

The Meaning of James H. Cone and the Significance of Black Theology: Some Reflections on His Legacy

Celucien L. Joseph*

Ph.D., Associate Professor of English Indian River State College, USA

**Corresponding Author: Celucien L. Joseph, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English Indian River State College, USA, Email: celucienjoseph@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Arguably, James H. Cone was America's most important and controversial theologian in the twentieth-century. Cone grew up in the 1940s and 50s in a segregated society that dehumanized black people and alienated them from the benefits and opportunities of the American system. As a result, Cone would construct distinctively a "theological discourse in black" and concurrently impart meaning to Christian theological practice and discourse in American Christianity and theological landscape through his uncompromised celebration of black dignity and life, and his (re-) assessment of the black experience in the United States. For Cone, Black people have intrinsic value simply because God created them in his image for significance, freedom, and to have life in fullness.

In the same angle, he contended that black culture and history also have value because God's revelation also penetrated the cultural traditions and practices of Black people. Cone believed that the black culture in the United States has not only made significant contribution to American Christianity, it has pushed forward universal civilization and global human history toward progress, unity, and solidarity.

This essay is an attempt to reflect critically on the meaning and legacy of James Cone and the relevance of black liberation theology for our current moments. It provides a critical reflection on three important interconnected and inseparable themes in Cone's theology: (1) black suffering through the ritual of lynching—a powerful indication of the excess and exercise of white violence and the arrogance of white supremacy in American society; (2) Cone's black theological anthropology—a positive affirmation of the worth and significance of black existence and life, and (3) Cone's quest for black dignity and liberation—an intellectual crusade that challenges anti-black racism by promoting the liberation of black people.

Keywords: *Black Liberation Theology, Liberation Theology, James Cone, Constructive Theology, Black Suffering.*

INTRODUCTION

On April 28, 2018, students of Christian theology and Black religion around the world have lost one of the most brilliant theological minds the United States has ever produced in the disciplines of Christian theology and Black religious tradition. Arguably, James H. Cone was America's most important and controversial theologian in the twentieth-century. Cone was born in August 5, 1938 in Fordyce, Arkansas. He grew up in the 1940s and 50s in a segregated society that dehumanized black people and alienated them from the benefits and opportunities of the American system. As a result, Cone would construct distinctively a "theological discourse in black" and concurrently impart meaning to Christian theological practice and discourse in American Christianity and theological landscape through

his uncompromised celebration of black dignity and life, and his (re-) assessment of the black experience in the United States. For Cone, Black people have intrinsic value simply because God created them in his image for significance, freedom, and to have life in fullness. In the same angle, he contended that black culture and history also have value because God's revelation also penetrated the cultural traditions and practices of Black people. Cone believed that the black culture in the United States has not only made significant contribution to American Christianity, it has pushed forward universal civilization and global human history toward progress, unity, and solidarity.

In attempt to reflect critically on the meaning and legacy of James Cone and the relevance of black liberation theology for our current moments, this essay is an effort to provide a

critical reflection on three important interconnected and inseparable themes in Cone's theology: (1) black suffering through the ritual of lynching—a powerful indication of the excess and exercise of white violence and the arrogance of white supremacy in American society, (2) Cone's black theological anthropology—a positive affirmation of the worth and significance of black existence and life, and (3) Cone's quest for black dignity and liberation—an intellectual crusade that challenges anti-black racism by promoting the liberation of black people.¹ By any means, this essay aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these relevant connections in Cone's theological corpus. In passing, one should note that the three major forces that contributed to the historical context of the birth of Black theology in the American society included the civil rights of the 1950s and 1960s, associated with the revolutionary political theology and activism of Martin Luther King Jr., the publication of Joseph Washington's groundbreaking and controversial text, *Black Religion*, in 1964, and the emergence of black power movement, connected with the radical political philosophy of black nationalism and social activism of Malcolm X.² Cone is/was the theologian par excellence of the black experience in the United States, and in the words of Gary Dorrien, "Cone was the apostle of the revolutionary turn in American theology that privileged liberationist questions."³

Childhood in Bearden and Theological Identity

Cone spent his childhood in Bearden, Arkansas, where his religious faith, black identity, and intellectual pilgrimage were shaped by his social environment and the Black church. As he remarks in his book, *My Soul looks Back* (1999)

on the meaning of Bearden to his intellectual and theological development:

The importance of Bearden is the way it enters my thinking, controlling my theoretical analysis, almost forcing me to answer questions about faith and life as found in the experience of my early years. It is as if the people of Bearden are present, around my desk as I think and write. Their voices are clear and inconsistent: "All right, James Hal, speak for your people."⁴

Cone developed an early consciousness about his identity as a black person associating with the plot of the poor and oppressed black people in Bearden, Arkansas. He also portrayed himself as their conscience, their spokesperson, and their ambassador in the American society and more importantly, he interpreted his underlying role as their voice of reason in the interconnecting fields of religion, ethics, and anthropology. On one hand, white racism, violence, and supremacy psychologically marked his existence as a young black man reared within the confinements of white power and in a society regulated and structured within the boundaries, freedom, and edifice of whiteness. On the other hand, in Bearden, he has witnessed the burden of blackness and the history of suffering and pain characterized the black experience in the United States.

Two things happened to me in Bearden: I encountered the harsh realities of white injustice that was inflicted upon the black community; and I was given a faith that sustained my personhood and dignity in spite of white people's brutality. The dual reality of white injustice and black faith, as a part of the structure of life, created a tension in my being that has not been resolved.⁵

As a result, Cone would engage the problem of evil and black suffering, "theodicy in black," and its implications on the question of black liberation and the meaning of black lives in all of his work. Cone sought to inquire energetically about this existential question coupled with the potential meaning of God for black people: "If God is good, and also powerful, as black church folk say, why do blacks get treated so baldly?"⁶ Cone's version of theodicy in black would underline the language and thesis of his three epoch-making and original texts, *Black Theology & Black Power*

¹In 2011 or seven years ago, I published my first article on James H. Cone, "The Rhetoric of Prayer: Dutty Boukman, The Discourse of "Freedom from Below," and the Politics of God," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2:9 (June 2011):1-33. The article explores the interconnecting interplays of freedom and God's preferential option for the poor and the oppressed within the backdrop of the historical-religious context of the Haitian Revolution as a grand political event in world history and human emancipation.¹

² Cone has devoted the first chapter of his book, *For My People*, 5-52, to analyzing and assessing these three major influences and forces.

³ Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy*, 457.

⁴ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.* 18.

⁶ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 18.

(1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975).

