



**On the Eulogizing
of the
Rev. Dr. James H. Cone**

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On April 28, 2018, we received the sad news that Professor James Cone of Union Theological Seminary had passed away. In order to celebrate Prof. Cone's theological legacy, the September 2018 issue of [Dialog: A Journal of Theology](#) (57/3) began with a series of [eight editorials](#), all of which I highly recommend to any who may read this. As a tribute to Prof. Cone, I wish to share here the unedited version of my own editorial, which I submitted to the journal shortly after his death and which was included in pp. 156-161 of the issue just mentioned.

Shortly after hearing of the death of Professor James Cone in April, I began reading on social media the many wonderful things people had to say about him. Pastors, theologians, and Christians of many different backgrounds paid homage and tribute to him for all that he had written, said, and done for over half a century, eulogizing him and expressing admiration, appreciation, and gratitude for his life's work. I imagined the many marvelous things people would continue to say about him and his theology in the coming days and weeks and the countless testimonies to his Christian faith, his love for others, and his concern for justice that those who had known him would share.

Yet, having heard and seen James Cone speak many times, both in person and especially on Youtube, when I recalled observing the ways in which he constantly challenged and confronted others and passionately questioned and denounced whatever he regarded as oppressive and contrary to the Christian faith, a passage from Luke's Gospel kept echoing in my mind. That passage was Luke 6:46, where Jesus tells the crowd listening to him, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what I tell you?" In my mind I could only picture James Cone clamoring from the other side of the grave to many of those who would be speaking so highly of him, "Why do you eulogize me and say such nice things about me, but do not do what I have taught and urged and prodded you to do?"

Wallowing in Whiteness

I teach theology at a school that is only a few hundred yards away from the stadium where, in October 1968, two black men who had just received medals for their performance in the Men's 200-meter event at the Olympic games being held in Mexico—Tommie Smith and John Carlos—each put a black glove on one hand and held it up in a clenched fist, staring down at the ground as the United States national anthem was being played. I remember watching this event on television at my home in Ohio and then in the following hours and days hearing words of angry censure and sharp condemnation for the two men, whose action was interpreted as a statement in favor of "Black Power" that was entirely out of place. When I share this information with my students and show them photos of that moment, usually I have to spend some time explaining the significance of this event in the context of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., especially since I discover time and again that, in all the years they have spent in history class in the schools where they have studied since childhood, not once were they ever told about what had happened just across the street and over the hill from the classroom in which we sit.

Generally, the day on which I bring up this event from 50 years ago is the day when we discuss a reading I have assigned to them from James Cone's 1970 work, *A Black Theology of*

Liberation, which was translated into Spanish and published together with a Prologue by Paolo Freire in 1972. In my Christology class, we read Chapter 6, "Jesus Christ in Black Theology," and in my Contemporary Theologies class, we read Chapter 4, "God in Black Theology." As far as I recall, every time I have taught those classes, the reading that invariably impacts the students the most and remains spinning around in their minds throughout the rest of the semester is the chapter they read from this book.¹

Although it always takes me a while at the beginning of the class to convey to them what James Cone meant by "blackness" and what "black theology" and "Black Power" refer to, as soon as we turn to what Cone says about "whiteness" and "white theology," their somewhat perplexed faces quickly light up. On that subject, they know perfectly well precisely what he is talking about. They know what it is to live in a world dominated and smothered and enshrouded by whiteness, a world in which the only people who count are those who wear white clothes and eat white food and listen to white music—even though in most cases those clothes and that food and music originally were *not* white but were instead of many different colors, including their own. However, all of these things along with many others have been co-opted and bleached white in a world where everything must become white in order to be of any value. Even though my students live in a country that is not considered by most whites as part of "America," despite the fact that it lies on the same continent that bears that same name—it too was co-opted long ago—they understand Cone very well when he writes that "insofar as this country is seeking to make whiteness the dominating power throughout the world, whiteness is the symbol of the Antichrist. Whiteness characterizes the activity of deranged individuals intrigued by their own image of

themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world" (7-8).

