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BILL MOYERS: Welcome to the JOURNAL. Our subject in this hour is one you don't hear discussed very often in politics or around the dining table. It's buried so deeply in the American psyche that rarely does anyone bring it front and center. Our silence on it is one reason we have so much difficulty coming to terms with race in America. I'm reluctant to raise it even now, because it's anything but a comfortable subject for television. But I went online not long ago and listened to a speech at Harvard University that I simply can't forget and I wanted you to meet the man who delivered it.

JAMES CONE: ...blacks and whites and other Americans who want to understand the meaning of the American experience need to remember lynching.

BILL MOYERS: His name is James Cone and he has a powerful message about seeing America through the experience of the cross and the lynching tree.

JAMES CONE: ..to make sense out of the cross, the central symbol of the Christian faith, and the lynching tree...

BILL MOYERS: That's right - the cross on which Christians believe Jesus Christ was crucified in the Roman Empire, and the lynching tree that meant agony and death for thousands of black people. Their connection is the subject of our broadcast. Be forewarned: you will see some disturbing images.

JAMES CONE: Yes, that is a noose...

BILL MOYERS: In the past few months we've all seen these chilling reports:

REPORTER:...one in Farmingdale and just yesterday in Roosevelt. Those two..."

BILL MOYERS: Nooses tied to a school yard tree in Jena, Louisiana.

REPORTER: ...historically reserved for white students...

BILL MOYERS: Nooses left for a black member of the US Coast Guard.

REPORTER: ...at New London, Connecticut...

BILL MOYERS: A noose on the door of a university professor's office here in New York City.

REPORTER: ...here at Columbia University...

VOICE: ...because today it's a noose and tomorrow they trying to put some bodies head in it...

BILL MOYERS: The reappearance of nooses is a haunting reminder of the dark side of American history, when after the civil war black Americans were forced to live in the shadow of the lynching tree. Thousands of human beings, tortured and hanged by the neck until dead.

BILLIE HOLIDAY SINGINGSouthern trees bear strange fruit.....blood on the leaves and

blood at the root, black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze...

JAMES CONE: ...'fruit hanging from the poplar trees'. Billie singing her signature song.

BILL MOYERS: James Cone knows that song well. As one of America's pioneers of black theology, he has never been able to forget its message, and he wants his students at Union Theological Seminary here in New York City, to remember it, too.

JAMES CONE: ...so that the brutal facts of history, keeps that from being a sort of pie in the sky thing.

BILL MOYERS: James Cone has been at Union Seminary since 1969, teaching systematic theology through the black experience in America...

JAMES CONE: ...it seemed to me that Martin and Malcolm represented two poles of my identity.

BILL MOYERS: He grew up in rural Arkansas, and soon found his calling in the church. He was ordained by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and went on to the life of teacher and scholar. Among his many books and articles are these - MARTIN & MALCOLM & AMERICA, BLACK THEOLOGY & BLACK POWER AND GOD OF THE OPPRESSED - all translated in nine languages.

JAMES CONE: ...not many black theologians and preachers have made an explicit...

BILL MOYERS: Right now he's thinking through how the cross and the lynching tree enable us to interpret America today.

JAMES CONE: ...so I want to start a conversation about the cross and the lynching tree and thereby break our silence on race and Christianity in American history.

BILL MOYERS: And Dr. James Cone is with me now. Welcome to THE JOURNAL. Glad to have you.

JAMES CONE: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

BILL MOYERS: That old Billie Holiday number that-- that we played, Strange Fruit-- "Southern trees bear strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree." I mean, nobody sings that anymore. You don't hear it. But, yet, that is deep in our DNA, is it not?

JAMES CONE: Yes, it's deep. Because lynching is so deep. And that song is about lynching. It's about black bodies hanging on trees. And that's deep in the American experience. Particularly after the Civil War. But, it's connected with slavery too. Although, lynching didn't take place in slavery because black people were worth too much.

BILL MOYERS: I didn't know that.

JAMES CONE: So, they're-- oh, no-- no. They didn't lynch them during the time of slavery. It's after slavery. And it's in order to control the community. It's to put fear and terror in their hearts so that they would be forced to obey and stay out in the fields and work and not loiter. And to remember that whites controlled the world. Even though the south lost the war, they are still in control of their section of America.

BILL MOYERS: After the Civil War.

JAMES CONE: After the Civil War.

BILL MOYERS: I mean, it was--

JAMES CONE: That's when lynching started.

