

**RE-APPRAISING “WHO IS JESUS CHRIST FOR US TODAY” IN THE BOOK,
‘GOD OF THE OPPRESSED BY JAMES HAL CONE (PUBLISHED IN 1975)**

Ifeanyi J. Okeke

*Department of Philosophy/Religion and Cultural Studies
Federal University, Ndufu- Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State
chilurumogu@gmail.com*

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.20726.47684

Abstract

James Hal. The cone is a black American theologian. He was born on August 5th 1938. Best known for his advocacy of Black Theology and Black liberation Theology. A one-time pastor of former American President Barack Obama, JAMES H. CONE is currently the Charles Augustus Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. The blacks in asking who is Jesus for us today, according to Cone means that the story of Jesus' life and death is the answer to the human story of oppression and suffering. Believing that the black's liberation through the fundamental understanding and application of who is Jesus for us today, will liberate the blacks (worldwide) from oppression, subjugation and enslavement by their white counterparts. Alas, even after giving independence and the institution of several measures towards the equality of mankind no matter the colour, blacks and indeed the whole world is faced with different and various problems emanating even from the blacks themselves across the globe. Now the question is, has the realization or knowledge of who is Jesus Christ for us today provided the much-needed answer to black liberation?

Keywords: Black; Theology; Systematic Theology, Theological Union

Introduction: Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?

Cone here, argues that the knowledge of the divine truth about Jesus Christ requires an investigation of the connection between Jesus' words and deeds in first-century Palestine and the black's existence today as a people. According to Cone, the blacks ask who is Jesus Christ for us today because they believe that the story of Jesus' life and death is the

answer to the human story of oppression and suffering. For people who have experienced the extreme absurdities of life, e.g. pain and other contradictions of life, the encounter of Christ in the struggle for freedom becomes inevitable. James Cone sees Christ as having broken into the black's social existence, establishing the truth of freedom in their midst; an event which has placed the blacks in a new socio-political context of receiving the gift of faith for the creation of a new future for themselves and humanity.

James Cone thinks that the people of Macedonia A.M.E Church were aware of this new socio-political context when they sang that "with Jesus coming, Isaiah's prophecy was being fulfilled as "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low... All flesh shall see it together".

On who is Jesus Christ for us (blacks) today, Cone concludes that the dialectic between the social situation of the believer and scripture, and the tradition of the church is the place to begin the investigation of the question. For him, the three (social contexts, scripture and Tradition) operate together to enable the people of God to move actively and reflectively with Christ in the struggle for freedom.

Jesus is Who He was

James Cone sees no contradiction between the knowledge of Jesus Christ today and who he was yesterday (his historical appearance in Palestine). This is made possible by the dialectic of the scripture, tradition and social context. Jesus' past is the clue to His present activity in the sense that His past is the medium through which He is made accessible to us today. It stresses the biblical emphasis on Jesus' humanity in history not as fiction but as God's way of changing the course of history in a human person. Yahweh became a Jew in Jesus of Nazareth, thereby making possible the reconciliation of the world to Himself. Jesus' Jewishness was essential. He was not a universal man but a particular Jew who came to fulfil God's will to liberate the oppressed.

Jesus is Who He is

James Cone argues that our knowledge of Jesus who was raised from the dead is not limited to His life in Palestine. He is not merely a historical person who once identified with the poor people of His land but Jesus is also the Risen Lord. This faith in the resurrection means that Jesus in His liberating words and deeds for the poor was God's way of breaking into human history, redeeming humanity from injustice and violence, and bestowing power upon little ones in their struggle for freedom. Who Jesus is today according to Cone is found by relating Jesus' past with his present activity. He rejected Pannenberg's conclusion about the absence of Christ in our present, not only because of

the scripture's testimony about the promise and presence of Christ's Holy Spirit but also because of the witness of the black church tradition and contemporary testimonies of black people who proclaim Christ's present power to "make a way out of no way".

Jesus is Who He will be

James Hal Cone posits that Jesus Christ for us today is not limited to his past and present existence. But rather Jesus Christ is who He will be. He is not only crucified and Risen but also the Lord of the further who is coming again to fully consummate the liberation already happening intellectually- "it is the praxis of freedom in the oppressed community". To hope in Jesus according to Cone is to see the vision of his coming presence, and thus one is required by hope itself to live as if the vision is already realized in the present.

