

James H. Cone: Father Of Contemporary Black Theology

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to provide pastors, laypersons, students and academicians with a sense of the human being behind and in the thick of black liberation theology as well as his courage to both lead and change. I shall briefly discuss aspects of James Hal Cone's background, some early frustrations and challenges he confronted, and ways in which his theology has shifted.

Since the late 1960s, Cone has been among the most creative and courageous of the contemporary black liberation theologians. Although he has been writing major theological treatises since 1968, there has been no booklength manuscript published on his work. There have, however, been a number of dissertations written on his theology since 1974, some of which are comparative studies. Cone has been the subject of much criticism by white theologians, although few of them have taken either him or the black religious experience seriously enough to be willing to devote the time and energy necessary to learn all they can about these in order to engage in intelligent dialogue and criticism.

Considered the premier black theologian and the "father of contemporary black theology," it is strange that after more than twenty years of writing, lecturing on and doing black theology, no one has yet devoted a book to Cone's work.¹ To be sure, Cone's is not the only version of black liberation theology. However, it was he who introduced this new way of doing theology in a systematic way. Unbeknownst to him, his first book actually provided the theological outline for the action-oriented views of the black clergy radicals of the National Committee

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of Negro Churchmen (NCNC), later the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC).² Since Cone was not a member of this group at the time he wrote his first book, he had no way of knowing that this was just what that group needed as a ground for the theology they were acting out.

Thus it is fair to say that Cone's contemporaries—e.g., James DeOtis Roberts and Major J. Jones, who wrote their own versions of black theology—were primarily responding to the groundbreaking work of Cone, and that all works on black theology since are but a series of footnotes to him. Roberts and Jones differed from Cone in two important ways. They were, in the first place, more influenced by the integrationist model of Martin Luther King, Jr. But King was integrationist in the traditional sense only through the Chicago campaign of 1966. After Chicago, he began to be less integrationist in the aforementioned sense. Instead, he began to define integration in political rather than aesthetic terms. After Chicago he saw more clearly the need for blacks to be recipients of shared socio-economic and political power at every level of this society, rather than to merely hope and fight for a token job here and there.³ Unfortunately, none of these leading black theologians paid much attention to this more militant, realistic aspect of King's work. At any rate, although Cone, too, was greatly influenced by King, he was more stimulated and challenged by Malcolm X. Coneans, therefore, tend to be Malcomites rather than Kingians, although the influence of King is always noticeable. With the publication of Cone's most recent book, *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1991), none can deny the Malcolm-King influence on his thinking.

A second way Cone's black theology differs from that of Roberts and Jones is that, although they each emphasize socio-political liberation in their theological projects, they have a different understanding of reconciliation and its place in the liberation process. Cone has insisted from the beginning that as important as reconciliation is, it must be done on black rather than white terms. For him, reconciliation presupposes the work of justice and liberation. Liberation, then, is the necessary precondition of reconciliation. We cannot talk intelligently about reconciliation until we (especially white oppressors) have gone through the cross of establishing liberation and justice. So, while Cone understood Roberts and Jones (whose views are essentially the same) to suggest that blacks must be willing to work toward reconciliation with whites no matter what, they interpreted Cone to mean that reconciliation is not as important as liberation. In this sense they misunderstood Cone, who has always maintained that reconciliation is a Christian requirement. He simply added that as long as white Christians participate in the oppression of blacks and other groups, reconciliation cannot occur on white terms. On the other hand, Cone misunderstood Roberts and Jones, since neither of them actually claimed that reconciliation must be on white terms.

The point of all of this is that there was a great deal of healthy debate between these three black theologians and others during the early stages of black theology.⁴ After 1975 there is evidence of greatly reduced public criticism of each of them by the other. In part this is due to the concern that white theologians may do with these criticisms what blacks would not otherwise care that they do. In addition, since black theologians

have fought and won the battle of establishing black theology as an academic discipline, each has been freed up to pursue other interests in their theological projects.

Black theology is a form of liberation theology that seeks the total liberation and comprehensive empowerment of African American and other systematically and massively oppressed peoples in this country and other parts of the world. Initially concerned to liberate Blacks from racial oppression and economic exploitation,⁵ the black theology of Cone has expanded to include sexual, class, age and other forms of systemic oppression. Cone has long espoused the view *that the gospel requires that all of the captives be set free*, and because all persons are created and sustained by God, none can be free until all are free. Indeed, this was Cone's view even in the early stage of his theological development, despite his equally strong focus on the specific liberation of blacks.⁶ In addition, black theologians now realize that their work must also take seriously the legitimate concerns many blacks have for the more traditional spiritual liberation from sin,⁷ as well as liberation from psychological maladies such as depression.⁸

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James Hal Cone was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, in 1936 and was raised a few miles away in Bearden. As a youngster, he and his brother, Cecil, struggled with the contradiction between the claims of the Christian faith and the actual condition of blacks in Bearden. They often wondered how it was possible for whites to be Christian on Sunday when they inflicted so much verbal, physical and other forms of brutality upon blacks during the week. How, they must have wondered, could otherwise Christian people pray for everybody on Sunday morning and then prey upon blacks during the week?

