality realized in the relentless struggle of black Americans for their rights. In Sobrino's view, God refuses to accept that the last word in history should belong to the oppressors; Cone describes how the actions of black Americans express the same refusal to accept their persecutors' triumph. While recognizing the overwhelming presence of historical crosses, both theologians believe that history is not determined by death and that the anti-Kingdom can be overcome. They realize that in addition to structural sin, a force is present in the world capable of transforming it toward God's Reign.

[227] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 149.

3.4.2 The paradoxical hope of the victims

"One has to be a little mad, kind of crazy, to find salvation in the cross, victory in defeat, and life in death" – writes James Cone.[228] Being immersed in the reality of contemporary victims and looking at Jesus' cross from this perspective does not allow for easy narratives of salvation and redemption. Looking for soteriological elements present in history requires confronting its paradoxical nature - the presence of suffering on the one hand and the promise of liberation on the other, the hope brought by Christ, and, at the same time, the continued presence of historical victims.

According to Cone, the realities of suffering and salvation met each other most fully at the cross of Jesus, making it the reference point for any possible historical liberation. He emphasizes how much this particular dimension of the cross was present in the religious experience of black Americans. Living through their own crucifixion, they could intuitively enter into the mystery of Jesus' cross, in which they felt the connection between their suffering and Christ's. At the same time, they found on his cross a hope for a change of their fate. "They felt something redemptive about Jesus' cross – transforming a 'cruel tree' into a 'Wondrous Cross.' Blacks pleaded, 'Jesus Keep Me near the Cross,' because 'Calvary,' in a mysterious way they could not explain, was their redemption from the terror of the lynching tree."[229]

Black Americans, Cone writes, embraced the story of the crucified Jesus, finding in his death strength for their own lives. The cross gave them an identity far more potent and meaningful than any injustice they experienced. Knowing that Christ had undergone similar suffering, they could believe that God was with them just as God had been with Jesus.[230]

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[228] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 25.
[229] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 73.
[230] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 18-22.

Cone does not romanticize this paradoxical situation. He fully acknowledges the magnitude of the victims' suffering and how challenging it was to have faith under such conditions. He argues, however, that the doubt, natural in these circumstances, is not a negation of faith but an integral part of it while also pointing out that doubt does not have the last word, as it belongs to hope.[231] The proof for him is that black Americans never descended into the abyss of despair - no matter what they faced, they never stopped believing that change would eventually come.[232]

The paradox of the cross and the paradox of modern hope amid suffering come together in the writings of James Cone. He knows how challenging it is to look at the cross in terms of God finding a way out of a hopeless situation. Still, he also knows that this was precisely the lived experience of oppressed black Americans, and it allowed them to see in the cross the very sign of their possible liberation.[233] From the victims' perspective, the cross represents "the worst in human beings and at the same time 'an unquenchable ontological thirst' for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning."[234] Therefore, the crucified black victims become, for Cone, the best witnesses and interpreters of the cross, in which the see life growing out of death and the hope confronting despair. For them, the cross of Jesus is not defined by death but constitutes „No!" spoken to death.[235]

This paradoxical nature of the cross, described by Cone, shows a certain similarity to what Jon Sobrino calls the hope of the victims. It represents a special kind of hope - one experienced by

[231] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 107.
[232] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 20.
[233] Christopher Morse, "Apocalyptic Concreteness: James Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Theology Today* 70, no. 2 (2013): 203.
[234] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 3.
[235] J. Cameron Carter, "Apocalyptic Blues: On James H. Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Theology Today* 70, no. 2 (2013): 217.

victims - that grows out of Christ's resurrection while being marked by the ongoing presence of historical crosses.

The departure point for the victims' hope is, in Sobrino's view, not the cross, as in Cone's (implicitly featuring resurrection as a promise), but the resurrection itself. This is what gives the victimized the courage and strength to live in history. However, drawing strength from Jesus' resurrection is grounded - here, similarly to Cone - in the victims' prior identification with the unjustly condemned Jesus. "If the person resurrected [Jesus] is a victim, the hope it produces is hope precisely for victims; they can hope for justice and life that have been denied them in a thousand ways."[236] Thanks to God's intervention in raising Jesus from the dead, a new perspective emerges for all similarly crucified people. Their historical participation in the cross becomes a possibility of participating in resurrection as well.