For centuries, people such as my students and their ancestors have been taught that they must become white, even though they know full well that they will never be accepted as white by the "real" whites. Just as their ancestors were compelled to abandon their mother tongue and even to regard it as barbaric and shameful in order to speak a white language that was foreign to them, so now they are told that unless they learn another white language, they will remain nobodies in this world. Like other Latin Americans, most of whom have skin that is brown or black—"tanned" not on a beach but from countless hours spent in open fields and on country roads and city streets—, they live in a country where, with a few notable exceptions, those who govern and sit in positions of power and authority are white. From childhood they are taught in schools that are thoroughly and unabashedly white, with their white curriculums and their white history books that keep their roots concealed from their sight and are careful not to mention an incident shown round the world that took place in a stadium in their own back yard 50 years ago. In this and other ways, they are made to fit into a system which is white, where definitions regarding who they are and decisions regarding what they must do and become are ultimately made by white people enthroned in places high above them. They have no choice but to live in a world run by white people, who make and enforce their white laws and define unilaterally what is moral and immoral, right and wrong, good and bad. In James Cones words, this society is one that "defines blackness as evil and whiteness as good" (121), "a white society that uses Christianity as a form of oppression" (111)."

Many of my students come from churches that are white, even though most of the people who fill them are not. There those people gaze on images of a white Jesus as they follow a

white liturgy and sing white hymns and hear preached to them a white God whose objective is to make them pure, clean, and white as “he” is. As James Cone notes, they are taught about a salvation that over the centuries “became white: an objective act of Christ in which God ‘washes’ away our sins in order to prepare us for a new life in heaven” (127)—a heaven in which all will be clothed forever in white robes, worshipping the One who sits on a great white throne, together with the slain Lamb now dressed in white, mounted on a white horse as he leads into battle “the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure,” who follow him on horses that are also white (Rev. 7:9, 13; 19:11, 14; 20:11). None of the members who attend these churches would ever dare to question such a vision of the heavenly salvation that is to become theirs once they cross beyond the “pearly gates.” How *can* they when it’s in the Bible, right there in black and white!

As I must explain to my students, when James Cone insists on “denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence” (10), calls for “the destruction of everything white” (62), and encourages whites to “hate their whiteness” (vii) so as to “lose their white identity—indeed, to destroy it” (62-63), he is not promoting racism or hatred of white people. Rather, in essence, he is saying what St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2), what St. John wrote in his First Epistle, “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15), and what Jesus told his disciples: “You do not belong to the world” (Jn. 15:19). Like John, Cone is referring to those who have “the spirit of the Antichrist,” of whom John says, “They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. But we are from God” (1 Jn. 4:5-6). The novelty was that Cone, in the context of oppression from which he wrote, had the audacity and clarity of vision necessary to explicitly identify that world with whiteness,

because it is run and ruled and regulated by whites. Worse yet, then as now, those whites claim to be acting in the name of the one true God and look to their white God to justify the oppression and enslavement of others, the vast majority of whom are *not* white. And all who refuse to denounce openly that whiteness, to struggle against it and seek to destroy it, thereby identify themselves as part of that white world and in fact serve to perpetuate and fortify it, whether actively or passively, thus exposing themselves for who they really are.

Making White Black

As Cone stresses, in the face of this white oppression, one cannot remain “neutral” or say that God is “color-blind” and therefore loves all people equally (4, 6). God does not love white oppressors—at least not in the way that *they* claim. Those oppressors must be destroyed in one of two ways: either by using force against them to make it impossible for them to continue oppressing, thereby freeing those whom they oppress, or by liberating them from themselves so that they choose not only to stop oppressing others, but also to join in the fight against white oppression.

According to Cone, this means becoming black: “If the oppressed of this land want to challenge the oppressive character of white society, they must begin by affirming their identity in terms of the reality that is anti-white. Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness” (7). “Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming one with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God!*” (65).

This is the God whom black theology proclaims: “the *liberation* of the oppressed is a part of the innermost nature of God. Liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine

activity. The blackness of God means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation" (64). "The white God is an idol created by racists, and we blacks must perform the iconoclastic task of smashing false images" (59). God's blackness also means that "God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation" (63). Cone mentions two ways in which this has occurred. The first is the election of black people as God's people. Cone is careful to clarify, however, that "God has chosen them not for redemptive suffering but for freedom. Blacks are not elected to be Yahweh's suffering people. Rather we are elected because we are oppressed against our will and God's, and God has decided to make our liberation God's own undertaking. We are elected to be free now to do the work for which we were called into being—namely, the breaking of chains" (56).