JAMES CONE: They wanted to remind black people that they were in charge and that whites controlled, for the same reasons why Romans-- crucified people in the first century.

BILL MOYERS: It worked, didn't it?

JAMES CONE: Yes, it worked.

BILL MOYERS: It worked.

JAMES CONE: It worked to a certain degree. It only worked in the sense that it reminded black people and white people that whites actually had political and social control and economic control. But, they didn't have control of their humanity. See, that's what religion is about. Religion is a search for meaning when you don't have it in this world. So, while they might have controlled the black people physically and politically and economically, they did not control their spirit. That's why the black churches are very powerful forces in the African American community and always has been. Because religion has been that one place where you have an imagination that no one can control. And so, as long as you know that you are a human being and nobody can take that away from you, then God is that reality in your life that enables you to know that.

BILL MOYERS: And even though you're living under the shadow of the lynching tree.

JAMES CONE: Even though you're living under the shadow of the lynching tree. Because religion is a spirit that is not defined by what people can do to your body. They can kill your body, but they can't kill your soul. We were always told that. There is a spirit deep in you that nobody can take away from you because it's a creation that God gave to you.

Now, if you know you have a humanity that nobody can take away from you, they may lock you up. They may lynch you. But, they don't win.

BILL MOYERS: But when you were growing up in that part of the world -- well, we grew up only about a hundred miles or so apart. I grew up in east Texas. You in southwestern Arkansas. I'm a little older than you. But, we come out of that same culture. Did you in your community, Fordyce and Bearden, talk about lynching very much?

JAMES CONE: Yes, my mother and father did-- my mother and father did. We didn't talk so much about it publicly. But, my mother and father talked about it all the time. They told us stories about lynching. I think that happened with many black families. It's that we didn't talk about it much publicly like in schools and in churches. But, we did talk about it at home.

BILL MOYERS: In the white community of my deeply segregated hometown, I honestly don't remember our talking about it.

BILL MOYERS: When my father died, I found in his effects a yellow newspaper from Paris, Texas where he was born and lived. And I lived there for a little while. And it was a lynching- a photograph of a lynching near his farm. Five thousand people had come to watch this man lynched.

JAMES CONE: Yeah--spectacle lynchings were-- were especially prominent just after the Civil War and in the beginning of the 20th century, spectacle lynchings. And they didn't stop until the 30s, the late 1930s.

BILL MOYERS: How do you explain the current spate of the appearance of the noose again? Up comes this story right here from the suburbs of New York. A noose found in the basement-a locker room of the village police department. The deputy chief of police is black. And then you've got Jena and you got what happened at the Columbia, near your office. You think these people who-- do you think they understand what that's the symbol of? Of what actually happened to human beings when that noose was placed around the

neck? Or is this just some kind of-- you know, some kind of grim game?

JAMES CONE: Well, you know, you don't have to know all about the Nazi hol-- Holocaust to understand what a swastika is. You don't have to understand all about the history of lynching to know what a noose is. Everybody knows that. Somehow, that-- that gets-- you don't have to know that history. It's in-- it's in American culture. As you say, it's in the DNA. It's our-- it's white America's original sin and it's deep. Like, for a long time, we didn't want to talk about slavery. They don't like to talk about 246 years of it. Then a hundred years of legal segregation and lynching.

Now, you don't get away from that by not talking about it. That's too deep. Germany is not going to get away from the Holocaust by not talking about it. It's too deep. So, America must face up that we are one community. We-- you know, if anybody in this society-- if anybody is brother and sister to the other, it's black people and white people because there is a-- there is a tussle there that you cannot get out of. It is a-- it is deeply engrained in our relationship to each other in a way that's not with anybody else--

BILL MOYERS: How do you mean?

JAMES CONE: --in this land.

BILL MOYERS: What do you mean?

JAMES CONE: Because 246 years of slavery, number one. We have built this country. White people know that. Then, after slavery, segregation and lynching, we still helped built this country. So, it's a history of violence, a history of black people fighting in every American war-- even the Civil War.

BILL MOYERS: Like the Jews and the Arabs, right?

JAMES CONE: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: 'Cause, I mean, they come out of the same--

JAMES CONE: That-- out of the same matrix.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, yeah, and they can't--

JAMES CONE: And you can't--

JAMES CONE: You can't let each other go. I don't care what you do. And that's why-- those nooses create that kind of response.

BILL MOYERS: But, why-- why don't we talk about particularly the lynching?

JAMES CONE: Yeah, it's ugly. Black bodies hanging on trees. That's ugly. And Billie Holiday can you make feel that, like you're at the foot of that tree. So, it's ugly. People don't like to talk about stuff that's really deep and ugly.