It was always a struggle to survive and to retain their sense of dignity and worth in that town of four hundred blacks and eight hundred whites. The whites, Cone recalled, seldom missed an opportunity to remind blacks who was in charge.⁹ It was as if they had determined the place of blacks in that community and expected that they be submissive and remain in the place in which whites had put them. Under no circumstances were they to question any white person or think that they could out-wit or out-smart them.

Cone's father found this dreadfully difficult to tolerate. He always believed that he could out-think white folks. He surely did not trust them, since he knew that few whites had earned the respect and trust of blacks. He knew what James Baldwin has written about so eloquently; namely, that no matter how often whites went to church, no matter how often and adamant their claims to be Christians, Christians simply did not act the way whites acted, and they certainly did not treat blacks the way whites did (and do!). Like Baldwin, Mr. Cone knew that inasmuch as whites do not even live according to their own professed morality, blacks are only being naive when they uncritically take the moral claims of whites as their own and proceed to live according to them.¹⁰ Therefore when white politicians came around trying to entice blacks into contributing to their campaigns and seeking their votes, Mr. Cone did not hesitate to invite them to go straight to hell.¹¹ In addition, he was adamant that persons should never allow themselves to be placed in the position of having to depend on their

oppressors for survival. As a child, James Cone asked his father why he preferred the uncertainty of self-employment (as a log and billet cutter) to that of a steady job in the local sawmill. The response given was: "My son, a black man cannot be a man and also work for white people."¹² In light of such a stance, it should not be difficult to see who was responsible, to a large extent, for the passion and energy that are so evident when James Cone discusses the oppression of his people and their quest for total liberation.

Cone's father was a religious man who taught his three sons that "...God will make a way out of no way, and...will also make your enemies your footstool."¹³ God, for him, was not only Love and the God of love, but the God of judgment, a point that African Americans have always taken seriously. God will not be mocked, and God's people will not forever be the victims of injustice and inhuman treatment.

In matters regarding relations between the races, Cone's mother tended to be more prone to endure racist pranks, although she was not altogether passive in doing so, since she would at least take the matter to God in prayer. She was, according to Cone, a praying woman who, along with her children, regularly attended Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church in Bearden. She, unlike her husband, who sometimes believed he had to take things into his own hands, was very spiritual in the narrower sense of believing that if one only prayed and trusted in God all would be well by and by. She possessed that simple faith that so many blacks possess at one time or another. At any rate, Mrs. Cone was more likely to trust in God when things got rough, and they often did. Cone remembers her as "one of the pillars of Macedonia, and a firm believer in God's justice."¹⁴

Cone, therefore, appears to be an admixture of his father's hardheaded realism, pragmatism and racial pride, and his mother's religious piety and belief that in the final analysis God's justice will prevail. The Cone family was a praying, church-going family. Mr. Cone's interpretation of the faith was more influenced by what Manning Marable has called the tradition of "blackwater";¹⁵ what Gayraud Wilmore calls the tradition of "black radicalism,"¹⁶ or the long tradition of black protest against racism and all forms of injustice. This explains why James Cone was troubled when, in graduate school, he heard professors and students using the black church as the prime example of the Marxist's view that religion is the opiate of the people. But this was not Cone's experience at Macedonia A.M.E. Church. Looking back on that period, he said: "The force of the Marxist logic seemed to fit perfectly the white churches in Bearden but did not appear to apply to the true essence of black religion as I had encountered it."¹⁷ Blacks in Bearden did not use religion as a means of passively accepting their oppressive condition. Religion did not narcotize them. They did not view it as an escape from the harsh daily realities of racism and economic exploitation. Cone was discovering in seminary what he would only later affirm explicitly, viz., that social location has much to do with how we see our reality, what we see in the Bible, etc. The oppressed and the oppressor are not likely to see things in quite the same way, given the same interpretation of the same data, or propose the same solutions to systemic oppression. I shall say more about Cone's relationship with the black church momentarily.

FROM BEARDEN TO GARRETT BIBLICAL INSTITUTE

When Cone completed high school in 1954, he entered Shorter College, a small two-year, unaccredited school of the A.M.E. Church in North Little Rock, Arkansas. Later he transferred to Philander Smith College, a Methodist school. Philander Smith was both larger and accredited. Having taken a major in religion and philosophy, Cone decided to seek admission to Garrett Biblical Institute (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) in Evanston, Illinois. It did not take him and his brother, Cecil, long to discover how naive they had been in assuming that northern whites were not, like their southern counterparts, racists, and that blacks were "really free."