For Cone, however, this breaking of chains is possible because God has assumed the condition of the oppressed in a second and more profound way:

Taking seriously the New Testament Jesus, black theology believes that the historical kernel is the manifestation of Jesus as the Oppressed One whose earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed of the land The definition of Jesus as black is crucial for christology if we truly believe in his continued presence today. Taking our clue from the historical Jesus who is pictured in the New Testament as the Oppressed One, what else, except blackness, could adequately tell us the meaning of his presence today? Any statement about Jesus today that fails to consider blackness as the *decisive* factor about his person is a denial of the New Testament message The definition of Christ as black means that he represents the complete opposite of the values of white culture (113, 120-121).

The blackness of Christ clarifies the definition of him as the *Incarinate One*. In him God becomes oppressed humanity and thus reveals that the achievement of full humanity is consistent with divine being. The human being was not created to be a slave, and the appearance of God in Christ gives us the possibility of freedom. By becoming a black person, God discloses that blackness is not what the world says it is (121).

Using blackness as the point of departure, black theology believes that God's love of humankind is revealed in God's willingness to become black. God's love is incomprehensible apart from blackness. This means that to love blacks God takes on black oppressed existence, becoming one of us. God is black because God loves us; and God loves us because we are black God makes black what humans have made white (73-74).

If Jesus Christ is white and not black, he is an oppressor, and we must kill him. The appearance of black theology means that the black community is now ready to do something about the white Jesus, so that he cannot get in the way of our revolution (111).

According to Cone, then, for any theology to be truly Christian, it must be black and proclaim not only a black God but a black Christ. "There are two reasons why black theology is Christian theology. Firstly, there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community. This is so because God is revealed in Jesus as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society. The goal of black theology is to interpret God's activity as related to the oppressed black community. Secondly, black theology is Christian theology because it centers on Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology which does not have Jesus Christ as its point of departure" (5). Thus, "[i]n order to be Christian theology, white theology must cease being *white* theology and become black theology by denying whiteness as an

acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God's intention for humanity" (9).

The Wrath of Love and the Love of Wrath

Cone points particularly to two components of white theology that must be rejected: the notion that we must deny God's righteousness and wrath in order to speak of a God of love, and the view that the suffering of the righteous is pleasing to God. Following Cone's insistence that "[i]f whites were really serious about their radicalism in regard to the black revolution and its theological implications in America, they would keep silent and take instructions from blacks," since "[o]nly blacks can speak about God in relationship to their liberation" (62-63), I will let him speak for himself:

Black theology, then, asks not whether love is an essential element of the Christian interpretation of God, but whether the love of God itself can be properly understood without focusing equally on the biblical view of God's righteousness. Is it possible to understand what God's love means for the oppressed without making *wrath* an essential ingredient of that love? What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist? Most theological treatments of God's love fail to place the proper emphasis on God's wrath, suggesting that love is completely self-giving without any demand for obedience (69).

By removing wrath as a symbol of the nature of God, [t]his interpretation weakens the central biblical truth about God's liberation of the oppressed from oppressors. A God without wrath does not plan to do too much liberating, for the two concepts belong together. A God minus wrath seems to be a God who is basically not against anything. All we have to do is behave nicely, and everything will work out all right (69-70).

[B]lack power . . . is the power of blacks to destroy their oppressors, here and now, by any means at their disposal. Unless God is participating in this holy activity, we must reject God's love [A]ccording to black theology, it is blasphemy to say that God loves white oppressors unless that love is interpreted as God's wrathful activity against them and everything that whiteness stands for in American society (70).

If God is a God of the oppressed of the land, as the revelation of Christ discloses, then wrath is an indispensable element for describing the scope and meaning of God's liberation of the oppressed. The wrath of God is the love of God in regard to the forces opposed to liberation of the oppressed. Love without righteousness is unacceptable to blacks: this view of God is a product of the minds of enslavers. By emphasizing the complete self-giving of God in Christ, without seeing also the content of righteousness, oppressors could then demand that the oppressed do likewise. If God freely enters into self-donation, then in order to be godlike we must give ourselves to our oppressors in like manner (71).

[T]hose who oppress others are in no position to define what love is Only those who live in an oppressed condition can know what their love-response ought to be to their oppressors. Their oppressors certainly cannot answer that question for them! . . . Black theology will accept only a love of God which participates in the destruction of the white oppressor [I]n a racist society, we must insist that God's love and God's righteousness are two ways of talking about the same reality. Righteousness means that God is addressing the black condition; love means that God is doing so in the interests of both blacks and whites (71-73).

