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A Critique of James H. Cone's God of the Oppressed

James Cone has presented his most mature statement thus far in this work. *God of the Oppressed* reflects serious reflection and rigorous research. The book deserves critical evaluation by several scholars from many angles.

Cone's writings have escaped adequate constructive criticism until now. White theologians have been too generous, if not indifferent. In some cases they have ignored all other black theologians and used the works of Cone as a "straw man" to reject the entire enterprise. Black scholars have often accepted his pronouncements uncritically because they agree with the liberation motif in his writings. Both black and white theologians, then, have had mainly skirmishes with James Cone without making a telling blow at the foundations of the deficiencies in his program.

His location as a professor in a prestigious theological school has given him a privileged status as a theologian at home and abroad. His case illustrates somewhat the impact of racism on blacks as well as whites. He has been approved by the theological establishment. And, therefore, he is endorsed by whites and anointed by blacks. This makes this critical task most urgent. He is the key spokesman for black theology at home and overseas. In addition, Cone assumes that he speaks authoritatively for the entire movement. For the sake of this important movement in the life of the Christian Faith, his credentials to make the claim to absolute truth for all black theological reflection must not go unchallenged.

In this review I will attempt to be fair and evaluate Cone's program as I understand him. My critique will not be toned down by sentimentality. Neither should the reader derive from my critique the notion that there is any lack of appreciation for his real contribution.

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone attempts to do several things: He seeks to plug into black experience of religion by recalling his own spiritual autobiography. He provides his continuing critique of white theologians for their failure to participate in the liberation struggle. He attempts to present a fuller explication of his understanding of Christology in the context of a serious consideration of the sociology of knowledge. Finally, he metes out criticism to other black theologians who differ with his own program on substantive matters.

We can agree at the outset that it is not possible to understand any thinker without some encounter with his life and milieu. *God of the Oppressed* helps us to enter into the private world of James Cone's spiritual and intellectual journey. The danger comes, however, at the point when

a private revelation becomes the norm for the community. Surely, it is the task of any church theologian to interpret the faith of a believing community rather than dwelling upon his own experience. One's own experience should be only a key to unlock the experience of the community to which he belongs. And, again, there is a type of smugness in his claim to "speak the truth" which casts his thought in a narrow and dogmatic mold and which must be disclaimed by serious scholarship. Theology must employ convictional language, but it must be subject at every turn to rigorous scrutiny. The emphasis must always be on the faith of the believing community, which serves as an important corrective to the pitfall evident in the ultra-confessional mold of this book.

There is the appropriate suggestion that black religious experience should inform the black theologian. We appreciate Cone's new-found interest in the black religious experience. He has investigated spirituals, blues and folklore in recent writings. He does not appear, however, open to the helpful insights of sociologists and historians of religion. His approach is too subjective to allow for the enlightenment that results from descriptive analysis of data. His ready-made theological structures are inevitably imposed on the data whether it fits or not. In spite of all the research, travel and writing Cone has done, there is little evidence of real growth in his theological program. One can still anticipate what he will say in advance. This stalemate in his thought, which he parades as his strong point, is in fact his Achilles heel.

When asked to move out on new fronts in theological thought, Cone often asks his critics to take on the task. And yet he takes excursions in areas where he exposes his deficiencies to deal with the material meaningfully. He is an able theologian who should rather deal with several crucial issues which have been overlooked. For example, he has not treated the pastoral aspects of black religion which is so central in the black religious experience. Psychological liberation is the locus of political liberation. Meaning for personal existence is the foundation for the protest that leads to liberation. Can Cone's liberation motif theology speak to the dimension of black spirituality? No army can do battle in the absence of morale.

Cone's use of the Bible is suspect. It is my impression that he "uses" the Bible and that he does not really allow the text to speak for itself. This is at least consistent with the manner he "uses" elements of the black experience. But it is not consistent with Cone's exposure to the subject of biblical criticism and exegesis. "Story" is certainly one literary device employed by some biblical authors, but it is not the only one. The Bible, as he realizes, is more like a library than one book as a literary work. Story-telling does not completely unlock either the Bible or the black religious experience. Some important black sermons, for example, include reasoning as well as story-telling and much Wisdom Literature is poetry rather than prose and does not present a narrative.