Aware that black students were not even expected to do better than average academic work at Garrett, Cone decided to discipline himself to be a very serious student. Despite the periodic racial slurs of some of the faculty and administrators, he passed his comprehensive examinations with distinction and was awarded the systematic theology prize for being the best student in the field. He had worked hard to sharpen his writing skills, and would later say that "anyone can be a good writer, if he has something to say and practices saying it."¹⁸ Upon graduation, his intention was to return to Bearden to pastor a church. However, when it became evident that no church was available for him, he began to rethink his career goals.

Cone was encouraged by William Hordern and Philip S. Watson, his teachers in systematic theology (both of whom are white), to pursue graduate studies. He therefore decided to apply for the Ph.D. program in systematic theology. Although there was resistance on the part of some professors and administrators, Cone became Garrett's first black Ph.D. candidate. He received no financial aid, although he was a straight-A student throughout his graduate studies. In addition, no text by black scholars was used as required reading. In any event, Cone put up with this and much more, and managed to save himself so he could do some good for his people. He received the Ph.D. degree in 1965.

STRUGGLES OF A YOUNG PROFESSOR

Cone returned to his alma mater, Philander Smith, to teach. He had written his dissertation on Karl Barth. But it did not take him long to discover that Barth, Tillich and many of the other European and Euro-American theological giants were not relevant to black students at Philander Smith, many of whom came from the cotton fields of the Deep South. This was a major concern for the young professor, and was only exacerbated by the black struggle for civil and human rights. He said: "The contradiction between theology as a discipline and the struggle for black freedom in the streets was experienced at the deepest level of my being."¹⁹ He struggled long and hard to overcome this by attempting to write articles on the theologies of the white men he studied. No journal editor accepted his articles for publication. Upon reflection years later, he said that his heart was not really in the writing of those essays anyway.

The publication of Joseph Washington's controversial book, *Black Religion in 1964*, was a turning point for Cone. He, like many black religionists, disagreed with Washington's contention that black religion was not Christian, since it identified Christianity with the black struggle for justice. Cone was asked to write a review of

the book, but he was not certain how to meet Washington's argument from an intellectual standpoint. He concluded that inasmuch as Washington was using the categories of white theology, and since he himself was still imprisoned by such categories, there was no way he could really oppose his argument. The only way he could intellectually take issue with Washington and the many whites who applauded his book was to turn the existing theological enterprise on its head. The problem was that he was not yet ready, nor did he quite know how to do this.

Cone's return to Philander Smith did not culminate in his warmest memories. He believed he was expected to always smile and bite his lower lip. He refused to do this, preferring rather to give black students the best he could give them. Consequently, he thought, the powers-that-be made it clear that he was not welcome to stay. Cone believed that the real aim was to keep the predominantly black Philander Smith inferior to another nearby Methodist-controlled institution, Hendrix College.

He left Philander Smith in 1966 and went to Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. He had not forgotten Washington's book, and continued to rethink the meaning of theology and all that he had learned. As the only black on the faculty at Adrian, it appeared to him that little else was expected of him than to teach his white students a few basic courses in religion and theology. It was not required that he make any emotional investment. This left him free to give further consideration to Washington's thesis. Indeed, it was at Adrian that the clearest outline of what came to be his black liberation theology began to emerge. It was here that he wrote his first article on black theology. He wrote out of his gut; he wrote passionately. Indeed, as the only black on the faculty, that was all he had, since there was no one to whom he could turn to comfortably and trustingly spill his theological guts. He said years later that though Lester Scherer "was a good friend who shared my emotional hurts," he nevertheless was white, and therefore it was not the same as being able to share in this way with a black colleague. Since there were very few blacks in the city of Adrian, Cone had no emotional investment in the city either. In order to survive at Adrian he surrounded himself with black music of all kinds and with literature by black writers for whom the suffering of blacks was their sole concern. So he poured all his energy into the creation of the outline for what, unbeknownst to him, would explode like an atomic bomb in the theological and church arenas.

When Martin Luther King was murdered in 1968, Cone had taken all he could stand. He knew that he had to do something to help his people. Having initially considered returning to graduate school to get a Ph.D. degree in literature, he now knew that there was no time for this. He was literally enraged during this period. His rage only intensified when he heard white religionists verbally condemn black violence in response to the violence being perpetrated against them by whites and the structures they controlled. All of this, while saying nothing about the structural violence that produced the retaliatory violence of blacks. "They quoted to blacks Jesus' sayings about 'love your enemy' and 'turn the other cheek' but ignored their application to themselves. I was so furious that I could hardly contain my rage."²⁰ The still-developing creation within him was now ripe for birth.