Moreover, in early years, he and his brother Cecil Cone attempted to reason around the idea of Black existential and the oppression branded the experience of black people in the country of their birth. Often, they engaged in stimulating conversations about “the problem of suffering in the context of the Christian faith.”⁷ Cone believed that the white people of Bearden not only contributed to the problem of pain the black people of Bearden experienced, “they regarded the social and political arrangements that they maintained as an expression of the natural orders of creation.”⁸ Eventually, his childhood experience in Bearden would contribute to a series of self-discoveries about the dynamics between black and white Americans, the problem of race and Christianity, the quest for black anthropology and dignity, the relationship between black freedom and the doctrine of God, the relationship between the justice of God (divine justice) and American justice (social justice); some of these discoveries were scandalous for Cone; others were liberative and comforting. These findings and encounters would shape the Conian theological narrative and discourse, and his incessant quest for black theology of justice and freedom.

Eventually, as he grew in more intellectual maturity and acquired more substantive knowledge about and understanding of the American culture and the struggle of the black people for freedom and acceptance, he realized that, as his father has also taught him, “the survivable for black people requires constant struggles and that no black should ever expect justice from whites.”⁹ Second, Cone also came to realization that racism was America’s original sin. Third, he was convinced that God was on the side of the oppressed black masses: “All blacks seemed to think that God was on our side and against the satanic force of white supremacy. We did not need approval of white theologians and preaches to know that whites were in the wrong both morally and legally.”¹⁰ Fourth, another pivotal force of enlightenment, a “theological shock,” for Cone was the contradiction of faith and injustice (or the relationship between the Christian gospel and

social justice) in white churches and Christian institutions in America.¹¹ Finally, after he has received his Ph.D. degree in systematic theology from Garrett-Northwestern University in 1965, Cone began to question the relevance and practicality of the white theological education he has received toward the liberation and future of his people.

I returned to Philander Smith with added enthusiasm. But what did Barth, Tillich, and Brunner have to do with young black girls and boys coming from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi seeking to make a new future for them? This was the major question for me. And it was further intensified by the civil rights struggle. 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. How was I going to resolve it?¹²

Above all, it was the Black church in his hometown that was the catalyst of Cone’s identity formation and the source of survival for the black masses, and correspondingly the antithesis of white supremacy. The Black church, such as the Macedonian African Methodist Episcopal Church where Cone and his family were members, provided the source of the sociopolitical struggle for the liberation of black people; the church was a symbol of resistance to white injustice coupled with black faith in God’s righteousness.¹³ While the Black church would provide to Cone social consciousness, Cone’s work would supply to a generation of black thinkers and scholars of black religion and black theology a new black consciousness rooted in his undergirded thesis that theology is always political and particular. Like his contemporary eminent theologian J. Deotis Roberts, Cone would contribute a “theology to make human life human for the American Negro.”¹⁴ In the same pattern of thought like Cone, Roberts was convinced that “Black Theology must be radical and militant. It must move men to act upon the ethical imperatives of their faith. To the assertion that ‘Black is beautiful,’ it must answer Amen, but to the call for violence it must say no.”¹⁵

Black theology constitutes many sources and historical trajectories that predate the civil rights

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 20.

¹⁰ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 25.

¹¹ Ibid. 27, 30.

¹² Ibid. 38-9.

¹³ Ibid. 22.

¹⁴ Qtd in Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy*, 446.

¹⁵ Ibid. 445-6.

movement of the 1950s and the 1960s or the Black Power movement of the 1960s. In his creative and brilliant work, *Shoes that fit our Feet*, Dwight N. Hopkins grounds the emergence of Black theology in the very religious culture of the enslaved African population as they theorized and theologized through songs and folk tales their understanding of God, Jesus, and humanity, and their inherent desire for freedom which was compatible with God's ultimate desire for the liberation of the enslaved.¹⁶ He remarks:

White theological proscriptions served as a negative incentive for slaves to pursue their independent religious thinking. On the positive side, blacks felt the powerful living presence of divinity in the midst of their daily burdens and concentrated in the Invisible Institution. These radical religious experiences colored their biblical interpretation; and, thus, they produced a theology of liberation. Given the contours of the Invisible Institution as backdrop, the slaves' liberation faith in the divine burst through in their own theological perspectives on God, Jesus Christ, and human purpose...American slaves discovered the nature of God as the One who sees the afflictions of the oppressed, hears their cries, and delivers them to freedom.¹⁷

On The Culture of American Slavery and Lynching

Not only slavery was the institution that tortured blacks, it was also the system that led them to find solace and freedom through their own religious world and belief that God was their Liberator. In his classic work on *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson attributed the beginning of the Negro spirituals to the context of American slavery; in which African slaves developed many thematic topics that would serve as the historical background to Black theology in the 1960s. Johnson infers that the Negro spirituals "was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity—patience—fear—love—faith—and hope—through a necessarily modified form of primitive African music. The Negro took complete refuge in Christianity, and the Spirituals were literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor."¹⁸ Cone himself wrote

an entire book on the basis of Black theology tracing its origin to the aesthetics of the spirituals and the blues. He argued that the Black spirituals and the Black theology articulated the collective experience of the black population in the United States.

The slaves interpreted God as (their) Liberator and Jesus Christ as "the King, the deliverer of humanity from unjust suffering."¹⁹ They sang about black suffering, death, sin, faith and suffering, freedom, and the ultimate God's freedom on their behalf. In fact, Cone summarizes the slaves' conception of freedom as they associated it as an event and God's liberating intervention:

Freedom, for black slaves, was not a theological idea about being delivered from the oppression of sin. It was a historical reality that had transcendent implications. Freedom meant the end of "driber's dribin'," "Massa's hollerin,'" and "missus' scolding;"—"Roll, Jordan, roll." It meant that there would be "no more peck o' corn," "no more driver's lash," "no more pint o' salt," "no more hundred lash," and "no more mistress's call for me, Many thousand gone." The slaves' view of God embraced the whole of life—their joys and hopes, their sorrows and disappointments; and their basic belief was that God had not left them alone, and that God would set them free from human bondage. That is the central theological idea in black slave religion as reflected in the spirituals.²⁰

Finally, the slaves believed that the end of slavery (as a terrorized system) was God's emancipative act on their behalf, the abused and exploited population. This collective understanding of divine deliverance was substantially shaped by slaves' theology of liberation. Yet, after the proclamation of general emancipation from slavery, blacks would experience another terrorize form of enslavement: the ritual and public performance of lynching in the American society.