The hope of the victims is the hope experienced inside a suffering world, forged and shaped in an oppressive environment - and therefore, the hope in the exact sense of the word. According to Sobrino, it is not possible to fully embrace the promise of resurrection without first facing the experience of death. For those who face death every day, hope is the power that prevents them from being imprisoned by it and leads them to look beyond: to the resurrection from the dead and the liberation to a new life. Toughened by the experience of historical suffering, the crucified hope enables the oppressed to anticipate resurrection amidst the pain and anguish present in their lives. It constitutes a promise deeply immersed in the reality of structural sin. It is not outside or above history but in history and for history – a hope directed against death and injustice. It does not entail

[236] Sobrino, "The Resurrection of One Crucified," 102.

optimism that naively approves life despite existing suffering but an active commitment against the structures of oppression and death.[237]

Both Sobrino and Cone recognize the paradox of faith and hope being experienced in a world that is constantly producing new crosses. Both also note that the hope born in such circumstances has a unique character and arises from the victims' identification with the crucified Christ. Cone explores this theme, pointing out the paradoxical nature of the cross itself - that from the victims' perspective, it signifies not only suffering but also the promise of transcending it. Sobrino goes beyond the cross, hinting at the same promise being found in the resurrection of Jesus. In his view, the hope that the victims have thanks to the resurrection is at the same time marked by their suffering and is, therefore, the crucified hope - they recognize it precisely as such in the framework of their experience. Cone, in turn, seems to suggest that the victims discover this kind of hope already in the cross of Jesus - in its juxtaposition of suffering and promise. For black Americans, Christ himself is the "crucified hope" - he who has gone through suffering similar to their own, and thanks to whom they can believe that there is life beyond the cross.

3.4.3 Transformation of reality

James Cone writes a great deal about the paradoxical nature of the cross and the hope already contained in the cross itself. However, by no means does he imply that suffering itself has a redemptive and salvific dimension to it. The hope found in the cross is fundamentally future-oriented and involves overcoming suffering and transcending the historical crucifixion toward liberation. Like Sobrino, Cone is not interested in different variants of the doctrine of

[237] Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 232.

atonement.[238] He also remains ever conscious that simply identifying lynched black Americans with Christ does not make their suffering acquire a transcendent religious meaning - according to him, their pain will always be an indictment of the world and a challenge to faith.[239] He writes: "I find nothing redemptive about suffering 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 oppressed…. What is redemptive is the faith that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair."[240]

Cone recalls that when Martin Luther King Jr. looked at Jesus hanging on the cross, he saw there, in addition to suffering, God transforming a tragic situation into a salvific reality.[241] By often emphasizing this manner of God's action, Cone seems to implicitly offer a specific model of soteriological praxis. It involves confronting the anti-Kingdom and reshaping sinful reality and presupposes the real possibility of transforming evil into good. Historical redemption lies not in suffering itself but in the human ability to face this suffering creatively and to derive from it, following the example of God, a new reality. The existence of suffering can result in resignation and bitterness, but it can also give impetus to act and confront oppressive structures. The tragic presence of victims can push others to solidarity with them, which echoes God's solidarity with the oppressed shown on the cross. Indeed, just as discovering God's solidarity demonstrated in the cross profoundly changes the meaning of the cross, so imitating this solidarity can radically change the situation of today's crucified.[242]

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[238] Gary Dorrien, "Black Liberation Theology and the Lynching of Jesus," review of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, by James H. Cone, *Tikkun* 27, no. 4, Fall 2012.
[239] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 112.
[240] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 150.
[241] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 86.
[242] Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 162.

This kind of soteriological agency corresponds with what Jon Sobrino describes as transformative *praxis*: a unique form of presence in the world inspired by God's actions - including what is revealed in Jesus' resurrection - and recreating those actions in new historical circumstances.

According to Sobrino, raising Jesus from the dead reveals how God gets involved in sinful history. God emerges in this act as the one who, in the end, does not leave the crucified Jesus alone but resurrects him, thus introducing a new hope to the world, especially to the victims. As for Christians, sustaining this hope does not involve merely nurturing its subjective experience but rather establishing a practice of its continuous implementation in the new historical reality. Sobrino calls for making the victims' hopes one's own, to actively participate in their reality, and to be willing to make an effort and sacrifice to change their situation.[243] Jesus' rising from the dead, therefore, invites Christians not only to believe in the reality of that event but also to reproduce it in historical terms.

What God has done in the resurrection calls everyone to what Sobrino describes as taking the crucified down from their cross - the cross to which they were nailed by oppressors similar to those responsible for Jesus' death. It is a special mission to imitate God's way of acting in history and a practical way to embody the hope and promise contained in the resurrection. "The mission that expresses the content of hope is that justice be done to the victims of this world, as justice was done to the crucified Jesus, and so the course of action called for is to take the crucified people down from the cross. This is action on behalf of the victims, of those crucified in history, that tries in a small way – with of course no hubris – to do what God himself does: to take the victim Jesus down from the cross."[244] Taking the crucified down from the cross - a continuation of God's action

[243] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 44-45.
[244] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 48.

in the concrete context of historical oppression - constitutes a transformative *praxis* that brings elements of hope and resurrection into a history marked by oppression and death.