THE BIRTH OF BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER

While still at Adrian, Cone was invited by a former seminary classmate to deliver a

lecture at Elmhurst College in February 1968. This invitation prompted the writing of his first published academic essay, "Christianity and Black Power," which essentially served as the outline for his first book. Here, and against Washington, Cone explicitly identified Christianity with black power and the black struggle for dignity and freedom. Indeed, he maintained that if the gospel and Jesus have nothing to do with the black struggle for liberation, he himself wanted nothing to do with them. No faith was worthy to be kept around that was not liberating. In such affirmations one could hear clearly the influence of James Baldwin and Malcolm X. Indeed, Baldwin said in *The Fire Next Time*: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."²¹ As Malcolm said: "Despite being a Muslim, I can't overlook the fact that I'm an Afro-American in a country which practices racism against black people. *There is no religion under the sun that would make me forget the suffering that Negro people have undergone in this country.*"²² [italics added] Did Malcolm not imply that any religion or religious personality that failed to take the black struggle seriously needed to be gotten rid of?

By the time Cone sat down to write his seminal article on black theology, he was fed up with the articulations and writings of most white religionists on God and human suffering in general. He had made up his mind once and for all that he was no longer going to allow white theologians and ethicists to tell him how to write and do theology and ethics.²³ He would write and do theology and ethics for his own people, and only they could stand in judgment of his work. He knew now that most of what goes on in white seminaries and graduate schools has little or nothing to do with black self-determination and the eradication of black suffering produced by racist institutions. "Why," he wondered, "should I let the ethos of the white seminary or university control the content and the form of my writing?" He concluded that he should not, and contended that his "intellectual consciousness" and everything else about him should be controlled by the standard of his own socio-cultural and religious heritage, not that of the people who had sought to destroy his and the dignity of his people.

Cone put the finishing touches on *Black Theology and Black Power* during the summer of 1968. The writing of the book was itself cathartic and therapeutic. Indeed, he said it "was also a conversion experience," symbolizing the death of white theology and the birth of a theology commensurate with his own experience.²⁴ When Cone first began teaching and trying to write articles on theology it had been nearly impossible for him to make the connection between the theology he learned and what he and his people experienced every day. It could not be done as long as he was consumed by white theological categories. Since much of the dominant theology was racist, he had to accept the fact that "racists do not define theology in a way that challenges their racism."²⁵ Not the oppressor, but the oppressed themselves must make the connections between the gospel and their struggle to be fully human and free.

Needless to say, that first book was emotionally charged. It literally blew many white and black religionists out of their otherwise calm theological waters. Since Cone knew ahead of time that this book would not defeat racism and its menacing

forms, he decided that he would not hold anything back. That many would be angered by his book was of little concern. The point was to say and do something to help his people.²⁶ He wrote that book out of the depth of his experience, and he did so with a passion that seldom characterized theological treatises previously or since.

Black Theology and Black Power was a response to over four hundred years of systematically dehumanizing treatment of blacks at the hands of whites. It was a response to the humiliation suffered by Cone's parents and grandparents. Although controversial, the book zapped many religionists of all persuasions, but particularly professed Christians.

Many accused Cone of having produced more rhetoric than theology in his first book. Although I came to the book rather late, having allowed myself to be convinced by some ("respectable" and acceptable!) black religious scholars that there was not much to it, I found this not to be the case when I actually picked it up to read for myself. I immediately sensed that there was much more to this book than what some described as "a lot of meaningless rhetoric."

To be sure, Cone, like Malcolm X and many other African Americans, was angry, and he did not hesitate to inform his readers of the fact. Yet, as I read his book I could see that if one read with an open mind, if one tried to see the facts Cone explicated through the lens of the long history of black suffering, if one endeavored to place his thesis that the gospel is identical with black power in this context, one would see evidence of new and creative thinking, as well as the beginnings of a new way of thinking about and doing theology. I have long believed that if those who read Cone's first two books would make an effort to understand the reason for his use of the "either-or" approach and especially his penchant for referring to all whites as the enemies of his people, they would encounter a theological giant-in-the-making. Unfortunately, many who read those books became so incensed with Cone's approach, his language and his refusal in those days to point out that there may be a genuinely committed white person here and there, that they easily dismissed him as little more than a rabble-rouser. In fact, Cone really fit what Asian theologians would today call a "rumor-monger," which is a compliment to one who takes the prophetic tradition as seriously as he.²⁷

SHIFTS AND CONTINUITY IN CONE'S THEOLOGY

Cone's first book was a more significant theological treatise than many religionists recognized at the time or since. Although often encased in strong rhetoric and polemic, there was present in germinal form many of the themes that Cone would later develop in a more explicit, systematic way. For example, although he spoke almost exclusively of black suffering and racism in his first book, prompting many to accuse him of a too narrow view of oppression, a close reading reveals that he explicitly pointed to his awareness that blacks were not the only ones who were victims of suffering and pain.²⁸ He never contended that his people were the only poor. What he actually said was that "if any person attempted to do theology in North America in the 1960s and '70s but failed to speak of God's identity with the black struggle for freedom, he or she was not doing Christian theology."²⁹ This is quite different from

the accusation of critics that he was only aware of blacks being victims of oppression.