In the context of the so-called New World characterized by racial violence and death, colonial savagery, and anti-black racism, white colonists and slave owners undermined the culture of enslaved Africans because according to Cone, they "demeaned black people's sacred tales, ridiculing their myths and defining their sacred rites. Slavery was both racial and economic. Their intention was to define

¹⁶ For a careful study of these three topics, see Hopkins, *Shoes that fit our Feet*, 13-48.

¹⁷ Hopkins, *Shoes that fit our Feet*, 22-23.

¹⁸ Johnson and Johnson, *the Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 20.

¹⁹ Cone, *the Spirituals and the Blues*, 43.

²⁰ Cone, *the Spirituals and the Blues*, 53.

humanity according to European definitions so that their brutality against Africans could be characterized as civilizing the savages.”²¹ The enslavement of the Africans was determined by economic factors that legitimized the transatlantic slave trade because of the need for large, cheap, and available labor force in the Americas. The degradation of the black body during the era of slavery and the racial attitude of Western writers towards the African population also confirmed that the enslavement of Africans was predicated on racial prejudice and the dark sin. Scientific racism legitimized that the Africans and people of African descent belonged to the lowest racial hierarchy, and that their culture, language, and tradition were far less inferior to those of the white Americans and Europeans.

As a result, Cone could concur that “The black experience in America is a history of servitude and resistance, of survival in the land of death. It is the story of black life in chains and of what that meant for the souls and bodies of black people.”²² African American theologian J. Kameron Carter adds that the modern nation-state was based “on a new type of anthropology, which had at its core a discourse of race (replete with logic of racism) that was itself tied to how Christianity came to be ‘rationally’ repositioned within the framework of modernity’s political economy.”²³

Cone, in his stimulating work, *The Lynching Tree and the Cross*, wrote provocatively and descriptively about the ambivalence of American slavery and American lynching as the most terrified moments in American history and for America’s black population. He interpreted the lynching of black people as a theology of atonement akin to the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

The sufferings of black people during slavery are too deep for words. That suffering did not end with emancipation. The violence and oppression of white supremacy took different forms and employed different means to achieve the same end: the subjugation of black people...At no time was the struggle to keep such hope alive more difficult than during the lynching era (1889-1940). The lynching tree is the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that blacks have seen but do not talk

about because the pain of remembering—visions of black bodies dangling from southern trees, surrounded by jeering white mobs—is almost too excruciating to recall.²⁴

The brutal death of African Americans through the ritual of lynching was to be understood as an example of social salvation and a ritual of racial cleansing. Many white people believed that the purification of the American soil lied in the total annihilation of black lives through the instrumentalization of pre-arranged lynching ceremonies. Hence, the lynching of black people as a sacrificial atonement brought about the redemption of white folk from the presence of Black folk within their midst. Unlike the atoning death of Christ that bears a universal application and salvific effect for the redemption of all people, the lynching of black—a particular racial group or people—Americans as a theology of atonement, in the Calvinistic logic, is particular and limited. Black lynching as a ritual of reference is a clear affirmation of a pivotal moment and an existential crisis of American anthropology and the country’s misapprehension of the human nature, and more importantly, the collective refusal to affirm and embrace black humanity. As Cone observed:

Lynching was the white community’s way of forcibly reminding blacks of their inferiority and powerlessness. To be black meant that whites could do nothing to you and your people, and that neither you nor anyone else could do anything about it...

It was a family affair, a ritual celebration of white supremacy, where women and children were often given the first opportunity to torture black victims—burning black flesh and cutting off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs.²⁵

The memory of (Black) lynching in the Black psyche is cogently expressed in Cone’s uneasy language: “The possibility of violent death was always imminent. African Americans knew what it means to make the best of a bad situation—to live ‘under a kind of sentence of death,’ not know [ing] when [their] time will come, it may never come, but it may also be any time.”²⁶ The lynching of black American citizens established an ambiguous relationship between history, memory, citizenship, and race

²¹Ibid. 23-4.

²²Ibid. 20.

²³ Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 80.

²⁴Cone, *the Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2-3.

²⁵Ibid. 9.

²⁶Ibid.

in American social history. American Lynching entailed the collective imagination, the shared participation of American citizens in white wickedness, and the ritual of white supremacy as a destructive performance. Ultimately, the lynching of black Americans was a devastating demonstration of America's "sick soul." In the paragraph below, Cone penned one of the most painful paragraphs about the history of this American tragedy:

Postcards were made from the photographs taken of black victims with white lynchers

And onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera. They were sold for ten to twenty-five cents to members of the crowd, who then mailed them to relatives and friends, often with a note saying something like this: "This is the barbeque we had last night." Spectacle lynchings attracted people from nearby cities and towns. They could not have happened without widespread knowledge and the explicit sanction of local and state authorities with tacit approval from the federal government, members of the white media, churches, and universities.²⁷

Furthermore, Cone construed black lynching as a serious theological problem rooted in a distorted theological narrative and biblical worldview about black people and their dignity:

The claim that whites had whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation by God to bear witness to the superiority of "white over black." Even prominent religious scholars in the North, like the highly regarded Swiss-born church historian Philip Schaff...believed that "The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American, all modern races, possess the strongest national character and the one best fitted for universal dominion...Cole Blease, the two-time governor and U.S. senator from South Carolina, proclaimed that lynching is a "divine right of the Caucasian race to dispose of the offending black moor without the benefit of jury."²⁸

Both the slave auctions and black lynching as ritual of references have incalculably contributed to the predicament of blackness in the modern world resulting in the crisis of black theodicy, which had impacted the discourse of

black theological anthropology. Accordingly, black theological anthropology must respond critically to the calamity of black theodicy (The phrase "black theodicy" here pertains to the God's seemingly absence and the persistent problem of evil in black life), the pain of black history, and the Calvary of black suffering in the modern world. James Cone himself has deliberately acknowledged the uneasiness of black conscience and black faith in the midst of black suffering and the ostensibly absence of the "Black God" in the plight of his (Black) people:

The cross places God in the midst of the crucified people [black people], in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured...No historical situation was more challenging than the lynching era, when God the liberator seemed nowhere to be found...Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans continued to struggle to reconcile their faith in God's justice and love with the persistence of black suffering.²⁹

Cone's restlessness to make sense of the supposedly divine absence in black suffering and the lack of God's presence in black lives is troublesome. Beyond Cone's solution to the problem of black theodicy, according to Anthony Pinn, the moral evils in this world are expressed in "oppression, injustice, inequality, and the resulting psychological and physical damage," and the "tridimensional oppressions"³⁰ channeled through the dynamics of race, class, and gender. Womanist theologian Stephanie Mitchem interrogates the very possibility of the promise of salvation and redemptive suffering in Christian theology:

Suffering in itself is not salvific. It is redemptive only in that it may lead to critical rethinking of meaning or purpose, as might nay life crisis. Such reexamination is part of the process of human maturation. However, suffering is a distinctive staring place for thinking about salvation as it brings into sharp focus humane experience with God.³¹

Like Pinn, Mitchem denies the possibility of redemptive suffering in God's economy of salvation and providence in history and in the same manner Womanist theologian Emilie Townes engages the question of the commoditization of black women's body, and the problem of evil and suffering in society. On

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 7.