Furthermore, liberation is not the only message communicated in Scripture though it is a crucial theme. Neither is God's judgment limited

to one class of people; it is upon all people. Cone reveals a remarkable weakness as a biblical exegete. It is the same shortcoming which is evident in his interpretation of black sources. He has decided what he is looking for before he approaches the text. When one allows the text to speak, one often finds the bitter with the sweet, but for Cone, it is all sweet. Amos is there, but so is Hosea. Judgment is present, but so is mercy, and both are attributes of God. The sacred history orientation of Cone's exegesis cast in the mold of Christo-centrism, limits his ability to be a faithful interpreter of the biblical message. He is correct in giving large attention to Scripture in the black religious experience, but any misrepresentation of Scripture is a mixed blessing. When the true biblical message is addressed to the situation of human oppression, sacred history becomes world history. The sacred and the secular meet as they do in the African/black religious experience. This occurs without neutralizing God's self-critical judgment upon oppressors and the oppressed alike. God's transcendent judgment always separates the holy from the unholy.

Cone has become the diplomat of black theology. This gives me some real concern given the provincial cast of his program. Considering his youth, one assumed, however, that he would learn a great deal by this international exposure. But; until now, there is little evidence that any growth has occurred. The revelation of Malcolm X in Mecca has bypassed Cone. Thus far, he has not opened up his hermeneutical structures in these dialogues. He travels to transport a ready-made theological program. There is no evidence that Cone intends or is able to re-think his view of revelation in order to move beyond a monologue to a dialogue with religionists of other cultures. This means that he has little to offer Christians who are re-thinking their Faith in the Third World. This is, in my estimation, a serious loss. Black theology has the possibility of being a kind of model for liberation theologies everywhere.

On the other hand, the liberation motif, as presented in Cone's program, is not very helpful for those in other lands who suffer internal forms of oppression. His interpretation of liberation, as we have seen, is "other-directed." It is a fact that the oppressed prey upon each other as a result of oppression suffered from an external source. But if the oppressed are to initiate their own liberation as Cone himself correctly points out, then much depends upon what happens within their own ranks to make the liberation of a whole people a possibility. The message of Sterling Tucker, "For Blacks Only," or of Carl Rowan, "Between Us Blacks," is woefully lacking in Cone's writings. What does black theology have to say about redeeming the black community, starting with the black family? Black theology must be pro-black and not merely anti-white if we are to participate powerfully in our own liberation.

The dialectical method used by Cone is akin to Hegelian ideology and neo-orthodox theology. It is not the kind of thinking one finds in the African/black religious heritage. Thus Cone employs the theological method of a group of Euro-American theologians to criticize them. This

method says "yes" and "no" to the same issues and rides on a paradox. For example, the oppression-liberation formula is central to Cone's program. It is problematic both in terms of what it says and does not say. It implies that oppression is a condition necessary for liberation because in America blackness and oppression are identical. Given this assertion, must we assume that blacks are to remain in bondage, that they may be the recipients of God's favor? It is somewhat like saying that where sin abounds, grace abounds. Must we continue in sin in order to receive grace? If so, where is the Good News of the Gospel? How may we rejoice over liberation if winning such a prize means that we will be forsaken of God?

Cone would deny this challenge by pointing to the non-philosophical character of his thought, indeed of black theology. And yet he rejects the "liberation-reconciliation" formula of my program on the same basis used to advance his position. My best judgment leads me to assume that Cone "uses" this method as he does the Bible. It provides him the luxury of selecting concepts to his advantage without the requirement of logical consistency. Black theologians cannot excuse themselves from serious epistemological reflection. We are accountable thinkers, too, even though it may be that our heritage, social experience and temperament lead us to a unique style of thinking. Vernon J. Dixon speaks of "diunital" thinking among blacks; it is "both-and" rather than "either-or" thinking (*Beyond Black and White*, Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1971, pp. 26-65). This form of thinking, according to Dixon, makes it possible for blacks to understand blacks and whites to understand only themselves. Another way to state the case is to assert that blacks, being influenced by African thought and belief, engage in "holistic" thinking. This type of thinking involves the whole person and all of life. It enables a black theologian to reject oppression, seek liberation and affirm community where there is a depth of human understanding, and all in a religio-theological as well as a psycho-political context.