It is true that racism, for him, was the fundamental social issue adversely affecting blacks. However, a close reading of his first book gives one a sense that he was at least aware, albeit peripherally, that women were also the victims of oppression. This is why I maintain that when Cone finally took a public stand against sexism in the black community and church in 1976, this was not a completely new stance for him. He was, from the beginning, too good a theologian to be against the liberation of any systematically oppressed group. The point is that, during the early period, there were so many overt and brutal acts of racism perpetrated against all blacks—men and women—that his vision was partially jaundiced regarding other forms of oppression that affected groups—e.g., women—within his race. So his statement in 1976 was really a shift to an enlarged perspective or outlook on oppression. He was beginning to see more clearly the linkages between the various forms of oppression. The idea was present in embryonic form during the early stage of his writing, and became more pronounced as he developed.

In addition, critics have said that social analysis was not present in Cone's early writing. But I wonder whether Cone, who recognized even in 1970 that it was not appropriate to put new wine in old wine skins,³⁰ did not at that time have a sense that something more than an ethic of survival was needed if blacks were to be authentically liberated. Why build a new house on a faulty, deteriorating foundation or structure? Was he merely a reformist during that period, as critics suggest, or did he at least have an awareness of the need for the radical transformation of the socio-economic order, but simply did not have the tools necessary to provide a radical social critique?

Similarly, although Cone remained a capitalist for some years after the publication of his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, is it not possible that he at least recognized that there was something fundamentally wrong with the economic structure in this country? That he did not have at the time the analytical tools needed to adequately critique it and to suggest the kind of political economy that should replace it is no reason to conclude that he was not at least aware of the need. Is it completely accurate to say, as some critics have, that he only hit upon the importance of social analysis when he began his dialogues with Latin American and other so-called third-world liberation theologians? I think not. Cone was too astute and had seen his people suffer too much as a result of greedy, power-crazed capitalists not to have seen in the early period that the economic structure of the country was essentially unsound and inherently against the fundamental Christian principle of respecting the dignity and worth of all persons.

Having read Cone's works systematically, it is evident that several of his more mature and more recent views appeared in germinal form in his first two books. To be sure, as he began to travel throughout the country and the so-called third world, to dialogue with women and other oppressed peoples, to channel his energy into more writing projects, and to delve deeper into African and African American religious and cultural sources, Cone was able to further develop some of these previously undeveloped views. Therefore, when I speak of shifts, transitions or changes in his thinking, I do not always mean that a presently held view is a radical departure from what Cone

wrote in earlier publications. Rather, there were shifts in focus, but there is a great deal of continuity between his earlier and later views. In part this is due to his commitment to truth and his willingness and courage to follow it wherever it led.

In an essay published in 1981, Cone acknowledged a broadening of his perspective, but contended that his basic position "has [not] changed radically. I still contend," he said, "that the gospel is identical with the liberation of poor people from sociopolitical oppression."³¹ In other words, although there have been both subtle and more pronounced shifts in his thinking, Cone's fundamental point of departure in theology remains unchanged. In this regard he has written: "I believe that my theological development will always be related to the historical projects of poor people as they struggle to build a new future not recognizable in the present world order."³²

SEXISM IN THE BLACK CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

Two of the most courageous steps taken by James Cone were the announcement of black theology through his first book in 1969, and the public stance he took on black sexism in 1976. Having been invited by black women students at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary to talk on the theme, "New Roles in the Ministry: A Theological Appraisal," Cone said:

The time has come for us to deal honestly with our differences, our hurts, and our pains. We cannot pretend any longer that all is well and that the problem of male-female relations is limited to the White community. It is in the Black community as well; and it is time we face up to the need to speak openly and frankly about what is right and wrong in our community in relation to Black men and women....

It is a contradiction for Black men to protest against racism in the White church and society at large and then fail to apply the same critique to themselves in their relation to Black women....

If Black people are going to create new roles in the ministry, Black men will have to recognize that the present status of Black women in the ministry is not acceptable. Since the gospel is about liberation, it demands that we create new structures of human relations that enhance freedom and not oppression.³³

Insisting on self-criticism—and that black theologians ought always apply this principle—and willing to allow himself to be challenged by white and black women students at Union Theological Seminary in New York where he has taught for more than twenty years, Cone led the way in breaking the long silence of contemporary black men regarding the gender question. Inasmuch as Jacquelyn Grant, an A.M.E. minister and professor of systematic theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, was one of his doctoral candidates at Union, it is not surprising that Cone was challenged as he was to break the silence. Grant, herself a prolific writer and frequent speaker on the lecture circuit, is considered by many to be "the mother of black feminist theology." She is a leader in the fast-developing black womanist theological movement.

When Cone wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*, he became the victim of the wrath of white theologians and too many black-skinned ones as well. When he confessed his own male-oriented theological language and participation in sexist practices against his sisters, and accused the black church and community of participating in this dreaded sin against black women and humanity, he found that he often had to stand alone. Although some of his black male colleagues have joined him in standing against sexism, it is fairly evident that at this writing few have been as emphatic and outspoken on this issue as Cone.