²⁹ Ibid. 27-8.

³⁰ Pinn, *Why Lord?* 13.

³¹ Qtd in Whitted, *a God of Justice?* 10.

the other hand, for Cone, black suffering can be redemptive. Townes in her dazzling study, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, offers an engaging and insightful commentary on black theological anthropology with a special attention to the various forms of structural evil and constructed cultural stereotypes about black womanhood.³² She underscores five representational stereotypes of black women which embody the manifestation of evil as a cultural production in the American society; these negative labels not only deprecate the black woman's body, defame black womanhood, they also identify the black female as property and commodity, and the subject of white gaze—as it were in the time of black lynching (Cone) and slave auction.

New interest in blackface stereotypes involves historical, political, and aesthetic implications that are more complex than allowed by the debates over positive and negative images. Every stereotype emerges in the wake of pre-existing ideology that deforms it, appropriates it, and naturalizes it. The blackface stereotype, by deforming the body, silences it and leaves room for white supremacy to speak through it...Black identity has been made property and it should leave a sickening weariness in the pit of our collective stomach for property means things owned, possession.³³

Townes correlates the notion of property/commodity with black lives resulting in the selling of black flesh as part of the Western capitalist order and economic exploitation of black bodies in New World slave marketplaces.

The modern conception of property considers it an economic resource, deems it friendly to money making, and regards the demands of the state as a drain on resources and a threat to a person's right to do as he or she will with their property. Implicit in this is an understanding of liberty as noninterference from the state. Ownership, then, means rights over resources that the individual can exercise without interference.³⁴

In addition, Townes' evocative rhetoric of the commoditization of black flesh can be construed as the process of devaluing black humanity. This remark is on par with Cone's candid observation about the lynching and

dehumanization of black people. As pointed out earlier, the misrepresentation of black flesh as non-human was a shared ecstatic moment between white families and their friends; it also functioned as an economic transaction in Southern United States:

The commoditization of bodies mutated into the commoditization of identity—Black history, Black culture, Black life—Black identity. Black identity as property means that a community of people has been reduced to exchange values that can be manipulated for economic gain—but rarely by the members of the community themselves. This manipulation includes merging race with myth and memory to create history. It includes caricaturing Black life, and in some cases Black agony, to sell the product.³⁵

To a broader and transnational understanding of black theodicy and black history, the suffering and shame black people experienced in the Americas has been addressed by both black thinkers in the African diaspora as well by African scholars. For example, Lewis Gordon contends that “The racial problematic for Africana people is twofold. One the one hand, it is the question of exclusion in the face of an ethos of assimilation. On the other hand, there is the complex confrontation with the fact of such exclusion in a world that portends commitment to rational resolutions of evil.”³⁶ Race, black suffering, and theodicy inevitably converge and shape the content of black religion and black theological anthropology and ethics—which is evident in the theological writings of James Cone. In a different passage, Gordon explains more clearly the predicament of blackness and black existence in the modern world is tied to the institution of slavery and anti-black racism:

U.S. slavery was a concerted dehumanizing project. It is this dimension that gardened its peculiarly *anti black*, *racist* characteristic. The tale itself reveals much about racism. Racism, properly understood, is a denial of the humanity of a group of human beings either on the basis of race or color. This denial, properly executed, requires denying the presence of other human beings in such relations. It makes such beings a form of presence that is an absence, paradoxically, an absence of human presence.³⁷

³²Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 6.

³³ Ibid. 42-3.

³⁴ Ibid. 43-4.

³⁵ Ibid. 44.

³⁶ Gordon, *Existential Africana*, 9.

³⁷ Ibid. 61.

Not only slavery had deformed black lives, divided African families, altered African retentions in the Black diaspora, African women were raped and as their male counterparts; their black flesh was publicly humiliated through both the historic events of slave auction and public lynching. As a result of the horrors of slavery and colonization, both male and female slaves, and their children experienced social alienation and physical death in large number. The quest to re construct a positive black theological anthropology within the theological grammar of black liberation theology has been an intellectual journey and theological exploration for James Cone since him the publication of his inaugural text in 1969 about his own articulation of a black theology of liberation. As he reflected on the dilemma of black humanity in his post-humorous auto biography: As a theologian, I felt compelled to write a manifesto to white churches announcing that Negroes could no longer tolerate the violation of their dignity. I had to give voice to the feelings of rage in the Negro community and especially the rage inside of me...It was an *existential* issue about black dignity--the political liberation of black people from white oppression.³⁸

Cone's Black (Positive) Anthropology

Evidently, Cone's point of departure for theological inquiry was the experience of the oppressed community and the African American people in particular, and their ambivalent relations with white supremacy and the construction and deconstruction of black humanity in the American society. Cone also relied on African ancestral religious traditions of the enslaved African population in the United States to reframe a positive portrayal of black theological anthropology. Beyond the black experience in the United States that informed Cone's theological logic, the ideological pre supposition of Cone's theological anthropology is premised on the general race concept. His race-based theological inclination and hermeneutics has marked his understanding of the human nature and black existence in the United States and in the modern world. He affirmed unapologetically that "Black theology emphasizes the right of blacks to be black and by so doing to participate in the image of God."³⁹ Simply, the discourse of Cone's black theological anthropology is an affirmation that

black people of all times are human beings and that they belong in God's big human family. This belief was a non-negotiable theological fact and a sustainable intellectual reality for James H. Cone.

Moreover, Cone's assertion about the essence of blackness as a racial category is plainly conveyed in this language: "To ask them to assume a 'higher' identity by denying their blackness is to require them to accept a false identity and to reject reality as they know it to be;"⁴⁰ his associated claim that black is beautiful and the essential humanity of both black male and female is probably grounded on the theological aesthetic of the creation story in Genesis:

So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...Then God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathe into his nostrils and the breath of life, and the man became a living being... So, the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord god made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man (Genesis 1:27; 2:7, 21-22)

Second, Cone sustained the theological logic that black people like other people in God's creation are participatory and creative agents of the *imago Dei*, another idea connected with the notion of humans being treated in the image and likeness of God according to the author of Genesis (Gen.1: 26; 2: 15, 19-20). In other words, the black race exists out of the divine will because God has created black people, so they could participate in his life. Nonetheless, slavery and violence fueled by racial hatred have dehumanized the image of God in black people. Cone did not believe that black people were destined for failure and tragedy nor has he held the racist view that God has ordained the Hamates/ the blacks, as many believe to be the first ancestors of black people, to be the slaves of the white race; yet, both tragedy and disappointments have colored the human condition in black America during the time of slavery and in the post-reconstruction era. Jim Crow laws were designed to break the black soul, restrained the future potentials of black citizens, and debased their humanity. Through his politico-theological work, Cone endeavored

³⁸ Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 13.