Closely related to Cone's crisis in theological method is his ethical paralysis. Granted he speaks of the social context of theology in *God of the Oppressed*, the application of this principle appears to be a type of faith-eschatological event. The thrust is mainly personal-psychological. His excursions in the sociology of knowledge indicate that he is well read even to the point of impressing the white authors who have provided the insights used in his discussion. The collective-ethical dimension of his thought is not sufficiently prescriptive in an ethical sense to make much difference in the plight of the black suffering masses. Notwithstanding the quality of scholarship in Cone's *God of the Oppressed* (his best book to date), we have yet to receive from his pen the help we need for social and political decision and action. Neither does one find Cone's theology to be "pastoral" in a vital sense. His theology seems to be *for* the people, but not *of* the people. Is it possible for a black theologian to write a program of Black Theology and not be in solidarity with the black oppressed? This is a question I continually

raise to myself. How does the Black Theologian provide a learned exposition of the Christian Faith against the backdrop of the black religious heritage and relate to the concrete life-and-death decisions faced by the masses?

Cone seems unable to adapt his Christo-centrism to meaningful action for the liberation of blacks. What we need is a bridge from theory to praxis. A black pastor announced an important election from his pulpit recently. He told his congregation that they should vote. The pastor asserted that today we worship and at the polls we will practice our Faith. A Christ-centered and a Church-centered theology must provide some direction for leaders of congregations and their following if Black Theology is to be more than dry bones, or worst yet, die stillborn. For all his theoretical concern for liberation and the black power thrust, Cone has yet to give his Christology an adequate political or even a pastoral shape.

There is a shaping-up of Cone's contribution to a full Christological statement in *God of the Oppressed*. But he seems to not have discovered the "politics of Jesus" discussed so forcefully in Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* many years ago. Black theologians must pursue the political dimensions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ if they are to confront the power-axis of oppression in an effective manner. The Black Church, the most influential institution at our command, urgently requires a foundation in black theological ethics to understand its nature and fulfill its mission.

It is, I believe, healthy that James H. Cone has found it impossible to continue to ignore his critics among Black Theologians. For the first time in his several writings, he has aimed broadsides at Gayrand Wilmore, Preston Williams, William Jones and myself. The most significant chapter in this category is aimed at Jones. Jones has forced Cone to give careful attention to the theodicy question. Cone provides a very helpful discussion on this important issue. I was greatly impressed with Cone's handling of this matter. As far as theodicy is concerned, it is obvious that Cone and I stand over against Jones' emphasis upon the functional ultimacy of man. He did not seem to engage other critics in the same way. In fact, he responded to his other critics in a superficial and condescending manner. But my impression is that this is a luxury he will not be able to afford much longer without some indications that he is prepared to alter some of his earlier dogmatic pronouncements.

There is a growing impatience with Cone's inflexibility to new insights on the subject matter. Most black theologians continue to honor Cone for his pioneering work, but they feel that they have paid their dues. They are asking him to be more accountable as a scholar and as a churchman. Indeed, if he is to maintain the role he has chosen (as the chief spokesman for the movement), they have every right to expect him to take their responses and criticisms with all seriousness. A great deal depends upon our ability to move together toward our common

goal — Black Liberation. Through mutual respect and constructive criticism, the future is hopeful. In spite of many fundamental differences with Cone and the many exceptions to the present work, I am hopeful that the creative genius of this young scholar will yet be unleashed. But this is possible only if Cone opens up his thought-structures and engages in mutual discourse with others in a common struggle.

This review is an invitation to dialogue to the end that we may pursue our common task to its maturity.

