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**Review of James H. Cone's, *Risks of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
"White Theology Revisited," 1998, pp. 130-37.**

by Marguerite Spencer

In his 1998 essay, "White Theology Revisited," James Cone criticizes both white and black theologians, the former for being silent about white supremacy and the latter for being timid in their use of race criticism. When asked if he is still as angry as when he began his public career, Cone states that one need only drive into the central cities or look at the statistical disparities between black and whites to learn his answer. Although the black middle class has made considerable economic progress, the black underclass is worse off than they were in the late 60s (130).

Unlike other secular disciplines, Cone notes, theology remains virtually mute on racism. Progressive white theologians from Reinhold Neibuhr (who spoke about the "Negro's cultural backwardness" as late as 1965) to the present, with few exceptions, fail to address the "radical contradiction that racism creates for Christian theology (130)." Not only do they ignore the historical link between Christianity and slavery, colonialism, segregation, and lynching, white theologians discount the identification of European values with Christian beliefs. Yet, white images and ideas dominate both Christian religion and theology, reinforcing the "moral right" of whites to dominate over nonwhites (131). Although white theologians may not be as blatant as Neibuhr, they are no less racist, argues Cone, because they fail to engage racism in their theological work (132). Without remembering past white crimes, without reflecting on theodicy from this perspective, without making racism the subject of sustained analysis rather than a footnote, without guiding national discourse on race, they will never discover how deep the cancer of racism is embedded in society and in the discipline itself. Notably, white theologians, who had ignored black theology, embraced Latin American liberation theology, focusing on class to minimize and even dismiss the black focus on race (133).

Cone admits, however, the white theology's amnesia about racism is partly due to the failure of black theologians to maintain a radical race critique of Christian theology (132). Race criticism is necessary for the integrity of Christian theology, Cone argues, just as are class Jewish, feminist, and gay and lesbian critiques (131). Although they shocked white theologians initially, Cone argues that black theologians failed to "shake the racist foundation of modern white theology

(134).” Cone attributes this to their uncritical identification with the dominant Christian and integrationist tradition in African-American history – their use of Spirituals more than the blues and Martin Luther King, Jr., more than Malcolm X, who Cone argues is the most formidable race critic in the United States, “the great master of suspicion (135).” Malcolm effectively contended that Christianity was a “white man’s religion” and a form of white nationalism. Although Cone acknowledges the contributions of the second generation of womanist of black male theologians,¹ he believes that blacks need to wrestle with Malcolm a bit longer, even while embracing King, using them as a double-edged sword “to slay the dragon of theological racism (135).” Malcolm alone isolates blacks and Martin alone makes it too easy for whites to ask for reconciliation without justice.

Cone argues that racial healing will not occur without dialogue about the white supremacy of the academy, churches and society. Silence is betrayal and racism’s best friend. Cone is clear that white theologians who do not oppose racism publicly must be exposed as the “enemy of justice (136).” Black theologians too, must replace theological deference to whites with courage or be condemned as “participants in the betrayal of [their] own people (137).”

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. What progress have white theologians made breaking their silence, if any?
I have ordered the book *Interrupting White Privilege*, which might help answer this question.
2. Is Christianity a white man’s religion and a form of white nationalism?

“Whose Earth is it, Anyway,” 1998. pp. 138-145.

In his 1998 essay, “Whose Earth is it, Anyway” James Cone argues that people who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological, and those who struggle against this degradation but do not fight against white supremacy are racists or “green bigots” (138). Cone calls for solidarity between both groups to fight the mechanistic and instrumental logic of white supremacy that is behind, not only the endangerment of animal and plant life, but the poisoning of blacks in our nation’s cities (139).

Cone briefly outlines the development of the environmental justice movement. African-American church leadership began to fight discrimination in the 80s, after

¹ Womanist theologians use writings of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and others to break the monopoly of black male theological discourse, challenging black male theologians to incorporate gender, class, and sexuality critiques along with the themes of survival and quality of life. Some second-generation black theologians think the focus on blackness is too limiting while others call for more commitment to it. Still others are laying exegetical and historical foundations for a critical rereading of Scripture (135).

an infamous protest of the placement of a PCB landfill in the black community in Warren County North Carolina (139). In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission of Racial Justice issued a groundbreaking report that found race to be the best predictor of the location of hazardous waste facilities in the U.S. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit convened in Washington, D.C., in October of 1991, bringing together more than three hundred environmental groups of color to discuss environmental justice. Linking civil rights and economic justice, the National Council of Churches sponsored a two-day summit in December 1993 that addressed toxic and hazardous wastes, lead poisoning, landfills and incinerators, as well as global dumping issues. These initiatives made it clear that racism and poverty are ecological issues.

Womanist theologians have already begun the theological task of addressing environmental racism. Delores Williams explores the parallel between defilement of women's bodies and the exploitation of nature. Emilie Townes describes the placement of toxic waste sites as contemporary lynchings (139). Cone calls on white theologians to undertake an equally thoroughly radical critique of the culture most responsible for the ecological crisis. Although white ethicists and theologians sometimes acknowledge the disproportionate impact of hazardous waste on blacks in a politically correct way, they do not treat people of color seriously, Cone argues, as if they have something essential to contribute. He harbors a deep suspicion about the theological and cultural values of white culture and religion, since "for five centuries whites have acted as if they owned the world's resources and have forced people of color to accept their scientific and ethical values (143)." In addition to making a critical assessment of how we got where we are should be, theologians' should participate in a mutual dialogue with communities of color (144), in a sustained way similar to the engagement of anti-Semitism, class, and patriarchy. Cone cites Elie Wiesel in saying that, "we must always take sides." When whites realize that a fight against racism is a fight for humanity, a coalition will emerge that can struggle to save the earth (145).

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. Has the Catholic Church spoken out against environmental racism? Have other predominantly white church communities?
2. How does one go about doing a radical critique of how white supremacy has led to ecological degradation?