³⁹ Cone, *a Black Theology of Liberation*, 92.

⁴⁰ Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 117.

to salvage black humanity, recreate black life, and in essence, to restore blackness in all its glory and dignity in the American society.

Furthermore, James Cone, in his admirable works, *God of the Oppressed*, and *The Spirituals and the Blues*, affirmed the African sources of black culture and the religious ethos in the New World, which had served as mechanisms of survival and existential hope in the era of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow (racial segregation):

That American black people have a tradition of their own that stretches back to Africa and its traditional religions. We are an African people, at least to the degree that our

Grandparents came from Africa and not from Europe. They brought with them their stories and combined them with the Christian story, thereby creating a black religious tradition unique to North America. African culture informed black people's perspective on Christianity and made it impossible for many slaves to accept an interpretation of Jesus story that violated their will for freedom. The passive Christ of white Christianity when combined with African culture became the Liberator of the oppressed from sociopolitical oppression.⁴¹

According to Cone, the rich elements of black culture provided the resources for oppressed blacks to reconfigure their identity and remake their fragmented lives. The spirituals and the blues are among these black cathartic resources. African ancestral cultural practices and religious traditions assisted the oppressed slaves to reject the God of their masters, and through black religion, they reaffirmed their humanity and believed that God was a God of justice and was on their side. Cone asserted that the oppressed African population during the era of slavery believed in a God who was not their oppressor but their Liberator. Moreover, from a Barthian logic, Cone also explored what constitutes the human nature and the ontology of being:

The question about the human person is not answered by enumerating a list of properties;

A person is not a collection of properties that can be scientifically analyzed. Rather to

Speak of the human being is to speak about its being-in-the-world-of-human oppression with

the reality of human suffering as our starting point.⁴²

While Cone regarded suffering as an important phase of the human experience, he did not equate suffering with existence. He was concerned with the meaning of black suffering in the United States, which shaped the black experience and God's response to black theodicy in modernity. Cone, who did not divorce Black liberation theology from Black theological anthropology, explored the function of Black liberation theology in the representation and vindication of black humanity against white supremacy, racial violence, and the triumph of whiteness in modern history:

Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people—their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be

Black-talk. When that man is black and lives in a society permeated with white racist power, he can speak of God only from the perspective of the socio-economic and political conditions unique to black people. Though the Christian doctrine of God must logically precede the doctrine of man, Black Theology knows that black people can view God only through black eyes that behold the brutalities of white racism.⁴³

Cone discussed how social dynamics have influenced theological hermeneutics and human transactions in society. He ventured to articulate a complementary objective of Black theological anthropology within the logical framework of Black Christology:

The task of Black Theology is to analyze the black man's condition in the light of God's

revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy white racism...Because Black Theology has its starting point the black condition, this does not mean that it denies the absolute revelation of God in Christ. Rather, it means that Black Theology firmly believes that God's revelation in Christ can be made supreme only by affirming Christ as he is alive in black people today.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cone *God of the Oppressed*, 105.

⁴²Ibid. 87.

⁴³Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 117.

⁴⁴Ibid. 117-8.

To put it simply, Jesus Christ is for the oppressed, and therefore, he is for black people and the defender of their rights and dignity. Cone interpreted the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ as a radical act of divine freedom with the ultimate goal to set free those who are shackled and exploited by various human forces and oppressions. If black people were in chain during the period of slavery, therefore, God has distinctively reevaluated in himself in Christ on their behalf in order to emancipate them from mental, physical, and psychological enslavement and oppression. In this instance, Cone converged divine revelation (the doctrine of special revelation), black existence (black ontology), and the birth of Christ (Christology) with the intended purpose of God (the doctrine of divine providence) to deliver all oppressed people include black people.

Having argued that the black humanity bears the divine imprint, Cone emphasized the value of freedom as a ground of being. For Cone, freedom was the most fundamental virtue of being human, and God has not withheld freedom as the “most cherished ideal”⁴⁵ in Western civilization, as Orlando Patterson has phrased it, to black people.

The biblical concept of image means that human beings are created in such a way that they cannot obey oppressive laws and still be human. To be human is to be in the image of God—that is, to be creative: revolting against everything that is opposed to humanity...The image of God refers to the way in which God intends human beings to live in the world. The image of God is thus more than rationality, more than what so-called neo-orthodox theologians call divine-human encounter. In a world in which persons are oppressed, the image is human nature in rebellion against the structures of oppression. It is humanity involved in the liberation struggle against the forces of inhumanity.⁴⁶

Not only Cone has disavowed the traditional and conservative definition of the “image of God” as God’s bestowing upon humanity reason or relationality, human responsibility, and the freedom of the mind, he creatively contextualized the concept to address the

historical suffering and the imperative of freedom on behalf of the oppressed, and the black people in the United States. Cone also attempted to correct a great misstep in Euro-American Christian theology, and projects that both American and European theologians have failed to link existential freedom and the notion of God’s image; as he remarked, “The inability of American theology to define human nature in the light of the Oppressed One and of particular oppressed peoples stems from its identity with the structures of white power.”⁴⁷ He also elaborated this theological crisis with greater clarity and precision in the paragraph below:

Modern theology, following Schleiermacher’s unhappy clue to the relationship of theology and anthropology, forgot about Luther’s emphasis on human depravity and proceeded once again to make appeals to human goodness. The nineteenth century is known for its confidence in the rational person, who not only knew what was right but was capable of responding to it. The image of God in human nature was the guarantee that the world was moving in desirable direction. It never occurred to these “Christian” thinkers that they had missed some contrary evidence: this was the period of black enslavement and Amerindian extermination, as well as European colonial conquests in Africa and Asia.⁴⁸

Cone’s postulation was that Western thinkers have never attributed rationality to black folk. Immanuel Kant, for example, has argued that rationality or reason is a mark of genuine humanity, and that to be human means to be a rational being. In his attempt to explain Cone’s relationship between freedom and human existence, African American theologian James H. Evans claims that “This image is essential to humanity because it is the image of God pressed upon the human being in the moment of creation. When God set out to make humanity in God’s own image, freedom became the guiding in human existence.”⁴⁹ Cone’s thesis was grounded on his (re-) interpretation of the meaning of the Gospel: the categorical emancipation of the oppressed, and the application of Jesus’ message of freedom in the lived-experiences of exploited individuals and the collective. Thus, he could pronounce, “If the content of the gospel is liberation, human existence must be explained as ‘being in

⁴⁵ Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, 48. Patterson insists that in the origins of Western culture, freedom was not “founded upon a rock of human virtue, but upon the degraded time fill of man’s vilest inhumanity to man.”

