

Intersections of African American Culture and Theology in James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*¹

Péter Gaál-Szabó

Debrecen Reformed Theological University, Hungary

1. Introduction

Much as James H. Cone seeks to formalize black theology as a theological discipline, his lifework primarily revolves around questions of the black self in relation to white America. It is in the intersection of black theological anthropology and the newly aestheticized black self in the 1960s that he establishes a revolutionary theology in the post-Civil Rights movement era: contextualized in white America, he seeks to revitalize the black self and validate it from a theological point of view within America. As he importantly points out, “I am critical of white America, because this is my country” (Cone 1969: 4) – a statement proving and problematizing his oeuvre – that even in his early theology, he claims a place in America for African Americans, i.e., a place fundamentally shared with and not excluding other American citizens. Unlike the Black Muslims’ insistence on separation in the period and the militant black pride characteristic for Black Power advocates’ nationalism, it shows Cone’s dilemma how to reconcile Martin Luther King’s belief in integration with the revolutionary empowerment of African Americans in the emancipation of the black self theologically.

Cone published his *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 directly after King’s assassination that unleashed riots “represent[ing] the upending of social order [that] vividly highlighted the vast gulf that separated one America from another” (Risen 2009: 250). Well demonstrating the divide, emphasis centers in his book on the black self as the delimitation of both a racially oppressed category and a religious-cultural entity, which evolves through a rejection of white injustice and a sharp contrast to white theology. His stand precipitates as a radical critique of the white church as “the white church and white theology are dead, not God” (Cone 1969: 89) and a self-justifying embrace of “the black revolution [as] the work of Christ” (*ibidem*: 89). Straightforwardly, his theological work can be seen as an extension of Black Power-informed black pride to expose the “failings” and “paralysis” of white

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American theology and church (West 1982: 104) in order to bring about justice and equality for the whole African American community.

In the present study, the intersection of the theological and cultural are scrutinized *vis-à-vis* Cone's understanding of the prophetic tradition and the revelation of Christ as "two interrelated poles" (Singleton 2002: 113) to explore the meaning of blackness from a cultural point of view.

2. The prophetic voice in Black Theology

In establishing a revolutionary voice, Cone reaches back to, what Cleophus J. LaRue identifies as, the components of the sermonic tradition of black preachers to establish the continuity of his religio-cultural discourse by interpreting the Bible "on behalf of the powerless and oppressed" (LaRue 2000: 5), i.e., from the point of view of the black experience:

"The New Testament message of God's love to man is still embedded in thought-forms totally alien to blacks whose life experiences are unique to themselves. The message is presented to blacks as if they shared the white cultural tradition. We still talk of salvation in white terms, love with a Western perspective, and thus never ask the question, 'What are the theological implications of God's love for the blackman in America?'" (Cone 1969: 49).

Cone's refusal of white European traditions echoes the black preacher's "social location on the boundary of the dominant culture, a boundary that provides them with creative perspectives often unavailable to those standing in the center of power" (LaRue 2000: 6). His theology appears to primarily exert harsh criticism of the white church and whites in general for their silence and consequent compliance with racism, but, more importantly, it seeks his understanding and interpretation of God that evolves from an authentic black perspective, which is "practical and relevant to a broad spectrum of black existence" (*ibidem*: 6).

Cone's endeavor coincides with Enrique Dussel's observation regarding the main trends of liberation theologies. In an overview of liberation theology, Dussel identifies the reinterpretation of the Bible and the identification of a particular relationship to Jesus as well as a parallel with the prophetic movement in Israel's history. As he claims, "Liberation theology is a creative and complex synthesis of apparently contradictory tensions. Without falling into traditionalism, it claims to participate in the most ancient prophetic traditions and to learn from the very founder of Christianity" (Dussel 2001: 40). In a likewise manner, Cone "envision[ing] [black theology] the voice of the oppressed and the theological wing of the black Christian tradition" (Pinn 2003: 103) addresses the peripheral, the marginal, the oppressed through decentering the hegemonic center socially, politically, theologically, and culturally via connecting to the black religious tradition as "people's psychic survival