BILL MOYERS: You quote James Allen, who wrote a book in which he talked about the terrible beauty of the lynching tree. But, beauty and terror seem so at odds with each other.

JAMES CONE: Well, that's my phrase. Not his. That's my phrase.

BILL MOYERS: Is that your phrase?

JAMES CONE: That's my phrase. But, it comes from Reinhold Niebuhr --

BILL MOYERS: The theologian that--

JAMES CONE: The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr -

BILL MOYERS: You teach Niebuhr today, right? That's right.

JAMES CONE: Yes.

STUDENT: I think for Niebuhr that it is the individual that ramps up to the larger group, that ramps up to the larger nation, and then when you consider that level of self interest and pride -

BILL MOYERS: Reinhold Niebuhr was America's most influential protestant theologian of the 20th century. He taught at Union Seminary for 32 years.

JAMES CONE: So you think Niebuhr's right.

STUDENT: Yes, I think he's absolutely right.

BILL MOYERS: His analysis of how faith connected to the realities of power shaped two generations of political thought and influenced Christian leaders such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. James Cone's class on Niebuhr is one of the most popular at Union Seminary.

JAMES CONE: What says faith for Niebuhr is an affect that empowers people to fight in the world. That's what's at stake for him.

BILL MOYERS: Do you think there's any nucleus of his teachings that are still relevant in this new world that we're living in, in the 21st century?

JAMES CONE: Oh, without question.

BILL MOYERS: What?

JAMES CONE: It's Niebuhr's perspective on humanity. Niebuhr has a profound understanding of the human being, which sees the human being as a creature as finite but also free, that is also with a sense of transcendence but it's that freedom.

BILL MOYERS: Sinful being seeking justice?

JAMES CONE: Yes. It's sinful being seeking justice. It's that freedom that also makes him anxious and also makes him always have good and bad always mixed up together.

It is never clean. And if America could understand itself as not being innocent, it might be able to play a more creative role in the world today. And Niebuhr could help America see that. And if Bush would read more Niebuhr, he might be able to get a perspective on himself and on America that would deepen its vision about a world of freedom and justice.

BILL MOYERS: If the President asked you for one book of Niebuhr's, which would it be?

JAMES CONE: THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY. That would be the book.

BILL MOYERS: And the core of it is?

JAMES CONE: The core of it is, is helping America get over its innocence. Helping America to see itself through the eyes of people from the bottom. And you see, America likes to think of itself as innocent. And we are not. No human being is innocent. And so, I-- that would be the book I would recommend him to read. But since he's a Christian, I would especially recommend that he reads Beyond Tragedy. Niebuhr tells us that Christianity

takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy by way of the cross to victory in the cross.

BILL MOYERS: Meaning?

JAMES CONE: Meaning that the cross is victory out of defeat.

BILL MOYERS: And the lynching tree?

JAMES CONE: And the lynching tree is transcendent of defeat. And that's why the cross and the lynching tree belong together. That's why I have to talk about the lynching tree. Because Christians can't understand what's going on at the cross until they see it through the image of a lynching tree with black bodies hanging there.

BILL MOYERS: Why?

JAMES CONE: Because what the Christian Gospel is a transvaluation of values. Something you cannot anticipate in this world, in this history. But, it empowers the powerless. It is-- what do you mean by power in the powerless? That's what God is. Power in the powerless.

BILL MOYERS: But, the victims of lynchings are dead.

JAMES CONE: No. Their mothers and fathers aren't dead. Their brothers and sisters aren't dead. I'm alive. I have to give voice to those who did die. And all of us do. That's why we can't forget it.

BILL MOYERS: But, you know, Dr. Cone, I went online and-- and watched the video version of your speech at Harvard where you talked on Strange Fruit-- the Cross and the Lynching Tree. I must say that audience didn't seem very comfortable with that-- with that linkage, right?

JAMES CONE: No, they did not. No, because I said it at a divinity school. And that's mostly whites there. Blacks felt comfortable with it. They're-- they like that. They like that connection because it gives them a perspective on the lynching that empowers them rather than silences them.

JAMES CONE: People who have never been lynched by another group usually find it difficult to understand why it is blacks want whites to remember lynching atrocities. Why bring that up, they ask? Isn't that best forgotten? And I say, absolutely not! The lynching tree is a metaphor for race in America, a symbol of America's crucifixion of black people. See, whites feel a little uncomfortable because they are part of the history of the people who did the lynching. I would much rather be a part of the history of the lynching victims than a part of the history of the one who did it. And that's the kind of transcendent perspective that empowers people to resist. That's why King knew he was going to win even when he lost by human sense.