Jesus becomes the Expected one who is coming to liberate the oppressed from slavery.

Jesus is Black

It is therefore only with the context of Jesus' past, present and future as aspects of his person which related to scripture, tradition and contemporary social existence that we are required to affirm the blackness of Jesus Christ. Jesus' blackness is derived primarily from his past identity, his present activity, and his future coming, as they are related to each other. His blackness is thus not the psychological disposition of Black people but from a faithful examination of scripture, tradition and social existence. He asserts that Jesus was a Jew; and argues further that He is black because he was a Jew considering his mission on earth- the liberation of the downtrodden. James Hal Cone thinks that Christ's blackness is both literal and symbolic. His blackness is literal in the sense that he truly becomes one with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of the black's struggle, the story of their pain, and the rhythm of their bodies.

On the other hand, to say that Christ is black according to Cone means that black people are God's poor people whom Christ has come to liberate.

Christ is black, therefore not because of some cultural need of the black people, but because and only because Christ enters into our world where the poor, the despised and the black is, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants.

He concludes by saying that God comes, and continues to come to those who are poor and helpless, to set them free. God has not over, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in the struggle.

The Meaning of Liberation

James Cone sees human liberation as God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ, who in humanity and divinity is the point of departure for a black theologian's analysis of the meaning of liberation. For Cone, therefore, liberation is not a human possession, but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression. It is the project of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation.

While buttressing his point, Cone referred to the Markan account of Jesus' cry of dereliction "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me" (Mk 15:34) which shows the depth of Jesus' agony and the pain of being abandoned by his father. But because he was one with divinity and humanity, the pain of the cross was God's suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression. Liberation fills the vacuum i.e. the need to empower black leaders and ethnic leaders within their movement which necessitates that white leaders understand the experiences of injustices that already exist in the consciousness of the oppressed. Thus, Black people can fight for freedom and justice because the one who is their future is also the ground of their liberation struggle.

Liberation as Freedom to be in relation to God

James Hal Cone sees fellowship with God as the beginning and the end of human liberation. The liberated person according to him is the one who encounters God in faith, that is, the conviction and trust that one's true humanity is actualized in God. The black does this through prayer, which is being able to communicate with God and to know that He cares for them and that human liberation is based on divine revelation and community worship which is an important expression of divine-human fellowship.

Liberation as Freedom of Self and the Community of the Oppressed

For Cone, Liberation is also the knowledge of self, which is only attainable in the context of an oppressed community in the struggle for freedom. Thus, the authentic identity of Christians with the poor is found in the claim that the Christ-encounter lays upon their life-style, a claim that connects the word "Christian" with the liberation of the poor. Christians fight not only for humanity in general but for themselves and out of their love for concrete human beings. Against this backdrop therefore, only those whose existence is defined by the liberation of people from social, political and economic bondage can understand the dialectic of oppression and freedom in the practice of liberation and should

be referred to as the oppressed. In all, only those who are oppressed can feel that the true liberation of self is found in the oppressed community's struggle for freedom.

Liberation as the Project of Freedom in History

Here, Cone posits that there is no true liberation independent of the struggle for freedom in history. He sees the closeness of liberation being visible whenever the emancipation of people from the chains of slavery takes place in history e.g. the one that took place in Egypt. With liberation comes transformation, and the commitment to revolutionary action against injustice, slavery and oppression. For Cone, any liberation that fails to take seriously a people's freedom in history is not biblical and is thus unrelated to the one who has called the blacks into being.

Liberation as the Project of Freedom in Hope

Cone sees some transcendent element in the definition of liberation which affirms that the realm of freedom is always more than the fragments of a free life which we may accomplish in history. There is thus in liberation, the "not yet" vision of a new heaven and new earth. The oppressed have a future not made with human hands, but grounded in the liberating promises of God. This futuristic aspect of liberation is not simply otherworldly, but is the divine future that breaks into their social existence bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering and enabling black people to know that the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God's future.

In summary, Cone argues that the God of Jesus is the liberator of the oppressed from oppression, not minding the continuous existence of black suffering which offers a serious challenge to the biblical and black faith, which answer he found in Jesus Christ whose is God's decisive word of liberation in blacks experience, that has made it possible to struggle for freedom because blacks know that God is struggling too.