⁴⁶ Cone *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 93, 94.

⁴⁷ Cone *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 86.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 91.

⁴⁹ Evans, *we have been believers*, 110.

freedom,' which means rebellion against every form of slavery of everything creative."⁵⁰ In the words of Lewis R. Gordon, "Problems of existence address the human confrontation with freedom and degradation."⁵¹ It is apparent that in our analysis we have observed that the history of people of African ancestry has been a search for holistic/emancipative freedom and cathartic healing—both at the personal and collective level—from the catastrophic events of slavery, Jim Crow, and "New World wounds," as well as from the awful conundrum of black suffering originated in anti-black racism and white supremacy.

In response to the plight of black people in modernity, Cornell West has identified three dimensions of freedom found in the Black expression of Christianity: the existential, the social, and the eschatological, associating with black anthropology.

- Existential freedom is a mode of being-in-the-world which resists dread and despair. It embodies an ecstatic celebration of human existence without affirming prevailing reality;
- the social dimension of the freedom predominant in black Christianity does not primarily concern political struggle but rather cultural solidarity... Yet the cultural practices of the black church embody a basic reality: sustained black solidarity in the midst of a hostile society;" and
- The eschatological aspect of freedom in black Christianity is the most difficult to grasp. It is neither a glib hope for a pie-in-the-sky heaven nor an apocalyptic aspiration which awaits world destruction. Rather, it is a hope-laden articulation of the tragic quality of everyday life of a culturally degraded, politically oppressed, and racially coerced labor force.⁵²

Cone has detected the threefold of black freedom linked to black anthropology in black religious texts such as the spirituals and the blues we alluded to in the above analysis. It is important to reiterate the optimistic vision of Cone's Black theological anthropology, which he linked to a Christology of redemptive suffering and sustaining hope:

[Black Theology] it calls upon black people to affirm God because he has affirmed us.

His affirmation of black people is made known not only in his election of the oppressed

Israel, but more especially in his coming to us and being rejected in Christ for us. The event of Christ tells us that the oppressed blacks are his people because, and only because, they represent who he is.⁵³

Elsewhere, Cone appropriated (black) theological anthropology within the framework of a Christology of symbolic representation and relationality. For Cone, Jesus' humanity was more meaningfully to the liberation of the oppressed than that of other heroic narratives in global history.

Jesus is not a human being for all persons; he is a human being for oppressed persons, whose identity is made known in and through their liberation. Therefore, our definition of the human being must be limited to what it means to be liberated from human oppression. Any other approach fails to recognize the reality of suffering in an inhuman society.⁵⁴

Cone's Christ is the one who works determinedly and sovereignty to liberate the oppressed from the sociopolitical oppressions and demons, and the economic powers of this world. Cone's "Black Christ" affirmed brazenly the humanity and dignity of black people; as he declared boldly, "In every case, Christ is the otherness in the black experience that makes possible the affirmation of black humanity in an inhumane situation."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the challenging query about black ontology remains both an inevitable and existential phenomenon in Cone's rhetoric of blackness and black theological anthropology; as he himself confessed, "The crucial question, then, for the black man is, 'How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?'"⁵⁶ He tried to answer his own question, but failed miserably: "But when he attempts to relate as a person, the world demands that he respond as a thing. In this existential absurdity, what should he do? Should he respond as he knows himself to be, or as the world defines him?"⁵⁷ His remedy was to turn to a Christology of blackness while

⁵⁰ Cone *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

⁵¹ Gordon, *Existential Africana*, 7.

⁵² West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* 162-4.

⁵³ Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 118.

⁵⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 85-6.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 105.

⁵⁶ Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

interrogating the whitening of the biblical Messiah.

In addition, Cone accentuated Christ the Liberator and the meaning of Christ's suffering and power to reconstruct an optimistic Black theological anthropology. Cone voiced his own critique against American Christianity for deviating from the Christian message of peace, reconciliation, and hospitality. According to Cone, "The essence of the gospel of Christ stands or falls on the question of black humanity, and there is no way that a church or institution can be related to the gospel of Christ if it sponsors or tolerates racism in any form."⁵⁸ In sum, a Christology rooted in the rhetoric and logic of whiteness cannot redeem the oppressed and the economically-disadvantaged brown and black populations; this Christianity is a dead faith that bears no existential meaning to black existence in the United States. As a result, Cone had to construct a *theology in black* that gave meaning to the black experience in America; as he noted concisely, "Blackness is the image of God in Black people."

The Meaning of Cone, and Cone in the Construction of Meaning in Theology

As he attempted to uncover the meaning inherent in black life, Cone showcased the interconnecting links between Christian theology, black culture, and black history. He maintained that black agency and autonomy was necessary in the quest for significance and freedom. Cone insisted that black expression in theology was mattered and similarly he put forth the notion that the voice of the black masses was important to God; therefore, black theologians and thinkers must challenge any force in society that seeks to silence the collective expression and autonomy of black people. This attitude entails both a practical task and intellectual responsibility including the public denouncement of cultural sins and oppressions aimed toward black people and the celebration of black humanity.

For Cone, racism was not just America's original sin; racism was/is a theological problem. As he articulated in this sentence, "For a black person who was born in the South and whose church came into being because of racism, the failure to discuss it as a central problem in theology appeared strange and racist to me."⁵⁹ The thesis that racism is a theological

problem is also a core issue in Joseph Washington's influential book, *Black Religion*, published in 1964. Washington established a distinction between Black religion and White Protestantism and contended that the birth of Black religion occurred in the historical context of American slavery and American religious segregation in white churches wherein black Christians were excluded from the practice of Christianity in white churches, hence resulting in the creation of the Black church. The birth of Black religion or the Black church was the consequence of a theological problem; the problem of white Christian racism is a consistent challenge to black existence and *democracy in black*.⁶⁰

In the same vein, he advanced the idea that white Christians should be proponents of the justice and love of God in the American society if they're going to embody a biblical faith consistent to the teachings of Christ and rooted in the biblical understanding of justice and the fatherhood of God. The denial of injustice to black people in America is a categorical attack on black dignity and an automatic denial of black humanity. Cone never divorced the causes of social justice and civil rights for blacks and the economically-disadvantaged American population to the central message of the Christian gospel. He identified the gospel with the struggle (of blacks) for justice in society and that the Christian message and its associating theological language and creeds must deal with social justice and civil rights issues.⁶¹ To put it simply, Cone did not separate Christianity and politics, theology and moral and ethical issues. Cone alleged that "Christian ethics was the natural link for the connection of the problem of racism."⁶² Finally, Cone believed that God's ultimate desire for black people, who are also bearers of the *Imago dei*, is to be free from all forms of human (white) oppression, degradation, and injustice.