BILL MOYERS: You think that's what he meant when he said, "I see--

JAMES CONE: The promised land?

BILL MOYERS: --the promised land?"

JAMES CONE: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, and "I'm going to the mountain."

JAMES CONE: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: He said in Memphis-- that last speech.

JAMES CONE: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: You think that's what he had-- it-- you think he had the symbol in the way you're talking about it of the cross?

JAMES CONE: Oh, without question. The cross was the most dominant symbol in King's understanding of the gospel and in his life. And the more difficult it became-- and it did become difficult-- the more difficult it became, the more he knew he was going to be killed, the more he turned to the cross.

BILL MOYERS: Now, you gotta appreciate the fact that my audience includes a lot of people who understand the language, come out of the Christian faith, are in the Christian faith. But, it also includes a lot of people for whom the cross makes no sense.

JAMES CONE: Yes, right.

BILL MOYERS: The Roman empire putting a man on the cross and killing him, and a religion growing up--

JAMES CONE: Yes-- yes-- yes.

BILL MOYERS: --out of a dead body. For all those people, how do you put it into popular language that is beyond the dogma, beyond the creed, beyond the Christian story?

JAMES CONE: See, the cross is my story. It's the story of black people. That's the only way I can talk about it. See, when people ask me to tell my-- tell my story, that's what I tell. Now, my story may not be your story. I've been all over the world: in India and in Sri Lanka and in Africa. I've been all over the place where people did not have as their dominant symbol. But, they want-- they wanted to hear my story. When I tell my story, that's what I tell.

But, then, I want people to tell me their story. What I do know is religion is always the search for meaning for people who are weak and powerless. And it connects me with people all over the world. That's why I want to hear these people's stories. I want to hear the stories because I know God is not without witness. All over the world. And God speaks in many tongues. I know where God is present when I see little people, the least of these, affirming their humanity in situations where they have few resources to do that. That power is what I mean by the cross.

BILL MOYERS: And you say, "The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles usually reserved for hardened criminals, rebellious slaves, rebels against the Roman state and falsely accused militant blacks who were often called black beasts and monsters in human form." So, how do the cross and the lynching tree interpret each other?

JAMES CONE: It keeps the lynchers from having the last word. The lynching tree interprets the cross. It keeps the cross out of the hands of those who are dominant. Nobody who is lynching anybody can understand the cross. That's why it's so important to place the cross and the lynching tree together. Because the cross, or the crucifixion was analogous to a first century lynching. In fact, biblical scholars-- when they want to describe what was happening to Jesus, many of them said, "It was a lynching."

And all I want to suggest is if American Christians say -- they want to identify with that cross, they have to see the cross as a lynching. Any time your empathy, your solidarity is with the little people, you're with the cross. If you identify with the lynchers, then, no, you can't understand what's happening. That in the sense of resistance-- what resistance means by helpless people. Power in the powerless is not something that we are accustomed to listening to and understanding. It's not a part of our historical experi-- America always wants to think it's gonna win everything. Well, black people have a history in which we didn't win. We did not win. See, our resistance is a resistance against the odds. That's why we can understand the cross.

BILL MOYERS: What are we to do about all of these recent events with the nooses? How-- how should we respond?

JAMES CONE: It ought to encourage us to connect. Blacks and whites. It oughta encourage us that-- to remind us we don't have the community that we oughta have. And so, instead of it, you know, separating us from each other, it should bring us together. And generally speaking, there were whites in all of the marches in Jena, at Columbia. There are always whites there. That's hope. That's a sign of hope.

BILL MOYERS: What does it say to you? I mean, Jena's one thing because of the tradition and history of the south. But, how do you explain the presence of these nooses anonymously-- placed in the New York area? Columbia, as you say? Long Island where I lived for 25 years. Not far from where we're sitting right now. How do you explain that phenomenon?

JAMES CONE: You know, racism and white supremacy is-- was not confined to the south. It was all over America. It's just expressed in different ways. So, it's as deeply-- in many ways, more deeply felt and present in the north of the - or outside the south largely because it was not acknowledged.

BILL MOYERS: We just -- recently saw this book called Lynching in the West: , photographs from Ken Gonzales-Day, as he went searching for California's lynching trees. This is California.

JAMES CONE: Yes--

BILL MOYERS: Three hundred--

JAMES CONE: Yes-- yes.