Cone here helps one to see God as the liberator of the oppressed and that over time the white church became the oppressor. The 'black Jesus' was, is, and will be liberating not only the oppressed but also the oppressor as the oppressed live into the eschatological vision of freedom from all humanity.

Cone's Challenges

James Hal Cone by this contribution in his book has made an appreciable and commendable effort in his attempt to seek freedom for the persecuted and discriminated blacks in America and indeed elsewhere. This he has done through his interpretation of

God's purpose for the oppressed through Jesus Christ. Blacks in America and other parts of Europe have been discriminated against by their white counterparts in most facets of their lives. Freedom for the oppressed as posited by Cone can be achieved through 'black/liberation theology'.

American Theology and Western European Theology have left out the major theme of "liberation of the oppressed" from the Gospel. Cone has therefore made a compelling case for the contextual and historical consciousness of the theologians that lead to their theological blindness. A black theology helps us to see what was missed and gives us a clearer picture of the God of the oppressed. The strength of Cone's black theology as referenced here is that it opens the black peoples' eyes to see their privileged status quo, and comfortable lifestyle is never neutral, as blacks may seem to think, but linked to social, political and economic oppressive systems. This understandably can transform new Christ-like ethics that are aligned with the project of God in the liberation of the oppressed. Cone's views and positions here as a Christocentric perspective give the much-needed vision of Christ as a liberator and in many cases over and against "classical" tradition.

James Ellis, 111 (2011:5), the Chaplain of Discipleship at Hope College in Holland, MI, posits that as a brilliant scholar and theologian, James Hal Cone without doubt, has articulated 'black theology' in a way that has offered an invaluable, unique perspective of empowerment to the black Christians. Nevertheless, all of Christendom has benefited from his work. Cone's critical analyses of white Christianity in America and its explicit, systematic oppression of blacks and other ethnic/racial minorities have played an essential role in contributing to the expansion of other self-affirming Christian theologies such as Latina women("mejerista"), black women("womanist"), and feminist liberation. Cone has positively asserted that "To create an antiracist theology, white theologians must engage the histories, cultures and theologies of people of colour. It is not enough to condemn racism. The voices of people of colour must be found in your theology". This indeed is a valid concern and deserves to be heard.

Here, Cone has demonstrated that his work speaks truth to power on issues that should be of concern to all Christians. Along with colleagues like Dwight N. Hopkins (1989:15; 1999:25) and others, Cone has put legitimate scholarly flesh on arguments against exclusivist notions that Christianity is best articulated by those in power. Cone writes, "Christ's blackness is both literal and symbolic...The least in America are literally and symbolically present in black people". Not so according to Psalmist who reminds us, all were born in sin, shaped in iniquity. No matter our social position, Christ died for us insomuch as all. We are one in Christ.

However, it must be pointed out that James Cone went to the extreme in this campaign. His position in this book suggests nothing short of a revolution, which will lead to disorder, loss of lives and property, and a general breakdown of law and order in society. The increased white aggression, attacks on the black race, and unwarranted shooting of the blacks by their white counterparts even to date, is partly attributable to the revolutionary teachings of people like James Cone. Even the bombing of the World Trade Centre in America by Osama bin Ladin and his group of terrorists/freedom fighters in the year 2001 and all other terrorist attacks/freedom fighters in America and other parts of the world including Nigeria can easily pass or adjudged to have been influenced by teachings such as Cone.

According to Cone, “The grounding of Christian ethics in the oppressed community means that the oppressor cannot decide what Christian behaviour is”. This indeed presupposes righteousness on the oppressed, which begs questions about who decides the qualifications for those descriptors-“oppressed” and “oppressor”, his intentional disregard for “classic” theological philosophical categories as a weakness notwithstanding. It is obvious that blacks are no more pious, righteous, or spiritual than anyone else, nor are they a monolithic group devoid of deep diversity of opinion and experience. The blacks sin. They oppress. They exploit. When given the opportunity just like anyone else, the blacks will selfishly embrace oppression. Theology like this is problematic as it promotes cultural elitism in some way as Cone sees his way as the only way to salvation for white America, which flies in the face of scripture. For a good number of people, Cone’s black theology could deepen the divide between whites and blacks. His vision of reconciliation and mutuality, ironically in praxis, seems to be oppressive and un-liberating. Somewhere in finding the will of God for the oppressed, it seems Cone missed a deep response of love to anyone outside the community for the oppressed.