IMPORTANCE OF CLASS ANALYSIS

Cone's more explicit inclusion of class analysis in his theological project emerged as he participated in some rather heated dialogues with Latin American liberation theologians who were socialists and Marxists, and for whom the chief social evil was classism. Initially they were as adamant about this being the basic social problem as Cone and black theologians were that the fundamental issue was racism. Ultimately both sides conceded the truth of the other and began to hear each other and to incorporate the other's analysis into their own. For Cone there was a real breakthrough at the Theology in the Americas Conference in Detroit in 1975. The occasion was a dialogue between Latin theologians and white North American theologians. Black theologians had not been invited to help plan the conference. This notwithstanding, Cone writes:

It was at that time that it became clear to me that either black theology would incorporate class analysis into its perspective or it would become a justification of middle-class interests at the expense of the black poor. Although claiming to speak for the poor, we actually speak for ourselves.³⁴

After that conference Cone could see that the problem of racism was even further exacerbated by socio-economic exploitation, and that members of a racially oppressed group might very well oppress less privileged members. Cone has been as dismayed that so few black theologians take classism in the black community seriously as he has at their failure to take sexism seriously.

How can we provide a genuine check against the self-interest of black theologians and preachers who merely use the language of liberation and the gospel in order to justify their professional advancement? Unless black theologians and preachers face the class issue, the integrity of our commitment to justice for the poor will remain suspect to other freedom fighters and to the poor we claim to represent.³⁵

Let it be understood, however, that Cone has never been an orthodox Marxist. He rejects Marxism as a worldview, but finds its critique of capitalist economies to be very valuable in critical social analysis. So, while rejecting the Marxist worldview and its atheism, he accepts aspects of Marxism as a tool for social analysis. In addition, he reminds us that, historically, blacks have been affiliated with the socialist tradition through black preachers such as the baptist George Washington Woodbey. Although

Peter Clark was the first black socialist, Woodbey was the first to actually join the socialist party in the United States and to play a leading role therein.³⁶ Indeed, most blacks of that period learned about socialism through two prominent magazines of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: *The Christian Recorder* and the *AME Church Review*. Those who submitted articles to the former generally held that blacks should have nothing to do with socialism. Contributors to the latter organ forcefully argued the socialist platform. They sought to ground their view from both a biblical and social scientific perspective.³⁷ One of the most prominent defenders of socialism was Reverend Reverdy C. Ransom, later a bishop in the A.M.E. Zion Church. His article, "The Negro and Socialism," was published in the *AME Church Review* (XIII, 1896-97 issue). Ransom equated the socialist vision of life in the world and its emphasis on the dignity, worth, rights and equality of the person with the teachings of Jesus Christ.³⁸

Although most black churchgoers still cringe when they hear the term socialism and attempts to connect it with the gospel, it is precisely the socialistic vision for the uplift of persons that will commend itself to all black Christians. Part of Cone's challenge, and that of other black theologians, is to present the socialist vision in language that will be more intelligible to African-American Christians.³⁹

CONE AND THE BLACK CHURCH

That Cone has remained in the church throughout his adult life is indicative of his deep love for the black church. But all has not been smooth sailing. It will be recalled that after he earned the basic seminary degree he desired to return to Bearden to pastor a church, but there was no church for him. Even after he earned his doctorate, the leadership of his denomination seemed to show no interest in his future.⁴⁰ One of very few recipients of the Ph.D. degree in the A.M.E. Church, Cone thought there would surely be a position for him in one of that denomination's schools. He always hoped his own denomination would eventually provide something for him.

Later on, when he had begun teaching, his forthrightness and critical stance became problematic with the leaders in his denomination. He was thoroughly disappointed with his own and other black denominations because of their lack of involvement in the liberation of blacks. Most, including the A.M.E. Church, seemed not to meet this criterion of the gospel, but instead were more interested in preaching "a 'spiritual' gospel that ignored the political plight of the black poor."⁴¹ Because he was not allowed to participate as a theologian in his denomination, Cone left to become a United Methodist, although his primary interest was to affiliate with the Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR). In addition, he sensed a level of acceptance by black United Methodists that he did not experience within the A.M.E. Church. His affiliation with the BMCR, the NCBC and other black caucuses provided intellectual stimulus and room to apply theology to the blood-and-guts issues confronting his people.