BILL MOYERS: --lynching trees he found out there. I mean, that's the far west. That's not the south. That's--

JAMES CONE: Lynching happened all over. In Pennsylvania, in New York, in California. All over America lynching happened. Now, it was more prominent in the south like Mississippi and Georgia. But and the terror - was deeply embedded there. But, it was a part of America. And that's why Malcolm X said, "Mississippi is America." It's not-- you know, it's not separate. And so, you know, Malcolm X came from the north. And his voice was a lot more militant than King's who came from the south. And so Malcolm was trying to get people to listen to something that they didn't want to listen to. Now, King knew. His truth was obvious. Malcolm's truth was not so obvious.

BILL MOYERS: The truth that?

JAMES CONE: Truth that white supremacy is as present in New York City as it is in Jackson, Mississippi. That's the truth. And when America can see itself as one, not just the south did the lynching, but it is a part of American culture, then we can figure out how we can start to overcome that. You can't overcome something if you never acknowledged its presence.

BILL MOYERS: Do you acknowledge the presence of crucifixion and lynching today?

JAMES CONE: Yes, I do.

BILL MOYERS: Where?

JAMES CONE: It's in the prisons. It's in prisons. It's all over. Prisons, I would say, is the most prominent.

JAMES CONE: Crucifixion and lynchings are symbols. They are symbols of the power of

domination. They are symbols of the destruction of people's humanity. With black people being 12 percent of the US population and nearly 50 percent of the prison population, that's lynching. It's a legal lynching. So, there are a lot of ways to lynch a people than just hanging 'em on the tree. A lynching is trying to control the population. It is striking terror in the population so as to control it.

That's what the ghetto does. It crams people into living spaces where they will self destruct, kill each other, fight each other, shoot each other because they have no place to breathe, no place for recreation, no place for an articulation and expression of their humanity. So, it becomes a way, a metaphor for lynching, if lynching is understood and as one group forcing a kind of inhumanity upon another group.

BILL MOYERS: Do you believe God is love?

JAMES CONE: Yes, I believe God is love.

BILL MOYERS: I would have a hard time believing God is love if I were a black man. I mean, those bodies swinging on the tree. What was God? Where was God during the 400 years of slavery?

JAMES CONE: See, you are looking at it from the perspective of those who win. You have to see it from the - perspective of those who have no power. In fact, God is love because it's that power in your life that lets you know you can resist the definitions that other people are being-- placing on you. And you sort of say, sure, nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows my sorrow. Sure, there is slavery. Sure, there is lynching, segregation.

But, glory, hallelujah. Now, that glory hallelujah is the fact that there is a humanity and a spirit that nobody can kill. And as long as you know that, you will resist. That was the power of the civil rights movement. That was the power of those who kept marching even though the odds are against you. How do you keep going when you don't have the battle tanks, when you don't have the guns? When you don't have the military power? When you have nothing? How do you keep going? How do you know that you are a human being? You know because there's a power that transcends all of that.

BILL MOYERS: So, how does love fit into that? What do you mean when you say God is love?

JAMES CONE: God is that power. That power that enables you to resist. You love that! You love the power that empowers you even in a situation in which you have no political power. The-- you have to love God. Now, what is trouble is loving white people. Now, that's tough. It's not God we having trouble loving. Now, loving white people. Now, that's-- that's difficult. But, King -- you know, King helped us on that. But, that is a-- that is an agonizing response.

BILL MOYERS: Have you forgiven whites for lynching your ancestors?

JAMES CONE: Well, it's not a question of forgiveness except in this sense. You see, when whites ask me about that, then I want to know why they're asking, see. Because I want to first talk about what you going to do in order to make sense out of the world to make me want to do that. See, I don't think my forgiveness of you depends on what you do. But, I am curious why you ask me that.

BILL MOYERS: I ask it because I'm not sure I could give it.

JAMES CONE: That's because, you see, when you have a power and a reality in your experience that transcends both you and me, then it's not just what you can do or what I can do. It is what the power in us can do. That-- you lose that-- you lose the presence of a spirit that is greater than you, that enables you to do the unthinkable because you know you're connected with the scoundrel even though he might have lynched you or lynched your brother. You are gonna fight him about that. But, does not-- he's a bad brother. But, he's still a brother.

BILL MOYERS: You said in that speech at Harvard that you hoped by linking the cross and the lynching tree to begin a conversation in America about race.

JAMES CONE: Yes.

BILL MOYERS: What would you like us to be talking about?