This last point is crucial. The destruction of whiteness and its replacement with blackness is *in the interests of both blacks and whites*. Whites

must be saved from their oppression just as much as blacks must be. When Cone states that whites must become blacks because blackness “stands for all victims of oppression who realize that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness” (8), he is talking about the survival of the humanity not only of *blacks* but of *whites as well*. He thus has in mind both blacks *and* whites when he affirms that “Jesus is the Oppressed One whose work is that of liberating humanity from inhumanity” (117), since whites must also be liberated from their own inhumanity. Only by loving what is black and hating what is white can whites love themselves: “Love is a refusal to accept whiteness. To love is to make a decision against white racism. Because love means that God meets our needs, God’s love for white oppressors could only mean wrath—that is, a destruction of their whiteness and a creation of blackness” (74). Because this type of destruction is at the same time a “new creation,” it is an act of divine grace and mercy.

With regard to the notion that the suffering of the righteous is pleasing to God, Cone asserts categorically:

[B]lack theology cannot accept any view of God that even *indirectly* places divine approval on human suffering The suffering that Jesus accepted and which is promised to his disciples is not to be equated with the easy acceptance of human injustice inflicted by white oppressors. God cannot be the God of blacks *and* will their suffering. To be elected by God does not mean freely accepting the evils of oppressors. The suffering which is inseparable from the gospel is that style of existence that arises from a decision to *be* in spite of nonbeing. It is that type of suffering that is inseparable from freedom, the freedom that affirms black liberation despite the white powers of evil. It is suffering in the struggle for liberation (80-81).²

As Cone repeatedly mentioned when he spoke in public, his black liberation theology developed directly out of the intense anger and rage that consumed him when he considered aspects of white theology such as the two ideas just mentioned:

I felt deeply that the time had come to expose white theology for what it was: a racist, theological justification of the status quo. To understand the content and style of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, one must have empathy for the depth of my anger regarding the presence of racism in theology, with white theologians trying first to deny it and then to justify it. I could barely contain my rage whenever I read their books or found myself in their presence (xvi).

At the same time, however, Cone rightly argues that one cannot do black theology by simply abandoning white theology. My students often note that virtually all of the theologians whose work Cone refers to and cites in the chapters of his book that they read are white. This gives me the opportunity to explain why, throughout most of my courses, we read extensively the work of the well-known and acclaimed white theologians Cone mentions repeatedly, such as Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. You can’t defeat whiteness unless you learn to use the same weapons that the white world has been able to develop as a result of its privileged position of possessing a scientific knowledge and technological prowess that are far superior to anything found in the non-white world. As the American Indians quickly learned, bows and arrows are no match for muskets and razor-sharp steel swords. Because the only people in the world who make M134D Gatling Machine Guns are white, in a figurative and metaphorical sense, the only way black people can liberate themselves from white oppression is by obtaining M134D Gatling Machine Guns of their own from those whites and learning how to use

them more skillfully and effectively than the whites themselves can. Similarly, to overcome the white theology used to oppress and dominate those who are black, black theologians must become so well-versed and proficient in that white theology that they can use it against itself and thus turn it black, as God is black. Only in this way can black theology accomplish its goal of “the destruction of *everything* white, so that blacks can be liberated from alien gods. The God of black liberation will not be confused with a bloodthirsty white idol” (62).

Getting Saved

From Rev. Cone’s perspective, therefore, any who refuse to become black cannot rightly consider themselves true followers of Christ: “To be a disciple of the black Christ is to become black with him” (123). According to Cone, “There will be no peace in America until whites begin to hate their whiteness, asking from the depths of their being: ‘How can we become black?’” (vii). To that question, Cone responds:

“[B]ecoming black with God” means more than just saying “I am black,” if it involves that at all. The question “How can white persons become black?” is analogous to the Philippian jailer’s question to Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” The implication is that if we work hard enough at it, we can reach the goal. But the misunderstanding here is the failure to see that blackness or salvation (the two are synonymous) is the work of God, not a human work. It is not something we accomplish; it is a gift. That is why Paul and Silas said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”

To *believe* is to receive the gift and utterly to reorient one’s existence on the basis of the gift. The gift is so unlike what humans expect that when it is offered and accepted, we become completely new creatures. This is

what the Wholly Otherness of God means. God comes to us in God’s blackness, which is wholly unlike whiteness. To receive God’s revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the work of liberation (66).

