

*Risks of Faith*, by James H. Cone and *Black Faith and Public Talk*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins

reviewed by [Lewis V. Baldwin](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

Black theology as an intellectual discipline and as systematic discourse is virtually synonymous with the name and academic career of James H. Cone. Currently the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at New York's Union Theological Seminary, Cone is considered by many to be the father of the contemporary black theology movement. His *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) triggered the birth of black theology as public discourse, initiated the first serious critique of Western theological traditions, and pioneered a reinterpretation of the Christian faith and the entire biblical revelation in light of the African-American struggle for freedom, justice and equality of opportunity. Cone's seminal book is discussed at some length in both his own recent work and the volume edited by Dwight N. Hopkins--essential reading for those who wish to understand contemporary black theology while placing it in its proper context.

Cone's book covers some of the major trends and/or developments in black theology from 1968 to 1998. He begins with his own struggle to understand and do theology as an African-American, and then focuses on the spiritual and intellectual sources of black theology, its indebtedness to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the ways in which it finds expression in the works of black womanist thinkers, and its relationship to the ethics of violence, revolution, reconciliation and community in a global context.

Most of *Risks of Faith* repeats what Cone has already said in his previous works. Aside from a few pages that call for an expansion of "the race critique" and "the ecological critique," there is nothing strikingly new here. Thus, the book's significance lies not in its originality and creativity, but in the skill and profundity with which Cone shares the essentials of his life's work in one volume.

Cone challenges theologians to link racism with "the ecological crisis" or "the degradation of the earth." He argues that Delores S. Williams, Emilie M. Townes and other womanist theologians have already begun this significant intellectual work. While Cone is right in pointing to the inseparable relationship between racial and

environmental injustice, especially since blacks are affected disproportionately by toxic waste landfills and other forms of environmental pollution, one wishes that he had devoted more than six pages to the subject. Cone's call for a radical critique of culture, focusing on links between race and ecology, offers suggestions as to how he might expand his own theological discourse.

*Black Faith and Public Talk*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins, associate professor of theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and written in celebration of the 30th anniversary of Cone's groundbreaking book, is a much more interesting and creative volume than is Cone's recent compilation. Hopkins draws on the critical insights of pastors and of scholars in various fields, black and white, male and female. All 20 contributors to his book agree that Black Theology and Black Power sparked an historic and unprecedented shift in African-American religious and theological thought. But while recognizing it as a seminal work of enduring value, these contributors move on to address larger questions that reflect the relationship between black faith and public talk.

The book begins by exploring the relevance and implications of Cone's ideas and of black theology in general for getting at issues of human identity, religious freedom, and the meaning of philosophy and theology as defined in the academic debate between modernists and postmodernists. It goes on to challenge churches or "prophetic faith communities" to deal with the issues of racism, theological education and black leadership, and to combine experience and doctrine, faith and praxis in the interest of human liberation.

A radical shift occurs in the next part, which focuses on the continuing need for black faith communities to develop a public discourse that addresses sexism and female subordination in the academy, church and society. The important role already played by womanist thinkers in shaping new forms of public discourse is acknowledged, but there is no serious critique of the dialogues between them and Cone and other African-American theologians. Here one senses the enduring struggle of various liberation theologies to remain true to their own particular contexts while engaging with other liberation theologies.

The book then focuses on the significance of Cone's work for the future of black theology. It recognizes that black theology has not reached its fullest potential during the past 30 years. The writers also call for more theological dialogue and networking between Christians, Muslims and secularists in the African-American

community. And they acknowledge that the church and the academy must find more common ground if they are to collectively fashion a public discourse that adequately combines spiritual, ethical and political concerns.

A powerful and provocative work, the Hopkins book also has obvious limitations. Its introduction should have been longer and more detailed, indicating more clearly what readers should expect of the volume. The title, which suggests a critical approach to Cone's book, is misleading. An afterword highlighting the central themes that hold the work together would have been helpful. Finally, the absence of an index somewhat limits the volume's usefulness. But despite these shortcomings, *Black Faith and Public Talk* is another important step in the maturation of black theology as an academic and ecclesiastical enterprise.