kit” (Mitchell 2004: xv) representing “their collection of rules, values, and modes of action for coping with the realities of their existence” (*ibidem*: 15). The rather heterogeneous prophetic movement in ancient Israel appeared in “an era of internal disintegration” with prophets as “holders of cultic office” and others “who proceeded to stronger and stronger attacks on existing institutions and altogether denied their legitimacy in the eyes of Jahweh” (Von Rad 1962: 97). The charismatic prophets often exerted their work in opposition to the political system and the centralized cult: “In actual fact it was against the holders of the high offices, kings, priests, and prophets, that these prophets turned, and reproached them with their failure to comply with the will of Jahweh” (*ibidem*: 97-98). Importantly, these prophets sought to reprimand the leaders for their failure to fulfill the will of God, while never questioning the legitimacy of their offices (*ibidem*: 99). As defenders of the faith and the people, they often got entangled with social and political issues. The prophets with charisma had thus various functions including inspiration, praise, and teaching (*ibidem*: 102) – but, perhaps, no less importantly, they functioned as the core reminders for Israel of who they were and where they belonged.

What Cone does is connect to the pre-Civil War black prophetic tradition of non-acceptance of oppression, while practicing constant critique of present-day social and political circumstances. In so doing, he insists on a long-standing African American tradition of a prophetic office, while also seeking Biblical verification. He consciously draws a parallel between the prophets of the Old Testament, who “certainly spoke in anger” (Cone 1969: 3), and black theology, thereby validating “a radical approach which takes the suffering of black people seriously” (*ibidem*: 49-50), even floating the possibility of violence by not denouncing it “as a legitimate means of protest” (Pinn 2003: 103). Radicalism is thus a question of perspective as any approach without emotion will stand in stark contrast to it, but an attitude that can be characterized by such radicalism is truthful to both the black ancestors and the Biblical forebears. The close identification of Israel and African Americans enhances the harsh contrast and establishes the equation of white America with the oppressors of the *Bible*.

The charisma of any prophet turns out to be political in the *Bible* as the practices criticized are not only related to the cult but bear an impact on the lives of the people. Indeed, Biblical prophets speaking up against the office-holders do speak up for those supplanted or even displaced, even as they defend the interests of God. Cone’s understanding reflects this, too, when he forcefully asserts that “If the Church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society” (Cone 1969: 2). The prophetic is equated with radicalism in the sense that it refuses moderate, emotionless consideration of the plight of African Americans. The prophetic is, on the one hand, meant to suggest immediate and uncompromised action and, on the other, regarding its nature, to be ultimately political as it is justified by faith (*ibidem*: 46). The prophetic must furthermore

represent and mediate God's will – an aspect that markedly comes to the foreground in a summary of Cone's thesis:

"What, then, is God's Word of righteousness to the poor and the helpless? 'I became poor in Christ in order that man may not be poor. I am in the ghetto where rats and disease threaten the very existence of my people, and they can be assured that I have not forgotten my promise to them. My righteousness will vindicate your suffering! Remember, I know the meaning of rejection because in Christ I was rejected; the meaning of physical pain because I was crucified; the meaning of death because I died. But my resurrection in Christ means that alien powers cannot keep you from the full meaning of life's existence as found in Christ. Even now the Kingdom is available to you. Even now I am present with you because your suffering is my suffering, and I will not let the wicked triumph.' This is God's Word" (*ibidem*: 46).

Claiming a prophetic voice, Cone does not just substantiate the cause of the address but identifies also with the suffering subjects in echoing "the communal voice raised in opposition to the reality" (Hubbard 1994: 7), envisions hope by reiterating the divine promise, and proclaims God's will for the suffering and the oppressed. In actuality, his Pauline verification of group membership through claiming stigmas of the African American existence, Cone activates the African American subjects through the resonance with traumas in the African American experience, while, at the same time, the maintenance of the harsh binary between the black socio-cultural reality and the a priori black condition. Similarly to old-time preachers in the peculiar institution, Cone, too, "in taking Jesus from *there* to *here* and moving the people from *here* to *there*, moves the spirit of the people beyond the boundary of hierarchical social order to the creation of new forms of human consciousness" (*ibidem*: 5). In so doing he joins the major black thinkers of the period as, for example, Vincent Harding, friend and colleague of Martin Luther King, Jr., who claims at one point that "Healthy self-esteem has been seen in many traditions as a prerequisite to the establishment of community" (Harding 2003: 716), who ultimately also "define [...] *freedom* as the ability to articulate the self" (Hubbard 1994: 5).

Importantly, Cone reconnects to an anthropological type in the *Bible* as he heralds the appearance of God in historical time and his purpose for African Americans even with eschatological horizons.

