What I learned as a student of James Cone's

Cone was a profoundly biblical thinker. His Christology captured my imagination.

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I would surely not be the first to come to mind when thinking of theologians who have been deeply influenced by the late James Cone. But I was his teaching assistant at Union Theological Seminary in the late 1970s, and he served on my dissertation committee. There was thus a time when I was very much in his camp. Even though we parted ways after he pronounced “shock” upon reading my doctoral dissertation—more on this later—I was deeply stamped by my relationship to him.

One of the main things I learned from Cone is that I am not a “white” theologian. As Matthew Burdette has explained in a blog post:

> Whiteness, Cone observed, is the social attempt to escape human particularity, to be the universal people in general of a god in general, freed of the burden of being this or that particular people, and oppressing those particular people in the process. The inferior others are particular, *colored*; but white people? To be white is just to be a stock human, the default model. And when this belief meets Christianity, what we end up with is a white Jesus: a spiritualized Christ whose particular humanity is of no real value, a Christ who only seems to have the particular flesh of a first-century Jew but is in fact just the revelation of the same old god in general of no people in particular. In other words, a Docetic Christ, a god who only seemed to take on flesh.

When the pioneer of black theology was pressed, he would always say that in contemporary America “blackness” is not a pigmentation so much as an “ontological symbol” of oppression. That qualification notwithstanding, Cone acknowledged the

pressure he felt from Malcolm X's African nationalist critique of Christianity as "the white man's religion" and from the secular socialist Black Power advocates who regarded any religion as the opiate of the people. Together these forces pushed him to his seminal 1969 *Black Theology and Black Power* in defense of the biblical God and the gospel of Jesus.

The Cone I knew in the early period of his career—up through *God of the Oppressed* — was a profoundly biblical thinker. The Bible was axiomatic, the matrix of his thought. Although famed for insisting upon contextual exegesis, his *text* was the Bible as freed from the distortions of "white" religion and theology.

I remember how powerfully this lesson was driven home to me as I helped students read *God of the Oppressed.* My default hermeneutic was to read the Hebrew Bible as prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. My seminary education and historical criticism had loosened up this prophesy-and-fulfillment scheme, but I still read the Deuteronomic history of Israel as a series of catastrophes followed by renewals pointing forward to the catastrophe of the cross of Jesus and the renewal proclaimed by his resurrection. While this is not a categorical misreading, what's interesting is what it caused me to overlook.

I vividly remember Cone insisting that the Hebrew prophets were primarily concerned with poor people, and that the God of Israel—beginning with the election of the nomad patriarchs and matriarchs and their descendant Hebrew slaves in Egypt—was identified as the One who took sides and acted for their liberation. This insight caused me to re-read Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah (which in seminary I had so laboriously translated from the Hebrew). The scales fell from my eyes as I saw the truth about God's self-identification in the biblical texts to which Cone pointed. I learned from Cone in a powerful way how the question we pose to a text influences what we derive from the text, and even what we notice in the text.

Contextualism in theology can easily run amok and become a pretext for reading all sorts of silliness into the text or even subverting the text. The test of a good reading remains the question of whether it accounts for all the evidence. Ultimately, there is a dialectic of spirit and letter—between the contemporary context of the church under the Spirit's guidance and the written word of scripture bearing the good news of the incarnate Word. Sustaining this dialectic requires a more robust Trinitarianism than I realized at the time.

All the same, it was Cone's Christology that captured my imagination. Cone was notorious at the time for his bold assertion that Christ is black. He was answering the poignant question that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had asked during the rise of Nazism, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" Qualified in the way that Cone himself was willing to qualify it, I assented then, and I still do: Christ *is* black in the same way that the bread of the Supper *is* the Lord's body.

The progressive movement of the late 1970s moved from the plight of the black descendants of American slavery to discover all sorts of other forms of oppression. But in North America the boldness of Cone's claim that Christ is black remains the salient one. Other oppressions pale "white" in comparison to America's sin of origin. "Christ is black" represents the baseline of the American church's witness for greater justice in society.

During this time, however, I was discovering the theology of Karl Barth, who worried about undialectical identifications of Christ with culture—even with the culture of the oppressed. Barth's famous 1925 introduction to Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Religion* sounded the alarm against inscribing *Gott mit uns* on the belt buckle of any ideology. Barth insisted, against Feuerbach, that the subject and the predicate are not convertible in theology. "God is love" is a statement about the subject, God, namely, the free One who in Christ first all loved all who fall short before ever they loved God or one another. It cannot be converted to "love is God" without inverting its meaning into a dreamy abstraction easily domesticated and employed by oppressors to sanctify systems of malice and injustice. I developed these kinds of Barthian concerns, not so much about Cone in the particularity of his claim that Christ is black, but with a host of lesser imitators.