Cone's membership in The United Methodist Church did not last long, however. He was invited by the bishops of the A.M.E. Church to lead a retreat in 1974 in Galveston, Texas, on the theme "The Nature and Mission of the Church." This, he recalled, was the first time his former denomination had invited him to do anything

since he received his doctorate. This experience was so positive for both Cone and the bishops that they formally invited him to return to the A.M.E. Church and to lead another retreat. The second retreat proved not as exciting and fruitful as the first.⁴²

Cone's critique of the black church and its leadership had been scathing in his first two books, although less so in the second. He began to be concerned about what whites would do with these criticisms of a major black theologian. He continues to be critical, but more in the presence of black audiences. We can be sure about one thing, however. Cone is less appreciated in many black churches today because of his early criticisms of the church. To a large extent the people in the pews have only been given an interpretation of his earlier criticisms of the church by pastors, many of whom have not spent adequate time grappling with Cone's real message: namely, that the black church has gotten away from its historical linkage with a more prophetic black church. It places too little emphasis on setting the captives free, and too much on celebrating pastors' anniversaries and raising funds to build expensive church buildings, often right in the middle of the ghetto! This has been the real point of Cone's criticism. He has never criticized either his own denomination or the black church in general merely for the sake of criticizing them. One who loves the church as much as he would never do that.

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

Soon after Cone and other black liberation theologians began giving systematic expression to black theology in the late 1960s there was a conscious effort to move away from the use of technical theological and philosophical jargon. In addition, they claimed to want nothing to do with epistemology (theory of knowledge) and metaphysics (theory of reality). These were considered to be too much in the clouds, and therefore too far removed from the day-to-day, blood-and-guts issues of the black poor and oppressed. The primary dialogue partners of black theologians, then, were not philosophers and metaphysicians, but social scientists, political analysts, and social activists.⁴³

Thus, there emerged what amounted to a moratorium on metaphysics and epistemology. Fortunately some black theologians have come to see that we all possess an implicit metaphysics and epistemology. When black theologians make any claims about the interrelatedness between God, created persons and the rest of creation—or when claims are made regarding what black theologians think they know about God or the created order—they are making metaphysical and epistemological claims. It, therefore, seems a significant transitional move for black theology to lift the moratorium. This is a particularly acute point if black theology is to be a meaningful, viable option in and beyond the twenty-first century. Since 1969, black theologians have made numerous claims about God, all of which are based on metaphysical assumptions. This being the case, it is now time to uncover these assumptions and begin the critical task of considering their implications for the liberation and empowerment of African Americans and all systematically oppressed peoples.

African American liberation theologians who have already made this shift to taking metaphysics seriously include such persons as Henry J. Young, Theodore Walker, Jr.,

and Archie Smith, all of whom have been influenced by the process metaphysics of Alfred N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne.⁴⁴ Although Young and Walker do an impressive job of clarifying the points at which process thought and black theology can strengthen each other, it seems to this writer that the personalistic metaphysics and ethics of Borden P. Bowne (1847-1910) and Edgar S. Brightman (1884-1953) are ones towards which most African Americans would more likely resonate. Personalism is the view that ultimate reality is personal and the only intrinsic values are persons. This has been a dominant view throughout African American religious and cultural tradition. Blacks have historically believed both in a personal God who is able to deliver them from bondage, and that they and all other persons are sacred and of infinite worth because God loves and cares about them. At least historically, the centrality of the person has been at the center of African American religious and ethical thought.

One wonders what James Cone's present thought is on this matter. We know that he led the way in repudiating metaphysics, and that as late as 1975 he was an adherent to the classical solution to the problem of evil and suffering, and insisted that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Cone rejected any theory which qualified either God's goodness (as represented in the thought of William R. Jones) or power (as represented in the thought of Edgar S. Brightman). God, for Cone and most black liberation theologians, possesses absolute power.

Black Theology, while recognizing the seriousness of the problem [of evil and suffering], cannot accept either logical alternative for solving it. It is a violation of black faith to weaken either divine love or divine power. In this respect Black Theology finds itself in company with all of the classic theologies of the Christian tradition.⁴⁵

At least by this period Cone appeared unwilling to subject this more traditional view to serious critique and to consider the implications of such a stance. Indeed, even in his most recent book he appeals to the tradition and faith of the black religious community. "But [Martin Luther King, Jr.] rejected Brightman's concept of the finite God as an explanation for the existence of evil. King's commitment to the faith of the Negro church was too strong to allow him to embrace a limited God."⁴⁶ Although writing about King, this appears to be Cone's position as well. There is no indication in Cone's public writings that he has seriously grappled with either Brightman's or any non-traditional views of God and the positive suggestions for black theology that may be gleaned from some of these. However, I have discovered what may be a minor concession or capitulation regarding his view of divine omnipotence:

Omnipotence does not refer to God's absolute power to accomplish what God wants. And John Macquarrie says, omnipotence is 'the power to let something stand out from nothing and to be.' Translating this idea into the black experience, God's omnipotence is the power to let blacks stand out from whiteness and to be⁴⁷ [italics added].

Although Cone seems aware of the need to redefine the traditional meaning of divine omnipotence, he does not go far enough here. He seems to imply that God does not in fact possess absolute power, but that God shares power with the rest of creation. Yet we can be certain that for Cone there is no power in the universe that surpasses God's.