Both Jon Sobrino and James Cone acknowledge the actual perspective of historical soteriology. In both cases, it is grounded in the possibility - accessible to a person - of transforming evil into good. This possibility was introduced into the world by God and demonstrated in how God responded to the crucifixion of Jesus. For Cone, the cross itself is already a sign of God's transformation of tragedy and death into something redemptive - as a human-made instrument of cruel execution that became a sign of redemption - while Sobrino sees this transformative moment in the resurrection, which he interprets as God's intervention on behalf of an innocent victim. God's action establishes a historical precedent that can continue in the transformative *praxis* people undertake, consisting of, Sobrino writes, taking the crucified down from their crosses. The concept of transformative *praxis* resonates with Cone's claim that the victims' suffering is not salvific in itself and that historical redemption lies only in confronting that suffering and radically reversing the situation. In Cone and Sobrino's view, historical soteriology happens when people react to contemporary crosses the way God responded to Christ's crucifixion.

3.5 CONCLUSION: SALVATION IN THE SUFFERING WORLD

The cross and resurrection of Jesus - as interpreted by James Cone and Jon Sobrino - offer the suffering world the possibility of a historical soteriology. For both theologians, history constitutes the relevant space for implementing the salvific project initiated by Jesus - failure to include history in soteriological reflection would be a severe impoverishment of the theological horizon. Moreover, it would mean ignoring the reality of oppression and injustice, which affects millions of victims and demands a Christian response.

James Cone never loses sight of the lynching tree and the continuing legacy of racial oppression. A soteriology/eschatology uninterested in black victims is useless to him and represents a religion of "running away from problems" - precisely like the one which white enslavers provided to black Americans. He states emphatically: "If contemplation about the future distorts the present reality of injustice and reconciles the oppressed to unjust treatment committed against them, then it is unchristian and thus has nothing whatsoever to do with the Christ who came to liberate us."[245] He sees confronting historical oppression as a criterion for both theology and Christian practice.

In Cone's view, the salvific perspective derived from black victims' identification with the crucified - and consequently risen - Christ provides them with the impetus to fight for a better here and now. From their personal, historical experience of the cross, black victims can bring forth - with the strength of their faith and hope - the possibility of historical liberation. He declares: "We now believe that something can be done about this world, and we have resolved to die rather than deny reality expressed in black self-determination…. Heaven cannot mean accepting injustice in the present because we know we have a home over yonder. Home is where we have been placed now, and to believe in heaven is to refuse to accept hell on earth."[246] The cross and resurrection of Jesus become a call to action in the context of racial injustice, inspiring black resistance and shouting a resounding "No!" to the forces of white supremacy.[247]

Jon Sobrino, although also writing about the transformation of reality and taking the crucified down from their cross, does not do so in such a militant manner as sometimes James Cone does. For him, Christian praxis does not feature such explicit elements of revolutionary

[245] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 145.
[246] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 149.
[247] Nathan R. Kerr, "Standing Out into the Coming Reign of God: Some Apocalyptic Reflections on James Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *Theology Today* 70, no. 2 (2013), 212.

action. Also, he recognizes another dimension of historical soteriology, stemming from how Jesus' disciples lived through his resurrection. According to Sobrino, it was an experience of a particular historical fullness and the victory of life over death - and as such, it can be historically reconstructed. He states: "Today too we need to be open to the possibility of having some sort of experience of 'fulness,' 'triumph,' 'victory' in history."[248] The visible signs of this fullness, according to him, are freedom and joy.

The freedom Sobrino writes about means that although humanity is deeply immersed in the reality of historical suffering, it is not determined by this darker side of history - people can choose to love and serve. This choice represents a historical reflection of Christ's resurrection by demonstrating that death does not have the last word. For Sobrino, an example of such freedom was, among others, Archbishop Romero, who chose to serve the poor out of love for them – he "loved the poor and loved nothing more than them or as radically as them."[249]

Joy is the second soteriological sign found in history. It is proof that there is something to celebrate in reality. According to Sobrino, alongside all that is painful in the world, one can also recognize what is good and positive in great and small things - this is what fills life with the dynamics of resurrection. Joy and celebration are clearly present in the lives of the poor and marginalized: "It is the joy of communities that, despite everything, come together to sing and recite poetry, to show that they are happy they are together, to celebrate the eucharist."[250]

According to Jon Sobrino, one can look at history with resignation and despair, but one can also see the promise and possibility of transformation within it. People who choose promise are taking up in history the extraordinary hope that came with the resurrection of Jesus. Moreover,

[248] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 75.
[249] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 76.
[250] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 77.