Further, it can be safely posited that most of America’s recent positions and adaptations of principles like the legalization of same-sex marriage, the ordination of gay priests, cloning of human beings, males carrying babies in the womb and their being delivered of the babies in due season are the offshoots of Cone’s liberation theology and such other similar teachings. Has the house divided against itself? This negates some of the fundamental teachings of Christ which centred on the cardinal principle of; following peace with all men, respect for constituted authority, Metanoia (change of mind or spiritual awakening) and value for life.

It is due to James Cone’s supposedly extremist posture of his liberation theology, that people have likened and indeed associated liberation theology to/with the Marxist theory of revolution. Against this backdrop also, it can be safely argued as it is being argued here, that liberation theology might be a “theology” but certainly not Christian theology

because it advocates for the overthrow of legitimate governments. This type of theology may have influenced revolutionary movements across Europe and indeed Africa. The Boko Haram insurgency or terrorists in Nigeria are daily singing the message of liberation, the Lord's Resistance Army of Uganda, the current agitation and call for the independent state of Palestine, Western Sahara, Catalonia, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in South East Nigeria are some few of movements apparently may have been motivated by this type of theology no doubt.

No wonder Adam Anderson (2018:2) wrote quite recently on the book: "very thankful to have read this book. Forces the reader to confront institutional bias and how it coddles the designer at the expense of the oppressed. This should not cause one to despair, but focus on how to reshape his or her lens to engage their culture". Awhayouseh (2021:8) writes that Cone by his views as enunciated above reinforces the belief that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed and is fighting alongside them for their full humanity. Desmond Tutu (1980:5) seems to echo similar concern for Cone's black theology in this vein: "I worry, however, about some of Cone's exclusiveness-that, for instance, only the oppressed can form a genuine Christian koinonia".

Further, Cone's argument that Christ is black because He entered into the world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants is 'telling a half truth'. It is obvious the facts that political and economic bondages are not the only problems in the world of America or any other black nation for that matter. Certainly, there were/are very many whites who suffered and are still suffering one form of problem or the other e.g. sickness (ill-health) or incurable diseases etc. Christ came for them as well to liberate them. If this is the case, then Christ can as well be white.

He (Christ) came to liberate all who are oppressed not only blacks but all including whites.

Cone's interpretation of liberation theology without mentioning liberation from sickness, demonic attack, witches and wizards was grave/ great neglect. This is because, since he centred his write-up on the liberation of blacks in America, he neglected one of the most threatening diseases of black men- the belief in the menace of witches, wizards and demonic attacks. Even Christ recognized this when he cast out demons from the Lunatic and later sent them into the swine that perished in the sea (Mark 5:1-13). No doubt black Americans needed social and political emancipation, but they needed spiritual emancipation in the same dimension.

In recent years too, some scholars have challenged Cone's claim. His ostensible aggression towards white America simply doesn't work for many Christians, black or white. In his book "The black church in America: African American Christian Spirituality" Michael Battle (2006:112-113) compares Cone's outlook on 'black theology' with that of Desmond Tutu (1980:6). Battle (2006:113) asserts that, for him, Cone "has a weak ecclesiology because in many ways his necessary black church continues to promulgate profane structures of racism. The battle goes on to say: "Tutu cannot abide by Cone's exclusivist rhetoric in which God's image is black or white... The difference between Tutu's and Cone's theological approaches is that for Cone, blackness simultaneously symbolizes oppression and liberation in the black church, whereas for Tutu black identity represents the imago Dei in which God redeems white identity.

If theology is faith-seeking understanding, then we must continue to critique not only our theological premises but also how we communicate them. Being proactive, with a strong sense of Christian love affirmed through the imago Dei, we are fully capable of developing theologies that affirm the experiences of racial and socioeconomic minorities that do not alienate Christians from other backgrounds. Black Christians are not a monolithic group that embraces the same so-called 'black' ideologies. Much like the rest of America and indeed the world over, blacks are a cosmopolitan mix of people with different traditions, interests, and tolerances. According to George Yancey, "with the mutual responsibility model, we look to the Christian faith to overcome the effects of human depravity in race relations. We work to develop a racial relationship based on our reconciliation with God". Christianity offers hope to all people and in our theological pursuit, we must seek to never sway from that foundation of vulnerability and sacrificial love, indeed because Christ is risen.