What is important here is that Cone himself may be wondering about the intelligibility of uncritically adhering to the classical view of God. If this is the case, then he may also be reconsidering the significance of metaphysics. But whether he is or is not, it is clear to me that black theology will have to move in this direction.

NOTES

1. However, it should be noted that I have written a book on transitions in Cone's theology. This manuscript is presently in the hands of a publisher. It should also be pointed out that Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III, published a comparative dissertation on Cone and Howard Thurman: "God, Being and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman" (University Press of America, 1989). The chief weakness of this text is that of most published doctoral dissertations, namely; it reads like a dissertation and is filled with technical theological and philosophical terms that will be troublesome for the average lay reader. Apart from this, and the fact that he is comparing Cone with another major African-American thinker, Stewart's is the best text out on Cone's theological method.
2. Gayraud Wilmore has written that Cone was "the first to suggest the broad outlines of what the NCBC theological commission was looking for—a theology that took the black experience seriously, including the search for countervailing power, while based upon an essentially classical interpretation of the Christian faith." See Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983 [1973]), p. 214.
3. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Testament of Hope," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), p. 317.
4. Cone provides an extensive summary of some of this and other important areas of debate among black theologians in "An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians," *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), pp. 609-622.
5. "Black Theology," in Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology*, p. 101.
6. See Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), p. 21. We get a clearer indication of this in a dialogue between Cone and his former teacher, William Hordern, in 1971. Here he said:

God's stand against oppression is his affirmation that all men have a common humanity in freedom. This means that I cannot be free until all men are free. And if in some distant future I am no longer oppressed because of blackness, then I must take upon myself whatever form of human oppression exists in the society, affirming my identity with the victims. *The identity must be made with the victims not because of sympathy, but because my own humanity is involved in my brother's degradation.* [italics added] (See Cone and William Hordern, "Dialogue on Black Theology," *Christian Century*, 88 [15 September 1971]:1085).

We see in this early statement some real theological savvy on Cone's part, which refutes the criticism that his was an exclusivist theology.

7. See Calvin Bruce, "Black Evangelical Christianity and Black Theology," in *Black Theology II*,

- eds. Bruce and William R. Jones (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1978), p. 173.
8. Henry Mitchell and Nicholas Cooper-Lewter stress this in *Soul Theology* (New York: Harper, 1986).
9. James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (New York: Seabury, 1982), p. 21.
10. James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin/Marek, 1985), p. 330.
11. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, pp. 20-21.
12. Cone, "The Gospel and the Liberation of the Poor," *Christian Century* 98 (18 February 1981):163.
13. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 21.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
15. See Manning Marable, *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness and Revolution* (Dayton, OH: Black Praxis Press, 1981). See especially chap. three. He also provides a very helpful and enlightening discussion of the distinction between the accommodationist and more radical strands in the history of the black church in "The Ambiguous Politics of the Black Church," in his, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), chap. 7.
16. See Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.
17. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 22.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
21. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1961), p. 61.
22. Archie Epps, ed., *The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1968), p. 164.
23. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 45.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
27. Preman Niles discussed this term in a lecture given at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis in the Spring of 1986. Niles said that rumormongering is "a form of minjung political activity." On this view truth is circulated throughout the community in the form of rumors. The concept of rumormongering is dealt with at length in an article by Hyun Younghak entitled, "Theology as Rumormongering," *CTS Bulletin* (December 1984 - April 1985): 40-47.
28. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 141.
29. Cone, "The Gospel and the Liberation of the Poor," p. 166.
30. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 117.
31. Cone, "The Gospel and the Liberation of the Poor," p. 166.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Cone, "New Roles in the Ministry: A Theological Appraisal," in *Black Theology*, eds. Wilmore and Cone, pp. 397, 395.
34. Cone, *For My People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), pp. 94-95.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
36. Philip S. Foner, ed., *Black Socialist Preacher* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1983), p. 5.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
38. See his article in *Ibid.*, p. 286.
39. Cone provides excellent discussions of socialism and the black church in *My Soul Looks Back*, pp. 122-138, and *For My People*, chap. 9.
40. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 65.

41. Ibid., p. 66.
42. Ibid., pp. 86-92.
43. Cone, "Black Theology: Its Origin, Methodology, and Relationship to Third World Theologies," in *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, eds. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 100-101.
44. See Henry J. Young, "Process Theology and Black Liberation: Testing the Whiteheadian Metaphysical Foundations," *Contemporary Philosophy*, 12 (May 1989): 26-30; *Hope in Process: A Theology of Social Pluralism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Theodore Walker, Jr., "Theological Resources for a Black Neoclassical Social Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 45 (Winter-Spring 1989): 21-39; Archie Smith, *The Relational Self* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).
45. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 163.
46. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), pp. 29-30.
47. Cone, "God is Black," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, eds. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 93.