In his writings, Cone articulated a Black politico-theology of liberation framed within the historical trajectories of the civil rights movement and Black Power in the 1960s and within the tragic narratives of the American slavery and lynching in the United States. He conceptualized his theological ideas and moral demands as a corrective rejoinder to the triumph

⁵⁸ Cone, *a Black Theology of Liberation*, 14.

⁵⁹ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 37.

⁶⁰ For Cone's critical analysis of Washington's work, see Cone, *For My People*, 8-10.

⁶¹ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 39.

⁶² *Ibid.*

of white supremacy in the American society, white violence against Black citizens, and the silence of White American churches and theologians to promote brotherhood and safeguard the humanity and dignity of black people against Police brutality, dehumanization, and racial terror. In an article entitled, “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go from Here?” published in 2004, Cone defined Black theological discourse as a “radical response from the underside of American religious history to the mainstream of white Christianity.” For Cone, Black liberation theology is an urgent call to white American Christians and white churches to exercise radical transformation of thought, behavior, and actions toward the oppressed blacks and the poor.

Consequently, the goal of Black liberation theology is to fight against all forms of human oppression and assault, and all evil forces of alienation and destruction against the underrepresented and marginalized populations toward their full emancipation, human flourishing, and the realization of their human potential as *Imago Dei*. Correspondingly, in his second and seminal work, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone argued that Christian “theology cannot be separated from the community it represents. It assumes that truth has been given to the community at the moment of its birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth, in order to make sure that the community remains committed to that which defines its existence.”⁶³ Cone’s theology is a theological discourse that integrates various disciplines of knowledge.

Black Liberation Theology and (Black) Liberal Theology

Another way to think about the meaning and legacy of James Cone is to establish the rapport between Black liberation theology and liberal theology. While there are many confluences and converges between Black liberation theology and liberation theology, Black theology is a contextual theological discourse that is grounded on the history, culture, life, and experience of black people in the United States. For example, the theological writings of James Cone demonstrate substantial marks of influence from white liberal theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, and concurrently, Cone is indebted to black history, black

literature, and the Black Arts movement in his theological formulation. A network of black intellectuals such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Leroi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka), Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and others have supplied to him the intellectual platform and cultural tools that he needed to do liberation theology from below and from an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspective. As he affirmed:

I needed more help with the actual content of black history. For the first time, I began to read Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson. Reading black thinkers, most historians, I encountered the various ways that black people have struggled against white racism. I learned that black people have never been as passive as whites had suggested in their history books. Therefore, my contemporary rebellious spirit had its roots in earlier black generations. This knowledge was quite liberating.⁶⁴

Black liberation theology is linked to Black radical tradition, and Black radical tradition sought to reinterpret the Bible in the light of black struggle for freedom, rights, and justice in the American society. As already pointed out above, the liberation theology of James Cone is also related to the Liberal theology⁶⁵ tradition and the revolutionary Black Social Gospel movement, which Gary Dorrien has brilliantly chronicled in his two ground-breaking books, *The New Abolition: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (2015) and *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (2018). The summary below offers a few propositions differentiating Black liberation theology and Liberation theology, distilling from the work of Cone.

While Black liberation theology emphasizes the black experience in theological inquiry and thought, the latter rejects some of the cardinal doctrines of Orthodox Christianity—such as the virgin birth of Jesus, the deity Jesus Christ, etc. (Black) Liberation theology and Liberal

⁶⁴ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 28-9.

⁶⁵ For an excellent evaluation of Liberal Theology within the American theological landscape, see Garry Dorrien’s trilogy, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805 – 1900* (2001), *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (2003), and *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Post modernity, 1950-2005* (2006).

⁶³ Cone, *a Black Theology of Liberation*, 9.

theology are two different theological systems that do not share the same methodology. They have different sources of origin, address different (theological) issues or (practical) concerns, and speak to different audiences or people. Liberal theology is a Eurocentric theological model that is written for a white audience, chiefly the educated white intellectuals. Like any European theological systems, liberation theology is concerned about theological abstracts and the fundamental doctrinal concerns. (Of course, one can speak of various segments of liberal theology that is not concerned with theological formulas and theological dogmas.) By contrast, Black liberation is the theology of and for the black masses, its primary audience, and speaks directly to their struggles and predicament in the American society. It is not written for the bourgeoisie class, but the economically-disadvantaged blacks who confront the realities of American racism and injustice toward the country's black citizens. While anti-black racism and the question of black justice are fundamental and existential concerns of black theology, classical liberation theology in the European tradition does not engage social justice and human rights issues in the best interest of the world's poor and the oppressed black and brown populations.

Black liberation theology seeks to interpret the plight of Black people and the most vulnerable in society from a theological and political vantage point of view and with a very specific social system. Cone asserted that the Black liberation theologian examines the Christian Scripture and other sources of inspiration carefully to discover what God has to say about the black experience in the world and its rapport to black freedom in a society controlled by whites. Three fundamental questions Black liberation theology attempts to answer considering the plot of the oppressed black and brown populations:

- What does it mean to be black (Black existence) and oppressed (Black oppression)?
- Is God on the side of the oppressed, that is, is God in solidarity (or with) "black people" in their suffering and oppression?
- Will the oppressed find justice or will God vindicate the oppressed and judge the oppressor?

According to Cone's thesis, the Biblical God is the God of the oppressed and a relational Being

who is totally committed to the welfare and safety of his people and his creation. God is for the weak and the most vulnerable individuals and groups in society. Any human phenomenon or activity that causes suffering and pain is a theological/God issue. Sin of any form or expression (i.e. cultural sins, political sins, racial sins, sins of the heart, theological sins) is worth examining through the lens of the lacerative message of the Christian Gospel and social justice democratic politics.