those who, in a world filled with death, celebrate life or have the freedom to sacrifice their lives for the victims, reveal the soteriological dimension of history - it is no longer a meaningless perpetual repetition of suffering, but a "the promise of a 'more' that touches us and draws us despite ourselves."[251]

A vision of historical soteriology is the culmination of Jon Sobrino's and James Cone's reflections. For both of them, the theology of the cross alone, along with the special place that contemporary victims occupy in it, will always be incomplete if a perspective of resurrection does not complement it. And just as the victims' cross has a real, historical character, so their resurrection should include historical liberation. Cone's remarks about such liberation are sometimes more revolutionary and militant than anything written by Sobrino. For the American theologian, Jesus' cross and resurrection provide an incentive for an active effort to transform reality. For the Jesuit, the theme of taking action is also there (a transformative praxis), but it is accompanied by a call to interpret reality in light of the resurrection - to recreate the experience of the first disciples. Ultimately, however, their theological projects are equally focused on changing reality and driven by the same hope that such change is possible.

[251] Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 78.

CONCLUSIONS

Jon Sobrino and James H. Cone create their theologies in complete honesty with reality. Not only do they not ignore the existence of structures of evil, oppression, and historical victims, but, being aware of the need to take it seriously, they make them the center of their inquiries. In their writings, the uncomfortable and painful side of reality becomes the key to interpreting Revelation and the focal point where Revelation obtains its historical actualization.

The unique role of victims as a theological *locus* is developed by both authors, especially in their reflection on the cross and salvation. Here, it takes the form of a particular hermeneutic loop: on the one hand, the death and resurrection of Christ become cognitively accessible through the victims, and on the other hand, these biblical events - read from this perspective - point back to the victims, allowing a new understanding of their fate, and indicating their distinctive role in the salvation history. In this loop, the mysteries of faith and the facts of history interpret and explain each other.

Interpretatively intertwined with the suffering of contemporary victims, the crucifixion of Jesus reveals a social disease that continually permeates the fabric of civilization. Both historical moments unmask what Sobrino calls the anti-Kingdom forces, an example of which are the mechanisms of white supremacy described by Cone. The structures of sin remain unchanged through the centuries - the same forces that were responsible for the trial and death of Jesus are behind the violence against millions of innocent people today.

With this theological interpretation of structural oppression, an even more critical insight emerges concerning the historical victims and their unique connection to the crucified Jesus. In light of this link, Jon Sobrino can call present-day oppressed a crucified people, pointing out, as does James Cone, the essential similarities between their predicament and that of Christ. The

victims of poverty, violence, and racism are, in the view of both theologians, a tangible manifestation of Christ's life and death. Both authors construct a broad analogy between the events of Jesus' Passion and the experience of historical victims. In their view, the suffering of the Latin American poor and black Americans in the US takes on the character of a historical reconstruction of the events of Jerusalem and Golgotha, with the victims receiving a distinctive Christological mark. All this allows both theologians - Sobrino does it in a much more elaborate way - to identify the modern oppressed with the Suffering Servant of Yahweh from Isaiah 53, one who, like them "was despised and rejected by others," "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities," and who "did not open his mouth."[252]

Sobrino and Cone's theology of the cross is constructed in the context of historical suffering. It features concrete situations and images of social, economic, and racial injustice in its background, and the meaning of the cross, as explored by both theologians, is firstly a meaning for the victims and only later, through the victims, a meaning for others.

However, for neither Cone nor Sobrino, the theological reflection carried out from the victims' perspective or the special bond between the oppressed and Christ is not exhausted by the theme of the cross, suffering, and death but finds its conclusion in the reality of resurrection and liberation. The vision of historical soteriology is the climax of their theological quest. According to them, just as the crucifixion is not symbolic but real and historical, the resurrection should also possess a similar dimension.

Both theologians see the possibility of historical liberation introduced to the world in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Both discover in those events the promise of the victim's ultimate triumph over the executioner. In their interpretation, God denies oppressors having the last word -

[252] James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020),123.

this divine action can, in turn, be taken up and continued in history. Writing from the depths of historical injustice and well aware of the overwhelming nature of historical crosses, Sobrino and Cone believe that history is not determined by death and that, in addition to the structures of sin, it also contains an inner force of resurrection that is capable of healing reality.

The way God responded to Jesus' crucifixion opens up new perspectives for history, pointing to the possibility, also available to people, of transforming evil into good. The practical implementation of this possibility is to take the crucified down from their crosses, which Sobrino writes about extensively and of which Cone gives many examples. In the view of both theologians, historical salvation - with its precedent in Jesus' passage from the cross to the resurrection - lies in a sincere confrontation with the suffering of the crucified and decisive action to change their fate. In a history that does not stop producing new crosses and multiplying deaths, people can constantly recreate God's action and bring the dynamics of resurrection into the world.

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