As I pondered the rightness of proclaiming Christ as the one who freely identifies in America with the particularly oppressed people of African descent, I came to realize that one source of Cone's understanding of contextual gospel proclamation was Martin Luther's Christology—and in particular, the communication in Christ of divine and human attributes. For Luther, it is the very glory of God to come down to the depths. God's transcendence is not some kind of metaphysical aloofness above the fray but rather, just as is told in God's speech at the burning bush, an ever-ready, infinite compassion to act for the poor people of the world. This glory of God is visible to the eyes of faith in the Christ who says, "I am your death, and my life is yours." This concrete exchange of predicates expresses the unique person of Christ who, though rich, became poor for the sake of those who are nothing in the world.

What I learned from Cone was not only an acute modernization of my own Lutheran theology, but also an account of Christ that is just as provocatively salutary for our times as Luther's was in his day.

But that discovery also leads to how I parted ways with Cone. In my doctoral dissertation on the Gospel of Mark, I wished (with Barth) to sustain the integrity of the subject term *Christ* in any predication, whether "Christ is our sin" or "Christ is black." I wanted to affirm that it is Christ who freely self-identifies in these ways. This affirmation requires giving an account of who Christ is, not only for us, but also for God—a move that leads to a more robust Trinitarianism. Following the narrative of Mark's Gospel, I saw that the only human being who rightly identified Christ as the Son of God was the executioner, and not as a human insight but as an act of divine apocalypse. The meaning of this predication of the crucified one as God's Son, spoken as the veil separating the Holy of Holies from sinful humanity is rent in two, is that Jesus has come not to be served but to serve and lay down his life as a ransom for many.

My affirmation of the atoning death of Christ as reconciling the sinner to the holy God is what shocked Cone. To him, that approach sounded all the perilous bells of Southern white evangelicalism, with a narcissistic, angry God demanding satisfaction for the trivial sins of personal life while sanctifying Jim Crow as the natural order of things in a supposedly biblical worldview.

I remember one graduate seminar in which Cone attacked the satisfaction theory of the Atonement in favor of a *Christus liberator* model, in which Christ was crucified by the imperial powers and his resurrection was an assertion of divine sovereignty over against them. A black student objected that in attacking the gospel news that Jesus died for our sins to be raised for our justification, Cone wasn't just landing a knock-out punch on white theology; he was also contradicting the deeply held faith of the black church. I don't remember Cone answering this objection very well, though his later reflections in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* might well be explored with this question in mind.

I stated at the outset that I learned from Cone that I am not a "white" theologian. I take this quite concretely. The binary between black and white is a product of an American history in tandem with European colonialism to which my ancestors and I came lately, and it has never revealed much about my journey. In fact, it is a binary that blinds those who use it to the rich plurality of American histories still being

woven into a tapestry of mutual destiny, as Martin Luther King Jr. might say.

When pressed about the crudity of the binary, Cone fiercely objected to the false universalism presumed by “white” thinkers. I came in time to hold that this conceit was codified in the Enlightenment by Kant’s “Tribunal of Reason,” as if, when Reason spoke, it was not the particular reasoning of the engineers of European colonialism with all their racist constructions of peoples of color as savage, primitive, uncivilized, fit for servitude, etc.

As I applied this lesson derived from Cone to myself, however, I came increasingly to recognize how profoundly I had been formed by my own family narrative. By immigrating, my grandfather, a Slovak peasant, avoided conscription in the Austro-Hungarian army where he would have served as cannon fodder in the imperialist contest known as World War I. He started life over only to see his three American-born sons return to Europe to defeat Nazism. I learned how I descended from a tradition of a persecuted minority (Lutherans in Catholic Slovakia) within a persecuted minority (Slovaks in the Hungarian Empire). This recovery of my people’s history became so important to me that I reverse immigrated for six years to teach in post-communist Slovakia. There I learned, up close and personal, the bitter lessons of European history. I thought to myself, tell a Hungarian and a Slovak that they are both “white;” tell the same to a Czech and an Austrian, or a Ukrainian and a Russian, or a Finn and a Swede. The list could be multiplied. Tribalism is not parsed by pigmentation. Perpetuating the black/white binary—even with the purpose of subverting it—too easily blinds us to the real histories that live just below the surface of consciousness.

By the time of my break from Cone, he was moving from theology toward historical studies like *The Spirituals and the Blues*. I complained that he was not providing his students with as good an education as he had received. He thought of me as returning to the fold of whiteness. These quarrels will pass away. In the light of glory, I yet hope to thank Cone personally for his impact on my life and thought.