Furthermore, as in any theological world view, there are many good things one can learn from Black theological liberalism. First, Black theological liberalism in the contemporary intellectual enterprise accentuates the imperative of black freedom and black agency in a society that constantly doubts the value of black existence and challenges the merit of black dignity and humanity. Second, this theological category or system seeks to promote the holistic welfare of black people and sustain the notion that the black life in the modern American society is worth safeguarding and that black people as a collective (human) race deserves the protection and care, not the constant surveillance and monitoring of the black body or existence, by the American government and Police forces. Third, black theologians, operating within the tradition of black theological liberalism, embrace the promises of the Social Gospel movement to envision an alternative life for black folk in America, in which equal opportunity and access to better employment and housing opportunity, better education, health care, job promotion, and economic mobility may also be granted to them.

Fourth, Black theological liberalism draws from a wealth of sources and traditions for theological reflection and imagination, and the Bible is not its sole authority in matters of faith and practice. Finally, this *theological tradition in black* highlights black voices and agency, as well as those of non-European theological traditions and canons in the theological exegesis of the Biblical text and theological eisegesis of the contemporary American culture toward black and human flourishing.

Not only James Cone is the father of black liberation theology, black liberation theology created Cone, and black theological liberalism provided both the theological language and the intellectual force to develop a truly theological discourse in black on behalf of poor blacks and underrepresented America's populations.

CONCLUSION

James H. Cone has helped an entire generation of black and brown scholars in America and elsewhere in the world to take seriously the biblical portrayal of God as a God of justice and the One who is on a mission to deliver the poor and the oppressed from human-inflicted oppression and pain. God's decisive commitment to holistic justice and the liberation of the most vulnerable in society is the underlying thesis of Cone's theological corpus. In his work, he emphasized the importance of theological praxis that is for followers of Jesus to embody the biblical faith and to live out the emancipative teachings of Jesus Christ. James H. Cone, Father of Black liberation theology, declared that "God was Black" because God has deliberately chosen to be on the side of the poor and the oppressed, which included the African American people who are historical victims of white oppression, violence, and white injustice in the United States.

Cone also believed that in order for American Christianity to be a truly liberative faith for the black and brown people in America, it must be the antagonist of whiteness and dissociate itself with white supremacy and privileges. Cone argued that white churches must reject the racist structures that are inherent to the birth and practices of white Christianity. Until the day he died, Cone maintained the idea that Christianity and racism are antitheses and cannot coexist; to put it simply, one cannot be a genuine Christian and is anti-black, and that one cannot be a true follower of the God of justice and love and remains silent in the faces of oppression and injustice toward black and brown people in the American society. According to Cone's logic, to be a committed follower of Jesus in the United States is equated with being a friend of the oppressed and the poor, the black neighbor.

For such a time as this, the underlying meaning of Cone pertains to his clarion call to protagonists of human rights and freedom fighters to assume their sacred duty as social critics and public intellectuals and to take up their individual responsibility to be on "the side of the poor and in solidarity with the oppressed;" this twin idea underscores the meaning, relevance, and legacy of James H. Cone in the age of destructive globalization, American foreign (military) intervention, and Western economic capitalism in the developing nations. Cone's intellectual contribution to black theology and moral theology constitute another

pivotal facet of his ongoing legacy: he has always made urgent calls to those who would listen to him to challenge the ongoing threats and challenges of white supremacy and white terrorism in the American society. Cone was also critical of America's hostile xenophobic attitude toward the immigrants and political refugees.

Moreover, Cone has maintained theological thinking is a performance that is rooted in the theologian's values, attitude, imagination, and world view. No one does Christian Theology without assuming a world view. For him, Christian theology is not a set of abstracts and principles the theologian articulates, promotes, and defends. Biblical theology never divorces theology and ethics, and the human experience and response to God and the cosmic phenomena; these are intermingled in the biblical notion of good religion and sound theological truth.

While we must always pursue theological truths that are rooted in God's revelation to humanity, we should not undermine the milieu and human environment in which God communicated his will, plan, and message to humanity. Cone argues in *God of the Oppressed* that God's revelation came to us in a contextualized form, the world and experience of the poor and oppressed; hence, all theologies and theological systems are contextualized forms and expressions of the individual who created them. God always speaks in the context of the human experience and the culture of the people who are the recipients of his gracious revelation: the poor of Yahweh. God has indeed spoken to black people within the parameters of their own culture. God is not (has not been) absent in any culture in the world. He has indeed spoken and revealed himself to all peoples and to all cultures, especially to the poor and oppressed—as we also learned in Latin American liberation theology.

Finally, for Cone, a theological system that emphasizes academic theology while undermining practical theology and God's passion for justice and his command to care for the poor, the oppressed, the orphan, the widow, and to show compassion and hospitality toward strangers and the needy is inadequate and insufficient.

The theological system that is silent on human suffering, pain, and oppression, as well as human hunger, and the exploitation of workers,

and sex slave trafficking in the world is also a rigged system. Cone has taught us that these are “Gospel issues,” not merely “social issues”; they are equally human concerns that touch the deepest part of the divine heart and mind.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Carter, J. Kameron. *Race: A Theological Account of Race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [2] Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970.
- [3] *The Spirituals and the Blues*. New York, Seabury Press, 1972.
- [4] *God of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.
- [5] *Black Theology and Black Power*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- [6] *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991.
- [7] *My Soul Looks Back*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999.
- [8] *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003.
- [9] *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2010.
- [10] *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011.
- [11] *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018.
- [12] Dorrien, Gary. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805 – 1900*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- [13] *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- [14] *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Post modernity, 1950-2005*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- [15] *The New Abolition: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- [16] *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- [17] Evans, James H. *We have been believers: an African-American Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- [18] Gordon, Lewis Ricardo. *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- [19] Hopkins, Dwight N. *Shoes that fit our feet: Sources for a Constructive Black theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.
- [20] Johnson, James Weldon and J. Rosamond Joseph. *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*. New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1926.
- [21] Joseph, Celucien L. “The Rhetoric of Prayer: Dutty Boukman, the Discourse of “Freedom from Below and the Politics of God *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2:9 (June 2011):1-33.
- [22] Patterson, Orlando. *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- [23] Pinn, Anthony B. *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- [24] Townes, Emilie Maureen. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- [25] Washington, Joseph. *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States*. Boston: Beacon, 1964.
- [26] West, Cornel. *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982.
- [27] Whitted, Qiana J. “A God of Justice?” *The problem of evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.

Citation: Celucien L. Joseph, “The Meaning of James H. Cone and the Significance of Black Theology: Some Reflections on His Legacy”, *Journal of Religion and Theology*, 2019, 3(2), pp, 1-16.

Copyright: © 2019 Celucien L. Joseph, This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.