If this is the case, then, true disciples of Christ can be saved only if they are willing to fall to their knees and cry out to God, “Oh Lord, in your infinite grace, mercy, kindness, and blackness, I beseech and implore you: Turn my heart black. Pitch black. Make it black with a dazzling blackness that shines so brightly and brilliantly that it darkens all who contemplate it, a blinding blackness that is immaculate, unblemished, spotless, and pure. And grant me the joy, honor, and privilege of serving as your instrument to blacken the lives of others, both near and far, just as your Son Jesus Christ and your servants such as James Cone have done.”

When my students read through and reflect on what Professor Cone wrote almost 50 years ago, what inevitably fascinates them the most is learning that God is black and that Jesus Christ was black as well. When I say that they “learn” this, I do not mean merely that they hear it for the first time. I mean that they realize that it is true. From their own experience, they also readily recognize as true Cone’s affirmation that you “have to know what it means to be a nonperson, a nothing, a person with no past, to know what black power is all about” (12), and grasp clearly what he means when he says that “black existence is existence in a hostile world without the protection of the law” (111)—because it is as evident to them as it is to me that the reality he described five decades ago remains essentially the same today and that the world we live in is as white as ever, no matter how hard it tries to disguise and camouflage itself. As I work with my students, what I long to see in them more than anything else is the same furious, raging love that I saw in Dr. Cone, a love that cannot and will not keep still or quiet

but instead burns incessantly deep inside their soul, as it does in mine.

In the wake of James Cone's passing, I join my voice to those of the many thousands eulogizing him and paying him tribute, thanking and praising God for his life and work. At the same time, however, I would hope that these many thousands would join their voices to mine so as to follow Dr. Cone in affirming unhesitatingly, unequivocally, and irresolutely that God is black, that Jesus Christ was and is black, and that each of us must also become and be black if we are to call ourselves his followers with truth, dignity, and defiance. Should we refuse to do so, I fear that we will hear James Cone's voice erupting from within and among us, exclaiming with all the passion that forever consumed him, "Take your dirty white eulogies and go heap them on someone else!" Professor Cone was never one to mince words. He stood for something—a beautiful black gospel that transformed the lives of multitudes, even though most Americans and even most Christians did not want to hear it or have anything to do with it. And I firmly believe that he would not hesitate to say, "If you dare to eulogize me and say sweet words and all sorts of niceties about me, you damn well better stand for what I stood for."

People who dedicate their life to struggling for a cause they consider right and just—a cause that they know is not theirs but God's—do not really care what other people think and say about them. It matters little to them whether they are loved or hated, admired or scorned, embraced or shunned, revered or reviled, and in the end eulogized or demonized. The only question that concerns them is whether you have made that cause your own. That is the question I constantly ask my students. That is the question I constantly ask myself. And I think it is the one question that Professor Cone would have for any of us who still care to speak of him and remember him.

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Image: [Mr. Fish, truthdig.com](http://Mr.Fish.truthdig.com)

Endnotes

¹ The title of Dr. Cone's work in Spanish is *Teología Negra de la Liberación* (Cuadernos Teológicos; Buenos Aires/México: Ediciones Carlos Lohse, 1972). Citations from his book in English are from the 2nd edition published in 1986 by Orbis Books (Maryknoll, NY), and are all from one of the two Prefaces he wrote in 1970 and 1986, from Chapter 1, or from one of the two chapters I assign to my students. Page references from this work have been placed in parentheses in the main text. I would like to thank Andrew Keck, Director of Library Services at Luther Seminary, and his staff for making the English original of Dr. Cone's book available to me.

² Together with Dr. Cone, who discusses the subject more fully in his 2013 book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis), I find totally unacceptable and even perverse the idea that suffering and death in and of themselves may be redemptive or atone for sins, as traditional Christian theology has taught for centuries. My repulsion for such an idea has led me to dedicate the past seven years of my life preparing my recently-released two-volume work *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought*, where I not only demonstrate that such an idea is entirely foreign to the Old and New Testaments and second-temple Jewish thinking, but also propose a radical rereading of the New Testament texts that ascribe salvific significance to Jesus' death, blood, and cross. More information may be found at <https://94t.mx>.