God and Modern Thought
James Cone

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Exodus 22: 21–27 *Excerpt from* God of the Oppressed

I wonder if you have any particularly clear memories of waiting for a parent who was late coming home from work? For most of us these will have only been moments of annoyance at late dinners or moments of hurt feelings due to promises not kept. In his most recent book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone shares his memories of waiting for his father on days he came home late from work. For Cone, these are memories of deep fear – sitting by the window, longing to see the headlights of his daddy's pickup truck, hoping that he was alive and not hanging dead from a tree somewhere in the darkness.

James Cone grew up in the American state of Arkansas, where he was born in 1938. His childhood was infused with the bitter and all-encompassing realities of racial inequality and oppression, including the terror of routine beatings, rapes and murders perpetrated by whites against blacks without fear of prosecution. On those days when he waited by the window, his mother would assure him that God would take care of his father, but young James had his doubts. Where was God in all the suffering and death he had already witnessed, even as a young child?

Cone went on to beat the odds stacked against him and made his way to university, where he would choose to write his first essay on the question 'Why do people suffer?'. He went on to postgraduate study of theology, earning his doctorate and becoming a lecturer. Lingering questions about suffering remained, and he found that the more deeply he believed in God, the more difficult it became to sustain his faith.

These internal, personal questions were given new purchase when they were met with the questions of his students. As he narrated in the excerpt we heard earlier from his book, *God of the Oppressed*, Cone entered classrooms as a young lecturer armed with extensive knowledge of the great thinkers of the Christian West, and he found their theology falling flat before his black students both in relation to the depths of their experiences of suffering and in relation to the depths of their personal experiences of Jesus Christ. He began to realize that it would not do to understand and expound upon theology as a set of abstractions.

James Cone was at the leading edge of a new moment in Christian theology, a moment in which he and soon other black theologians – Catholic theologians in Latin America, and post-holocaust theologians in Germany – were taking a long, hard, painful look at suffering in their contexts – the suffering of black people, of those in poverty, and of Jews – and asking where, in God's name, had Christianity been amidst all this suffering.

And what they all converged upon in this 'moment' was the forgotten centrality of liberation in Christianity – they insisted that God identifies with and acts in liberating solidarity amongst those who are oppressed, and that Christianity was tragically failing through its complicity in oppression. Liberation theology, in its many forms, was born.

James Cone was the founding theologian of black liberation. In 1968, three years after earning his PhD and two months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., he began to write the first book of the movement, *Black Theology and Black Power*. Of his many subsequent books, the best known are *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). Today, nearing his 78th birthday, he remains an active lecturer and writer, and is Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He has recently said of his work, 'If I have anything to say . . . it is rooted in the tragic and hopeful reality in which I was born and raised. Its paradoxes and incongruities have shaped everything I have said and done' (*The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* xv).

In Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, we see a black theologian of the 1960s caught in the paradox and incongruity of the social movements around him. Cone was deeply drawn to the hopeful, non-violent resistance movement led by Martin Luther King. He was also deeply drawn to the revolutionary Black Power movement led by Malcolm X. He argued that, although King's movement explicitly appealed to Christianity, while the Black Power movement often explicitly rejected Christianity as the white man's religion, the Black Power movement was, in fact 'Christ's central message to twentieth-century America' (1) because, 'In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor man is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human' (36).

Some of Cone's most provocative and compelling critiques of dehumanizing Christianity came in his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, in which he roundly mocked the false Jesus of comfortable, white suburbia. By stark contrast, Cone argued, Jesus Christ in the New Testament is 'the Oppressed One whose earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed of the land' (119).

Cone went on in *God of the Oppressed* to make his case for this liberationist interpretation, arguing that the God of the Bible sides with and liberates those at the margins of existence. God takes the side of the enslaved Hebrews and delivers them from Egypt, then instructs them (as in this evening's reading from the book of Exodus) to likewise be people who side with the oppressed and not to become oppressors themselves. The reading from Exodus closes with the promise to the people of God that if they become oppressors, God will hear the cries – God will choose the side of – those whom they oppress.

Cone's argument here was not one merely about the content of scripture, but also about the interpretation of scripture and the sources of theology. Scripture could never be the source of theology alone; the revelation of God as God of the oppressed was also a revelation of the experience of the oppressed as a source for theology. A black theology of liberation must begin with the experience of black persons in the world. Part of the failure of academic theology up to that point had been the failure to recognize that such theology was unwittingly drawn from the source of the experiences of, and thus served

the purposes of, whiteness. Christian theology had ceased to be Christian theology and had become instead White theology. Naming and exposing White theology would become one of the central tasks of black theology.

The extraordinary longevity of James Cone's academic career, which has already spanned over fifty years and is not yet at its end, has meant that he has continued to work alongside at least two subsequent generations of black theologians, many of whom are indebted to his work but have made distinctly critical decisions to take different directions in their own work.

In the generation after Cone's early work, one of his shortcomings which was most clearly recognized was his unacknowledged sexism. Cone's early black theology, claiming black experience as its source, arose very distinctly from the experience of a black man. Black men and white women were able to make inroads into academic theology before black women, and when black women arrived in the academy many resoundingly declared that neither black theology nor white feminism spoke for them – the experiences and voices of black women were nowhere to be found in either discourse.

A more recent criticism of Cone's work from the latest generation of black theologians is that it has suffered from working within the confines of the imaginary constructs of race – that instead of questioning the historical production of the constructs of 'white' and 'black', he assumed them and allowed them to be determinative.

Many other important critical questions have been asked and will continue to be asked about the liberationist theologies which arose in the 1960s, with Cone's black liberation theology at the forefront. Such questions should be pursued, but never as mechanisms by which we can imagine that we have escaped from James Cone's piercing analysis and pressing demands. His work requires us to take seriously the reality that theology arises in contexts from experience – no theology comes from nowhere. And his work requires us to take seriously that not only in the American South of his youth but in the majority of the historical and the present realities of Christianity in the West, theology has been constructed in alignment with power and privilege instead of in solidarity with the poorest and most oppressed – those with whom God identified in Jesus Christ, and for the good of whom God has always called people to live in the world.

'The real scandal of the gospel is this:' writes Cone, 'humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst' (*The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 160).

James Cone's work speaks very clearly into the particular context, history, and embodiment of racism in America. Just as clearly, however, it is an unrelenting question to everyone who worships God, who teaches about God, who talks or even thinks about God – and the question is whether this God props up the ideologies, institutions, cultures, and regimes which oppress, torture and crucify people, or whether this God draws us into solidarity with the crucified people who are, inevitably, in our midst.