JAMES CONE: I'd like for us, first, to talk to each other. And I'd like to talk about what it would mean to be one community, one people. Really one people.

BILL MOYERS: What would it mean?

JAMES CONE: It would mean that we would talk about the lynching tree. We would talk about slavery. We would talk about the good and the bad all mixed up there. We would begin to see ourselves as a family. Martin King called it the beloved community. That's what he was struggling for.

BILL MOYERS: What can people do to try to help bring about this beloved community that you talk about?

JAMES CONE: First is to believe that it can happen. Don't lose hope. If you-- if you-- if people lose hope, they give up in despair. Black people were enslaved for 246 years. But, they didn't lose hope.

BILL MOYERS: Why didn't they?

JAMES CONE: They didn't lose hope because there was a power and a reality in their experience that helped them to know that they were a part of this human race just like everybody else.

BILL MOYERS: All right--

JAMES CONE: And they fought for that.

BILL MOYERS: All right, so I'm-- I have hope. What's next?

JAMES CONE: The next step is to connect with people who also have hope: blacks, whites, Hispanic, Asians, all different kinds of people. You have to connect and be around and organize with people who have hope.

BILL MOYERS: Organize?

JAMES CONE: Yes.

BILL MOYERS: What do you mean organize?

JAMES CONE: You organize to make the world the way it ought to be.

BILL MOYERS: And that--

JAMES CONE: And that is the beloved community. You have to have some witness to that. Even if it's a small witness of just you and me.

BILL MOYERS: You don't have to be angels to do that?

JAMES CONE: No, you don't have to be--

BILL MOYERS: Remember, if men were angels, we wouldn't need government.

JAMES CONE: That's-- that's--

BILL MOYERS: As the founding fathers--

JAMES CONE: --right.

BILL MOYERS: --said. We're not angels.

JAMES CONE: No, we're not angels-- no, we're not angels. But, in-- where there are two or three gathered, there is hope. There is possibility. And you don't want to lose that. That's why I keep teaching.

BILL MOYERS: Speaking of race, guess it's like - all the talk in politics today about blackness. I mean, you've got people arguing, blacks arguing, is Barack Obama black enough or not? You got people talking about Condoleezza Rice. Since she's gotten to power, is she aware of her black-- should she be aware of her blackness? What's your take on all this?

JAMES CONE: Well, I think everybody should be aware of their heritage. See, blackness is a powerful, powerful symbol in America. Because we were taught to be ashamed of being black. And in a society in which you are taught to be ashamed of it, then to overcome that, you have to affirm it. So, you shouldn't be bashful about talking about it. Because to be bashful about talking about it is to, in some sense, to be ashamed of it, at least from the perspective of those who are black and who don't have the kind of position that Condoleezza Rice or Barack Obama would have. So, all they want is to say, you know, express some identity with our history and our culture. It's okay to identify with the larger culture. Because we are one community. But that should not entitle one to just forget about one's own particular culture of blackness.

BILL MOYERS: So, is Obama black enough?

JAMES CONE: Well, you know, I'm not sure I'm black enough. I'm not sure that that is the right ques-- I'm sure I'm not black enough for a lotta people. I-- what I think is relevant here is that people are reaching out to Barack Obama, wanting him to address some of the issues that are particularly important to them. And he has addressed one or two, but is not, you know, from the perspective of the people who are asking the question at least, not enough in order to affirm the fact that he really is as much for black people as he is for the state of America. See, and the problem here is, is that whites make it difficult for black people to be black and also for them to support him.

BILL MOYERS: How's that?

JAMES CONE: Because the more you express identity with the community from which you come from if you're black, the more fear white people have. Now, that's not true for Italians. That's not true for Germans. That's not true for any other group, hardly, except us. Because there-- it's because we haven't been talking about that lynching tree. We haven't been talking about slavery, the ugly side of that. So, if Barack Obama comes out and says, "I'm black and I'm proud of it," well, whites would get nervous. And they would be careful about whether they would vote for him. So, he has a narrow, a narrow-- road in which to walk. Because he won't be elected if he doesn't get the white vote. It's hard to get the white vote if you express a kind of affirmative identity with black people. So, you get caught between a rock and a hard place. And that's where he's caught.

BILL MOYERS: And I have sympathy on this score-- for Condoleezza Rice. Her policies are another thing. But part of what the civil rights movement-- was all about. We thought a black man or a black woman should get to be Secretary of State or President of the United States and not have to-- be anything but a powerful person doing what that person needs to do.

