

In Praise of the Secular

Natasha Levinson

Kent State University

The bent note is a perfect analogy for the structure of Sam Rocha's essay. Picture each string straining to lightly touch the string above it as Rocha offers this tribute to his *abuelito*, Andrés Rocha, by telling us a little of his story, connecting his advice "*No le aflojes*" — don't leave any slack in your rope — to the distinctive sound and style of B.B. King's blues guitar. Then, another string strains as the pain of King's stark memory of witnessing a lynching in Mississippi as a young boy is recalled. This memory takes us to Black liberation theologian James Cone's insistence that the Cross and the Lynching Tree are inseparable, not only for what they tell us about White Supremacy but more profoundly for what they suggest about the strange appeal of Christianity for African-Americans. If this opening paragraph were accompanied by a blues guitar, the note would reverberate so as to draw attention to the complexities of a theology of the Cross, with its difficult mix of politics and faith and its dialectics of suffering and redemption, historical rootedness and transcendence, identification and illumination, exclusivity and solidarity.

In addition to being a moving tribute to Rocha's grandfather, this essay is a critique of what he calls the "neat White liberal divide between politics and theology." Rocha accuses liberal secularists of a series of offenses, from the aesthetic offense that leads people to mistakenly read the blues as secular spirituals, to the pedagogical offense of not allowing "professors to profess, teachers to teach, students to learn," to the ultimate theological offense of failing to understand religious belief as embodied reality. I take this to be a critique of the idea that faith is a matter of beliefs — that is, ideas about God — that can be abstracted from both the lived historical and social context of a community and the embodied self of the believer. Although Rocha doesn't do so, it is worth exploring these difficulties further because they may well account for some of the alienation and frustration felt in schools by students from these communities. It's not just individuals who worry about feeling divided by education, but communities, too. As the Call for Papers of the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference's makes clear, education involves loss as well as gain, and we are talking here about communities that have already lost a great deal. So, Rocha is right to suggest that the shift from religious beliefs to a notion of "faith incarnate" — embodied community — calls into question any conception of a neat divide that would enable teachers to keep religion out of the classroom; we can no more keep religion out of the classroom than we can keep students out of the classroom. Nonetheless, the idea of faith incarnate raises more questions than it answers, particularly about professions of faith, and specifically when it comes to the nuances of Christian witness in the classroom. It is not easy to distinguish between expressions of faith and proselytization — indeed, for evangelical Christians in a range of denominations and political persuasions, there is no distinction.

It is not surprising that these sorts of issues of power are absent from the essay because it takes its bearings from liberation theology, which is interested in the struggles of the powerless, the marginal, the oppressed. For liberation theology, the central event in the Christian story — the lynching of Jesus Christ at the hands of a Roman mob — has clearest parallels with the black experience in America and the experiences of the poor in Latin America. Cone understands the black experience in America to be *the* essential Christian story, provided that we understand this story as Rocha urges us to: neither as “the magisterium of Christian tradition” nor through the distancing lens of “theological abstraction.” Instead, the Christian story needs to be read through the particular contextual and historical lens of the black experience, which is to say, as a story of a people wrestling with the question of “how life could be made meaningful in the face of death, how hope could remain alive in the world of Jim Crow segregation.”¹ Of course, we are talking here about death, not as shared human fate but specifically by lynching, a targeted crime carried out by white people to reduce the African-American threat in the wake of Emancipation.² We should not forget that the people doing the lynching often did so in the name of policing Christian morality. Despite this, African-Americans were drawn to the Christian story because they saw their situation reflected in it. They identified particularly powerfully with the experience of Christ on the Cross. According to Cone, Black Christians “sang more songs and preached more sermons about the cross than any other aspect of Jesus’ ministry . . . the cross speaks to oppressed people in ways that Jesus’ life, teachings and even his resurrection do not.”³ However, Cone notes that this identification with Christ on the Cross was not unquestioning. When they considered the figure on the cross, they saw their own suffering, to be sure, but the light of the cross also reflected back to God himself. Why did he appear to sanction slavery? Why did he not step in to end the mass terror of lynchings? Again, these were not abstract questions about the nature of evil, but very specific questions about their current situation and God’s relationship to them in light of it. In one sermon, a preacher asked God, on behalf of his congregation, “why it was that thou didst look on with the calm indifference of an unconcerned spectator, when thy holy law was violated, thy divine authority despised, and a portion of thine own creatures reduced to a state of mere vassalage and misery.”⁴