3. Black Christ and Black Power

Conceptualized in the spirituals of slave religion as "an ever-present and intimate friend" (Raboteau 2004: 259), Christ for the African American religion is no abstract concept, no distant, inaccessible, or mediated entity. Cone professes to this notion,

but with an emphasis on its empowering capacities: for him, Christ is seen as essentially connected to power; and for the theologian, as the interconnection of power and love empowering African American subjects to act.

Relying on Paul Tillich's insistence on the interrelation of love and power rather than their disconnection or even mutual negation, Cone identifies the duality of the Christian faith as the foundation to establish the renewed black self, and that renewed self is then able to reunite with others (Tillich 1969: 54). The love-power duality also represents the tool to effect social justice and, in this way, racial justice. The insistence on power becomes dubious, though – much as it is comprehensible from a rhetorical point of view – when he connects any form of power to the concept of love. The fiery and ideologically biased language use even if for rhetoric purposes can certainly not be validated on the basis of Christ's teachings or that destructive violence should be acceptable in the name of or as an expression of love. So, it becomes an apparent distortion with ideological overdetermination when he vehemently argues that

“The violence in the cities, which appears to contradict Christian love, is nothing but the black man's attempt to say Yes to his being as defined by God in a world that would make his being into nonbeing. If the riots are the black man's courage to say Yes to himself as a creature of God [...] then violence may be the black man's expression, sometimes the only possible expression, of Christian love to the white oppressor” (*ibidem*: 55).

Cone's bias becomes palpable as he seeks to validate his theology based on Tillich's contextual theology while he disregards its implications for the Christian practice proposed by him. Tillich sees love as “transcend[ing] justice” (1954: 13) as “justice is just because of the love which is implicit in it” (*ibidem*: 15), yet it cannot be interpreted without the “universal law” and the “particular situation” (*ibidem*: 15). Even if any method can contextually be validated, less so regarding the “intrinsic quality” (*ibidem*: 16) of universal law. As Tillich says, “Positive law [...] does not express but it judges power” (*ibidem*: 16). Power presents an obvious tenet in Cone's theology in the era of the Black Power movement. Centering his argument on a discourse of power, Cone seeks to empower African Americans theologically. Reiterating previous power discourses, he identifies blackness as the source of value, which evolves as God's original intention:

“For God to love the black man means that God has made him somebody. [...] His blackness, which society despises, is a special creation of God himself. He has worth because God imparts value through loving. It means that God has bestowed on him a new image of himself, so that he can now become what he in fact is. Through God's love, the black man is given the power to become, the power to make others recognize him” Cone 1969: 52).

Embracing blackness is dogmatized as an invitation by God to realize and accept the value connected to it. In this way, the black subject is religio-culturally reinlivened by being liberated from an essentially objectified stance that Cone calls “nonbeing.” Much as blackness signifies for him a symbolic level, which, supported by many black theologians, “grounds what we can say about God’s liberating activity” (Day 2014: 143) and that “in the context of the black religious experience” (Roberts 1971: 139), he establishes blackness as an ontological category, i.e., as “an ontological link between black people and the Divine” (Pinn 2003: 104). Cone’s passionate language is in danger of lapsing into “racial henotheism” (Anderson 2016: 15), introducing a “notion of blackness as essentialized, totalizing identity” (Copeland 2014: 44). The concept of “blackness” entails self-definition through the other, i.e., white America, but in Cone’s line of thought also detachment from the original divine intention that has led to the nonrealization of the initial divine plan for African Americans. The quote reveals that blacks are created at the sovereign will of God in his image, so accepting God’s will, i.e., acknowledging their real existence means becoming new (renewed) beings in the scheme of God and the resurrecting love of the black Messiah (see Cleage 1993) is able to deliver African Americans from their contemporary condition of misery.

With the concept of “blackness”, Cone blends into an “Afro-American exceptionalist tradition” going back even to the “liberating and revolutionary prophetic violence” of Nat Turner’s black theology (Lampley 2013: 15). The tradition “claims a *sui generis* status for Afro-American life in regard to form and content” (West 1982: 70), concentrating on differences, especially “what sets them apart from white Americans” (*ibidem*: 70). In inherently binary thinking, Cone idealizes both black and white as non-dynamic types, the former in rigid contrast to white America and defined by resistance and an incessant demand for liberty. In the heavily Black Power-informed milieu, Cone’s early work centers his arguments on the rejection of white society and the embrace of black values. As Cornel West categorizes similar tendencies: “These groups provided ontological justifications for the inhumanity of white Americans, hence Afro-American superiority over these whites. The evidence usually adduced was American history; the conclusion was to deny American (white) values, defy American (white) society, and preserve the small dose of (black) humanity left in America” (*ibidem*: 74). Cone’s move reflects the characteristic crisis theology (see Anderson 2016) of the 1960s as well exemplified by Joseph R. Washington, Jr., for whom black religion can be described by “protest and relief” and that the “uniqueness of black religion is the racial bond which seeks to risk its life for the elusive but ultimate goal of freedom and equality by means of protest and action” (Cone 1966: 33).