JAMES CONE: No. I think that's a little off there. I-- now-- see, I-- how I would put it is, a black person should be Secretary of State without having to deny their racial heritage and actually put it up front.

BILL MOYERS: Up front?

JAMES CONE: Yes, up front. Because we are a part of America.

BILL MOYERS: But that would make her the black Secretary of State.

JAMES CONE: No, no.

BILL MOYERS: And you don't talk about--

JAMES CONE: That's-- no, no.

BILL MOYERS: --Henry Kissinger--

JAMES CONE: No, no, no.

BILL MOYERS: --as the Jewish--

JAMES CONE: No.

BILL MOYERS: --Secretary of State.

JAMES CONE: No. They wouldn't make her the black Secretary of State anymore--

BILL MOYERS: Had she talked about it?

JAMES CONE: --no, no. It would not necessarily. It would mean that she is proud of her cultural history the same way-- white people are proud of theirs. When you talk about Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, well, you're talking about slaveholders. But you don't say that. But you are. And I--

BILL MOYERS: Why don't we say that?

JAMES CONE: Because America likes to be innocent. It likes to be the exception.

BILL MOYERS: But we're not.

JAMES CONE: We are not. That's why it's hard for Barack Obama or Condoleezza Rice to talk about blackness; 'cause it's-- if they talked about blackness in the real, true sense, it would be uncomfortable. But America can't be what America ought to be until-- America can look at itself, the good, the bad, so that we can work on making ourselves what we oughta be.

BILL MOYERS: In all of this, you turn your attention in the course of your long career, to this-- to THE SPIRITUALS AND THE BLUES, which is my favorite of your books. I mean, it's not the most theological. But it is I think the most vivid in its description of how music was theology. Tell me about that.

JAMES CONE: Well, I grew up with the spirituals and the blues. I heard the spirituals every Sunday morning in Macedonia AME Church. And that's where I received the sense that I was somebody. I was a child of God. But the blues was heard on Saturday night. Now, my mother wouldn't let me go to the place where the blues was played. But you can hear it.

BILL MOYERS: From your house?

JAMES CONE: From my house. Yes. You can hear it in all the community, 'cause there were several juke joints.

JAMES CONE: And that's where the people played the blues. That-- now, the blues was for people who did not receive the same kind of-- transcendence that people received on Sunday morning.

BILL MOYERS: What kind of transcendence did they receive?

JAMES CONE: And I-- see, on Sunday morning, you could-- you could know that your humanity was not defined by what happened to you during the week. Now, on Saturday night is when the blues people found that out.

BILL MOYERS: What'd they find out?

JAMES CONE: They found out that they had a humanity that nobody could take away from them.

BILL MOYERS: What-- what were they hearing?

JAMES CONE: BB King, Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith, all of the famous blues singers. They were played in Bearden, Arkansas and in Fordyce. Every Friday and Saturday night. And it was the place where people who didn't go to church expressed their humanity and sort of received a sense of self-transcendence, overcoming all of the brutality that had happened to them during the week. How are you gonna know you're a human being if you don't have a chance to express that?

BILL MOYERS: And what was your favorite blues lyric? You remember?

JAMES CONE: Yes. My favorite blues--Little Milton was one of my favorite singers.

BILL MOYERS: Little Milton?

JAMES CONE: Little Milton. "If I don't love you baby, grits ain't groceries and Mona Lisa was a man."

BILL MOYERS: That's great. Little Milton. I love the way that you-- you weave these-- you know, "I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log than to stay in this town treated like a dirty dog--"

JAMES CONE: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: --sitting here wondering would a matchbox hold my clothes? I ain't got so many and I got so far to go."

JAMES CONE: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: "I got a mind to ramble, a mind for to leave this town."

JAMES CONE: That's right. You see, when you can express and articulate what's happening to you, you have a measure of transcendence over it. It gives you speech. It gives you self-definition. And when you have self-definition, and not defined by the world, then you transcend what is happening to you.

BILL MOYERS: You say, "It's clear that the blues singer's searching for a reason to live, for purpose and meaning in existence. And the external realities of oppression seem to have gotten the best of him. And he lifts up his voice again, "99 years go jumping along, to be here rolling and can't go home, don't you go worrying about 40 -- the years of his prison sentence 'cause in five years, you'll be dead. If you don't believe my buddy's dead, just look at that hole in my buddy's head. Great God almighty, folks feeling bad, lost everything they ever had."

JAMES CONE: Anytime you can see and articulate your reality--

BILL MOYERS: Including your loss.

