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Review of James H. Cone's, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975).

by Marguerite Spencer

James H. Cone communicates his conviction that the God of biblical faith is the Liberator of those in bondage in *God of the Oppressed* (ix). He writes to reveal the origin and existential foundation of his commitment to the Christian faith and to develop the social nature of black theology (xix). Cone enriches the two theological sources of his earlier works – experience and the Bible – with the history and culture of oppressed peoples as expressed in sermon, prayer, song, and story, as well as in tradition (9).

There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience. Truth in this sense is black truth, a truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people. This means that there can be no black theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point (18).

Critics may call black theology ideological, but Cone replies that ideology is interpreting Scripture from an axiological perspective that contradicts the divine will to liberate the poor and the downtrodden – which he finds occurring in white theology (84). The question is not whether social interest determines theology, but rather *whose* social interest – the oppressed or the oppressors (87)? The black struggle for liberation, argues Cone, involves a total break with the white past, “the overturning of relationships, the transformation of life and then a reconstruction (179).”

In this work, Cone is responding to white theologians who were disturbed by the passion, anger, and militancy of black theology. They felt he was overly influenced by Malcolm X and Black Power, rather than by the integrationist philosophy of King and other advocates of the beloved community (xiv). However, he does not back down on his rebellious position. “The problem of violence,” Cone claims, “is not the problem of a few black revolutionaries but the problem of a whole social structure which outwardly appears to be ordered and respectable but inwardly is ‘ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions’-- racism and hatred (200).” As Cone argues, “the coming of the Kingdom means “a revolutionary usurpation of the present value system (205).” A black ethic of liberation asks us to accept the risk of faith and be a liberator of Christ (191).

Cone argues that whites misunderstand violence. They are not really concerned about violence in all cases but only when they are the victims. White theologians

use Jesus' so-called "nonviolent" attitude in the Gospels as primary evidence that the oppressed ought to be nonviolent today. Yet we do not hear from "nonviolent" Christians when blacks are *violently* enslaved, lynched and ghettoized (179-180), Cone observes. In reality, the problem of violence is not just a question for the oppressed but *primarily* a question for the oppressors (200).

Cone's Christology focuses on the revolutionary Black Christ who preached the good news to the poor and proclaimed release to the captives (xv-xvi). Because this God of Jesus Christ is the God of the Exodus, theologians must take politics and economics into account (57). As the subject of black theology, Jesus reveals himself in the struggles of all oppressed people (31). Cone is critical of theories of atonement in which Jesus is the passive surrogate. Such theories do not empower the oppressed to resist oppression but rather encourage them to accept it. Liberation, he writes, is none other than the overthrow of everything that is against the fulfillment of the humanity of the oppressed.

The gospel of liberation is *bad news* to all oppressors; it is death to their riches and power (71). For this reason, Cone argues, white theologians have a negative reaction to the Black Christ who takes on blackness to redeem it. Their whiteness blinds them to the truth of the biblical story and leads them to maintain the status quo (123). Many white scholars, he argues, are skeptical of the historical veracity of practically everything about Jesus but his lack of political involvement. How can they be sure, asks Cone, whether Jesus was violent or not? How can they adhere to the God of Jesus as Yahweh and shy away from his political involvement for the oppressed? Cone believes white theologians can because they are committed to and involved in the social structures of oppression--the very structures that Jesus despised (205).

Unfortunately, Cone notes, an ethics of the status quo has permeated the Christian tradition from Aquinas' justification of slavery, to Martin Luther's condemnation of the Peasants' Revolt, to the invisibility of racism in the works of Reinhold Niebuhr. Theologians of the Christian Church have identified Christian ethics with the cultural values of the white oppressors rather than the biblical theme of God's liberation of the oppressed. Even Paul Ramsey, Cone argues, is more concerned with informing blacks about the proper respect for law and order, than with unmasking the systemic order of white injustice (179-184). Cone insists that the church must ground its ethics in the oppressed community; the oppressor can not decide what Christian behavior entails (191).

Cone challenges the validity of Jesus' political neutrality. Many white scholars, he argues, are skeptical about the historical validity of practically everything but his political involvement. They are sure he preached love and that his gospel was spiritual or eschatological not politically revolutionary. How can they be sure, asks Cone, whether Jesus was violent or not? After all, Cleage has attempted to show that Jesus was a revolutionary leader and a zealot (36). Cone

believes it is because white theologians are committed to and involved in the social structures of oppression – the very structures that Jesus despised. Jesus was pointing to the new age that was breaking into the present, disrupting the order of injustice (205).

Either we side with oppressed blacks and other unwanted minorities as they try to redefine the meaning of existence in a dehumanized society, or we take a stand with the President or whoever is defending the white establishment for General Motors and U.S. Steel. There is no possibility of neutrality, the moral luxury of being on neither side. Neither the powers that be nor their victims will allow that (201)!

Despite one's participation in it, the world is unjust, and one must be committed to its liberation. People who want to join in these efforts, Cone insists, need only relinquish their commitment to the structures of injustice (201-02).

As with his earlier works, however, Cone rejects the white view of reconciliation (207). From God's side, reconciliation between blacks and whites means that God is unquestionably on the side of the oppressed blacks struggle for justice. On the human side, he continues, reconciliation means that blacks must struggle against all who try to make them slaves and participate in God's revolutionary activity by changing oppressive political, economic, and social structures. To be reconciled with whites means to *fight* against their power to enslave; it means reducing masters to the human level and making them accountable to black liberation. Reconciliation means *death*, and only those who are prepared to die in the struggle for freedom will experience new life (218). Although not ruling out the rare possibility of conversion among white oppressors involving death to their whiteness, Cone is insistent that mutual dialogue and integration has no place in Black theology. Liberation must be expressed in uncompromising language and actions, for only then can the conditions be created for reconciliation (221-23).

Cone looks upon the Kingdom of God as the irruption of a new age in which God acts in history to liberate the oppressed. Through Christ the poor and helpless are offered freedom to rebel against injustices that make them less than human (36). The new age of the Kingdom of God also disrupts injustices, bringing on a revolutionary usurpation of the present value system and the overthrow of whiteness (205). Cone writes:

God's kingdom is not simply a heavenly reality; it is an earthly reality as well. Human beings were not created to work in somebody else's fields, to pick somebody else's cotton and to live in ghettos among rats and filth. They were created for liberation – for fellowship with God and the projecting of self into the future, grounded in historical possibilities (144).

In this Kingdom, rebellion and revolution meet with reconciliation.

But since black liberation is central to Cone's analysis of the gospel, he cannot accept a view of reconciliation based on white values. Cone insists, we must see reconciliation in the social context of black liberation. Liberation and

reconciliation are linked (207).

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. Is Cone's project in black theology a failure, as one black theologian claimed at the AAR?
2. People who want to join in these efforts, Cone insists, need only relinquish their commitment to the structures of injustice. What does that relinquishment look like? Do whites have to rebel and revolt against whiteness, just as Malcolm X and Cone do?
3. What models of "reconciliation" exist within the Christian tradition? Are they white?