From a Christological point of view, Cone’s argumentation is essentially Barthian, especially as for him as for Barth “revelation [is regarded] as the decisive category of theological reflection” (Singleton 2002: 119). Cone centers thus his view on Christ who takes a stand “against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it

and deprived of it” (Cone 1969: 45). In many ways reminiscent of *Old Testament* prophets’ work (“The prophets certainly spoke in anger, and there is some evidence that Jesus got angry” [*ibidem*: 3]), Jesus’s activity is taken to be essentially liberating for the oppressed: “Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there” (*ibidem*: 38). In his interpretation, blackening Jesus means thus that he is the first representative of Black Power, whose social and political engagement is predominant. Opposition to the world, precipitated in statements like “To be free in Christ is to be against the world” (*ibidem*: 42), is in Cone’s understanding opposition to racist white America. For the theologian, it means to denote alignment to the standards of the Gospel. In this way, Christ’s action for African Americans, social or otherwise, is seen as the denotation of God’s will.

In a maneuver that Harry H. Singleton (2002: 92) labels as “indigenous deideologization”, Cone attempts to contextualize his message: “Like God’s righteousness, his love is expressed in terms of his activity to and for man, which is the very basis of man’s response to God and to his neighbor” (Cone 1969: 51). In the Barthian move, Cone builds on Barth’s doctrine of revelation as “[God] makes himself known through himself by distinguishing himself in the world from the world. Otherwise he cannot be known at all” (Barth 1938: 21). By apparently deideologizing any theological reflection of the revelation, Cone connects it to divine activity in history, more closely, to the actual, historical context of African Americans, professing to the Barthian view that “Human knowledge of God is an impossibility apart from God’s act of self-revelation” (Bruce 2020: 62; italics in the original). For Cone revelation is divine action expressed in terms of contextual opposition that serves to redefine the black self in the light of the Gospel in a way that caters to blacks’ needs and expresses African American contextualization in God’s work. Exceptionalist as Cone’s oeuvre may look, it does not necessarily express the condemnation of whites – only of the ungodly phenomena that Cone metaphorically labels as “white” – but it intends, in the first place, to refocus the theological discourse on the black self in a radical way. However, Cone’s militant insistence on ontological blackness blurs the permissive understanding of his theology even if, at times, it may follow from the arguments he makes – as when he quotes John Oliver Killens, a major literary voice in the period, on *Symposium: The Meaning and Measure of Black Power*: “Black Consciousness does not teach hatred; it teaches love. But it teaches us that love, like charity, must begin at home; that it must begin with ourselves, our beautiful black selves” (Cone 1966: 36). Even here, though, the fact that Cone replaces in the quote “consciousness” with “power” shows his preoccupation with power and less with the black aesthetics of the era.

For him, response to God is conceived as unconditional, whereas the response to humans cannot remain “unrequited” (*ibidem*: 36) as it is also suggested by Killens: “it will settle for nothing short of love in return” (*ibidem*: 36). Much as he echoes the many voices militant and moderate alike from within the African American community, Cone remains preoccupied with power, which originates from blackness conceived ontologically.

Conclusions

James Cone's "theology of revolution" (1969: 32) offers a radical view of black theology in the midst of the black political, social, and cultural awakening of the 1960s, blending into an age of turmoil of many kinds. Apart from the elements stemming from the anger of African Americans over the injustices in contemporary America, one finds an oeuvre that reflects the by-then well-established tradition of African American self-emancipation and cultural authentication. The often militant radicalism renders Cone's critical stance, nevertheless, "truncated" to use Cornel West's coinage in his evaluation of black prophetic practices calling for "a higher moral plane, a more sophisticated and open-ended theoretical plane and a more culturally-grounded political plane" (West 1988: 49). While Cone gave the African American prophetic tradition and the black religio-cultural self-conceptualization a significant, new impetus, it remained encapsulated in its own binary limitations, ultimately incapable of fulfilling calls by later generations for a black theology offering a comprehensive response to the challenges the African American community has to face.

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