William H. Becker (1977:6) posits that there are three major identifiable tensions or ambiguities in Cone's black theology as presented in the above discussion. They are a rhetorical, theological and spiritual tension. Is Cone's black theology addressed primarily to blacks or whites? Recognizing that "theology is not a universal language; it is interested in language and thus is always a reflection of goals and aspiration of a particular people in a definite social setting." Thus, Cone's black theological answers cannot apply to whites anyway, since "blacks and whites" do not share the same life. White theologians are largely boxed within their cultural history, their theologies are no more than "a bourgeois exercise in intellectual masturbation". If black theology is for blacks, why should it be particularly determined concerning white theology?

Finally, some years after the blacks have been liberated from political, social and economic oppression, and the church has not yet come to an agreement on equal rights for women with their male counterparts has only provided a one-sided liberation which is not

holistic. If people must be liberated, all must be liberated in every circumstance. The ordination of women even in a church that is preaching liberation has been met with mixed feelings. How can a church preach liberation without liberating its members? The liberation was suspected from the beginning.

Conclusion

In his address to the Pan – African conference in London, England in 1903, W.E.B. DuBois lamented that “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line”. Indeed the problem of the colour line has continued into the twenty-first Century. Cone’s black theology/ position represents the inherent truth in Dubois's prophetic statement. What upsets Cone is “the appalling silence of white theologians on racism in the united states and the modern world. Cone seeks to hold white Christians and theologians accountable for the many atrocities committed against blacks under the guise of biblical orthodoxy. This indeed cannot be far from the truth.

Then having been liberated from the colonial hegemony and white domination, are the blacks better off today? Hunger, poverty, heavy debt burden, food crises, kidnapping and banditry perpetrated by the blacks have assumed a wilder dimension. Whence is the gain(s) of liberation theology and Jesus Christ for the blacks today?

References

- Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Muyerita (1996). *A Theology for the twenty-first Century*. Maryknoll, NY.
- Adam Anderson (2018). *God of the Oppressed and the Hermeneutic Circle*; www.awra.me.uk
- Anderson, V. (1995). *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Continuum.
- Ankur Barua (n.d). *The God of the Oppressed and the Politics of Resistance: Black and Dalit Theologies of Liberation*. Core.ac.uk
- Antonio, E. (2007). *Black Theology*. In *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Second Ed, Ed. C. Rowland. Cambridge University Press.
- Anthony B. Bradley (2010). *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* Wheaton, IL: Crossway,
- Copeland, M.S. (2004). *Black Political Theologies*. In *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Eds. P. Scott and W.T. Cavanaugh. Oxford Blackwell.
- Cullmann, O. (1952). *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* Translated by Floyd V. Filson London: SCM.
- Desmond Tutu (1980). Review of James H. Cone’s *God of the Oppressed*; in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 31.
- Dwight N. Hopkins (1989). *Black Theology USA and South Africa*; Wipf and Stock Publishers, USA.
- Dwight N. Hopkins (1999). *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Books, USA.

- Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (2001). *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- George Yancey (2006). *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity,
- Gustavo Gutierrez (1988). *A Theology Of Liberation: History, Politics, And Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- J. Philip Wogaman (Ed) (1996). *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Source Book* (Louisville, K.Y. West Minster John Knox Press.
- James H. Cone (1999). *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998*. Boston: Beacon Press,
- James H. Cone (2004). "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy", *Black Theology. An International Journal*, Vol.2, issue 2.
- James Hal Cone (1975). *God of the Oppressed*. New York, Seabury Press.
- James, Ellis 111(2011). "A Critique of Cone's Black Liberation Theology" *Day 1 Journals Hope College, Holland; Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*.
- Michael Battle (2006). *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*. Malden, M.A: Blackwell Publishing.
- Michael Powell (2008). "A Fiery Theology under Fire." *The New York Times*
- Thabitti M. Anyabwile (2007). *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Academic,
- W.E.B DuBois (2005). *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics.
- William H. Becker (1977). Book Review: *God of the Oppressed*, by James H. Cone.