Black liberation theology thus grows out of profound theological and sociological disappointment.⁵ Disappointment but not despair because — to invoke Audrey Thompson’s response to Bill Lawson’s essay in this volume — the other dimension of a theology of the Cross is its message of hope.⁶ In Black theology, the salvation story is not a metaphysical journey of redemption from sin; it is a historical and sociological story of liberation, first from the horrors of slavery, and then from the terror of lynch mobs. Rocha finds this identification with the crucified Jesus to be a source of concern. Indeed, in an unfortunate even if technically accurate turn of phrase, he accuses these theologians of idolatry. He locates their “theological confusion” in what he calls “an inversion of the line of sight” from their situation to God’s revelation, instead of vice versa. Cone had similar worries about the fine line between Black theology and black ideology, and sought to explain the dialectic of Christian thought that is revelation:

Because the divine has entered the human situation in Jesus and has issued God's judgment against poverty, sickness, and oppression, persons who fight against these inhumanities become instruments of God's Word.... the word of the oppressed becomes God's Word insofar as the former recognize it not as their own but as given to them through divine grace.⁷

Now, this formulation won't convince those who are not already taken with the Christian story, which is precisely why, in his more recent writings, Cone starts to talk about faith traditions as stories that speak dialectically to those who feel summoned by them because they recognize a truth in them. Cone concedes that the Christian story will not be persuasive to everybody — and he is profoundly aware, indeed dismayed, by the range of ways in which this story is interpreted — even by influential liberal White theologians who, in Cone's view, misread the story of Christ on the Cross in metaphysical rather than political, social, and historical terms.⁸ As Cone explains, "I came to know this story as the truth in my own struggle in situations of trouble. Jesus is now my story.... I cannot and have no desire to 'prove' my story."⁹ Just as Cone came to regard the "blackness" in Black theology to extend to other oppressed, exploited, and marginalized peoples who are also represented "on the Cross," so, too, did the notion of a Christian story emerge out of a recognition that the Christian story is not the only way in which God makes himself manifest in the world. This opens Christians to solidarity with others, including those from nonbiblical traditions.¹⁰

Cone's turn to the notion of story helps soften Rocha's concerns about "idolatry" in several ways. First, it occasions a shift from a notion of "witness" to the idea of listening, which helps reverse the "inverted line of sight" that Rocha worries about. Listening to God's revelation is another way of talking about the "wounds witnessing."¹¹ Listening helps believers guard against being trapped in his or her own subjectivity, which is one part of the "idolatry" that troubles Rocha.¹² Second, the habit of listening might also open believers to other people's stories, including stories from nonbiblical traditions.¹³ Of course, it also allows them to share their stories, which brings me back to my concern with Christian witness, although the spirit of "sharing" is, at least in theory, different from the idea of imposition and different even from the idea of persuasion. How this "sharing" feels to non-Christians and what this suggests for crossing the "neat White liberal divide" in the context of religiously pluralist classroom are questions that must wait for another time. The more salient point here is that exposure to other people's stories is part of the movement toward secularization with which Rocha takes issue. But secularization does not have to be understood as either idolatry or iconoclasm: it is simply the space that opens up for hearing and telling multiple stories, and, of course — in the case of *corridos*, *Christiades*, spirituals, and the blues — many kinds of song.

1. James Cone, "Nobody Knows De Trouble I See," in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Press, 2011), 3.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 26.

4. *Ibid.*, 27.

5. See Bill Lawson's "Philosophy, Education and After-the-Lynching Blues," in this volume.

6. See Audrey Thompson's response, "Requiring of Us a Song: Longing, Hard Listening, and the Blues," in this volume.
7. Cone, "Black Theology and Ideology," in *God of the Oppressed* (revised edition) (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 90.
8. *Ibid.*, 78–83.
9. *Ibid.*, 98.
10. See Cone's Preface to the revised edition of *God of the Oppressed*, xiv.
11. This shift in focus from illumination to revelation is also more in keeping with Protestantism's repudiation of Catholic and Orthodox iconography — hence the unadorned cross rather than the crucifixion in Protestant symbolism.
12. Cone "Black Theology and Ideology," 95.
13. *Ibid.*