

Why James H. Cone's liberation theology matters more than ever

Guest post by [Daniel José Camacho](#)

June 9, 2015

*This piece originally appeared in Religion Dispatches, [here](#).*

Daniel's #JamesConeWasRight Sign

In 1975's [God of the Oppressed](#), theologian James H. Cone described how Christian responses to the 1967 Detroit riot revealed not only an insensitivity to black suffering but, as he argued, a larger theological bankruptcy on the part of white theologians.

As he saw it, many white theologians of that era were not genuinely concerned about all cases of violence. Worried about the threat of black revolutionaries, they did not see the structure of violence embedded in U.S. law and carried out by the police. Cone asked: "Why didn't we hear from the so-called nonviolent Christians when black people were violently enslaved, violently lynched, and violently ghettoized in the name of freedom and democracy?"

Ferguson, Baltimore, and Cleveland have shown us that not much has changed since the summer of 1967.

While Cone proceeded to reimagine theology and American Christianity, many Christians ignored him or rejected his work. The national spotlight brought upon Cone's black liberation theology in 2008 by the Jeremiah Wright-Obama controversy led to some sympathetic [hearings](#) but also sparked Christian accusations of "[Marxist victimology](#)."

Conservative Christians have consistently ignored or rejected Cone—and liberation theologies—as heretical, unbiblical, reverse-racist class-warfare. A Christianity Today [piece](#) on Michael Brown suggests that Cone's gospel is "for hatred, bitterness, [and] unforgiveness." Even when he is not vehemently repudiated, I believe that Cone is largely misunderstood.

One misunderstanding of Cone takes the form of an endorsement. I've often heard Cone and other liberationists' work reduced to the axiom, "all theology is contextual." The main thing about Cone is that he contextualizes Christianity to his black experience, this interpretation goes. While perhaps not untrue, this reductionistic interpretation loses sight of the bigger picture. One cannot properly understand Cone's claims about Black Power and God being black without understanding how Christianity got wrapped up with White Power in the first place—and made God white.

Cone's project is not simply about experience but is a direct assault on theology's entanglement with white racism. Cone was critiquing whiteness before virtually anyone in the theological academy realized what it was or the fact that it was a problem. To reduce liberation theory to "all theology is contextual" is a domesticating misreading that can amount to "to each their own."

Meanwhile, a serious reading of Cone doesn't stay at a neutral distance but confronts us with important decisions to be made about Christian theology as a whole.

In a recent [lecture](#) at Duke, Cone sketched the trajectory of his life's work. He recalled how he had to respond to white theologians' attitude that black people's lives, thought, and theology were insignificant. How was it that the black church went ignored so long? Cone rethought U.S. church history by seeing it in light of the crucified. The black church that the white theological builders had rejected was actually the hermeneutical cornerstone for properly understanding God and Jesus.

Cone's statement that "God is black" has always been grounded in Jesus' Jewishness and the biblical narrative which presents God as being in solidarity with the oppressed. As he has clarified on numerous occasions, it is a symbolic statement and not a statement of biology or literal skin color. At the same time Christianity has said "God is white"—in deeds if not in exact words—for the past 500 years. That some hear God's blackness as a zero-sum statement is a mistake.

In an [interview](#) this past January, Cone told HuffPo's Paul Rauschenbush: "God is red. God is brown. God is yellow. God is gay...I don't use blackness as a way to exclude anyone."

Liberation theology is for the liberation of all creation and all people but not in a way that erases concrete injustices, inequalities, and power differentials in society. Cone

says that oppressors “never recognize that the struggle of freedom is for all, including themselves.” Everyone needs to be set free. But all lives cannot truly matter unless black lives matter, or as Cone [puts it](#): “if the bottom matters then everyone matters.” Given our nation’s ongoing history, the burden of proof does not lie with black liberation theology; the indictment is upon U.S. Christianity and its traditional theologies which have rendered black life irrelevant.

Some have juked Cone’s theological critique by blaming the problem on ethics. In other words, “Orthodox” theology is faultless but has been at times simply misapplied or not faithfully lived out. These critics say we should be sympathetic to Cone’s passion but reject his answers as “[unbiblical and untenable](#).” But part of Cone’s brilliance was to avoid such an unhealthy disconnect between theology and ethics. If Cone is right (and I think he is), then we can’t keep using the master’s theological tools as they are to dismantle his church. If the theological well keeps yielding poison, we need to question that well and remember that God is the source of life.

In December 2014, I drew up and carried a sign with the words “James Cone Was Right” as I marched with members of the Union Theological Seminary community for the Millions March NYC. My sign became a hashtag and sparked a [larger conversation](#). I think #JamesConeWasRight is about much more than just one person, it’s about voices that have long been sidelined; this includes Womanist theologians (many of whom were students of Cone who rightly critiqued him on sexism), Latin American theologians, and Queer theologians for example. There’s a whole host of voices that many churches have refused to listen to even as the poverty, abuses, and bodies have piled up around us.

Documented police brutality and current unrests have prompted more conservative Christians to take stronger stands for social justice and against racism. Russell Moore, President of the Southern Baptists’ Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, [denounced](#) the non-indictment of Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner, saying: “...it’s high time we start listening to our African American brothers and sisters in this country when they tell us they are experiencing a problem.” And he recently explained that “[normal Christianity is not white](#).”

This leaves me asking, again: will Christians who have long dismissed Cone ever admit that he was right?

*Daniel José Camacho is currently a Masters of Divinity student at Duke Divinity School. Originally from Uniondale, NY, Daniel graduated from Calvin College in May 2013 with a B.A. in Philosophy. His writing has been published in Perspectives Journal of Reformed Thought and his commentary has appeared in New York Times. Daniel is pursuing ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*