JAMES CONE: --including your loss, tragedy, that's the terrible beauty. That's the terrible beauty. See, the beauty is you not being defined by it. The tragedy is looking at that reality, looking at it sharply, plainly, not avoiding it. It's the kind of, as James Baldwin said, an ironic tenacity. It is claiming a sense of yourself, even in the midst of misery.

BILL MOYERS: Where do you see that terrible beauty today?

JAMES CONE: I see it in rap music. I do. I do. I do see it there.

BILL MOYERS: You're gonna get a lotta disagreement with that--

JAMES CONE: Well, I--

BILL MOYERS: --you know, Bill Cosby was--

JAMES CONE: Well, I know-- I know what he says. And I, you know, that's partly true what he's talking about. But it's not the whole story. It's just not the whole-- nothing is the whole story. You know, I can look in the church and show you some things that's happening now--

BILL MOYERS: No.

JAMES CONE: --that would make you not ever want to be a Christian!

BILL MOYERS: You weren't a Baptist.

JAMES CONE: So, you can look anywhere. There's always a little bit of good and bad mixed up. The question is, does the bad have the last word?

BILL MOYERS: And?

JAMES CONE: It does not. There is always hope. Anybody who loses hope and gives up in despair, they die.

BILL MOYERS: James Cone, thank you very much for being here.

JAMES CONE: Thank you.

BILL MOYERS: Talking with James Cone about the terrible beauty of music, I remembered another conversation I conducted several years ago with a woman whose life is devoted to music that moves the heart and soul. Many of you know of Bernice Johnson Reagon. She is the founder of the popular singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. She told me that when we sing we announce our existence, Take a look.

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON: This next song is about a woman named Ella Baker. She's put over 50 years in struggle for justice in this country for her people and for human beings. And she says, "We who believe in freedom should not rest until the killing of black men..."

ELLA BAKER: ...black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's son. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON: She was talking about the Civil Rights movement workers who had been murdered in Mississippi in 1964. And as they searched for the bodies of the three missing workers, they turned up bodies of black men in the rivers of Mississippi that nobody had searched for because they were black and they did not get killed with white

men. She was angry about that.

SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK:[singing] We who believe in freedom cannot rest / We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes / We who believe in freedom cannot rest / We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes / Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons / Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons / We who believe in freedom cannot rest / We who believe in freedom cannot rest until-

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON:This next song I learned in school from the same teacher but then I heard it sung by a blind man who had learned it from his grandmother who had been sold.Virginia's this great slave-breeding state, so so many of us who end up in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi have Virginia or Maryland roots. And this song, his grandmother had come down from Virginia, was sold on the block in Americus, Georgia, and it's "Steal Away." And he said it was a song that was calling people to come together to the meetings that were secret meetings and they used to go to the bush-hoppers to do them.

[singing] Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus / Steal away, steal away home.

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON:In our tradition, we are told that crossing over, all of those words, "crossing over," "tomorrow," "in the morning when I rise" - all of those words, all of those phrases could be applied to any practical, everyday situation, talking about changing your life. It has to be a change that was as drastic as death so that, you know, if you were saying "in the morning when I rise," you really might be talking about "in the morning when I rise, I'm leaving."

[Singing] If you don't go, If you don't go, If you don't go

So really within the African-American experience, you could sing ahh, you could own this story. You could own any story floating in you lee. And this has to do with this every moment being special. If every moment is sacred and If you are amazed and in awe most of the time when you find yourself breathing and not crazy, then you are in a state of constant thankfulness, worship and humility.

BILL MOYERS:The astonishing thing to me, you keep saying that they would celebrate this moment, they would take the reverence of the moment, they would treat each second as a sacred experience, yet these were people suffering, these were people in slavery. These were people who had nothing to possess of their own except their tradition and their stories. These were not first-class citizens and yet you keep talking about their celebrating the moment.

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON:You might not have money. You might not have blah, blah, blah. But you've got this culture that empowers you as a unit in the universe and places you and makes you know you are a child of the universe.

BILL MOYERS:Even though you're not free?

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON:When the culture is strong, [faint singing: "Wade in the Water"] you've got this consistency where black people can grow up in these places with this voice just resonating about our special-ness in the universe. And I always say you're in trouble if you get too far away from that core that grounds you.

[singing] Oh, see those children dressed in white / God's going to trouble the water / You know the leader looks like that Israelite / God's going to trouble the water / Wade in the water, wade in the water, wade in the water...

BILL MOYERS: That wraps up this JOURNAL. We'll see you next week. I'm Bill Moyers.

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