

Black Theology Unmasked: James Cone, Liberation, and the Antichrist

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ABSTRACT

Black Theology Unmasked analyzes the relationship between black liberation theology and value, mis-religion, and the theological legacies of settler colonialism. This paper interrogates the meaning of James Cone's Antichrist and its relationship with contemporary modes of colonialism. As Cone's Antichrist stands in contrast to human flourishing and biblical liberation, this paper argues for ways that Christian theologians can build on Cone's deconstructive, unmasked theological method. Like the Hebrew prophets and Jesus of Nazareth, Cone's unapologetic, theological critique of race is necessary in a post-Cone world.

Keywords: black theology, liberation, settler colonialism, mis-religion

INTRODUCTION

In *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, James Cone says, "When I picked up my pen to write 'Christianity and Black Power,' I vowed that I'd never wear a mask again when black dignity was at stake." ¹ Ironically, these words found in Cone's final word, resonate with a world that **necessitates masks** for health, survival, and neighborly responsibility. What might be the implications of Cone's unmasked black theology in a post-Cone world? What are the implications of an unmasked black theology in a context where black, brown, and poor people suffer from a pandemic animated by white supremacist capitalism?

This paper examines how Cone's unmasked, black theology witnesses toward black liberation in the wake of the Antichrist. For Cone, the Antichrist (s) are churches and theologies animated by white supremacy and white supremacy itself. White supremacy is the Antichrist "because it has killed and crippled tens of millions of black bodies and minds in the modern world." ² Indeed, Cone's Antichrist continues to cripple, kill, and destroy black humanity behind the mask of Christianity. Ironically, the presentation argues for the necessity of Cone's unmasked, black theology in a world where masks are necessary for health and survival. Theologies in a post-Cone era might carry forward Cone's deconstructive, unmasked theological method to confront white supremacy in its myriad forms.

I will analyze Cone's Antichrist's relationship and the unfreedom of Cone's mask, and explore Cone's unmasking of white supremacist Christianity to reclaim and liberate. I will conclude by arguing that Cone's unapologetic, radical critique of race, theological grounded, is necessary in a post-Cone world.

BLACK THEOLOGY UNMASKED

If Karl Barth describes the difference between God and humanity, God's revelation and human initiative, as the "infinite (or absolute) qualitative distinction," Cone counters that there is no infinite qualitative distinction between God and black people in the United States. For Cone, "God did not make an absolute distinction between divine revelation and the black experience but rather took that experience as

¹James Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 2018) 30.

²Ibid, 53-54.

God's own reality."³ Although Barth's *Romans*⁴ resolves the infinite qualitative distinction through God's grace—the mediation of Jesus Christ, Cone's Christology is qualitatively distinguished from Barth's in the way that God in Christ takes the form of "a black slave in the United States." One significant difference between Barth and Cone's Christologies has to do with their different contexts.

The Black Christ speaks to God's work in the context of white supremacist America. Cone's claim about the centrality of liberation concerning the gospel rests on God's revelation in the liberation of oppressed Israel and the incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁵ "The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition of God's condition."⁶ When Cone argues that the essential theme of Christianity and Christian theology is liberation, he shows how white supremacy and white Christianity stand in contradistinction to God's liberation.

If God worked to liberate black humanity through the Black Power movement, "all acts which impede the struggle of black self-determination—black power-are anti-Christian, the work of Satan."⁷ However, Cone goes further. Christian theology is not only antithetical to the gospel when it actively works against God's liberation in God's identification with the oppressed, but "theology in America that fails to engage white supremacy and God's liberation of black people from that evil is not Christian theology but a theology of the antichrist."⁸ Contextually, theologies in America that fail to engage white supremacy are categorically Antichrist if Christ liberates and empowers black people to resist white supremacy.

What are the implications of Cone's Black Christ and the Antichrist? The "straight jacket of white supremacy" is so powerful that it muzzled the mouth of the father of Black Theology himself. White theologies generate silence, passivity, and violence. White theology masks black humanity behind the veil of insecurity and fear while robbing black people's voice, confidence, and dignity. The violence of white supremacy creates "psychic, physical, and spiritual" catastrophes.

White theologies that ignore and fail to engage black experiences, history, and culture, dismembers black people from the memory of their humanity, their faith, and their ancestors. In *Risks of Faith*, Cone says,

There can be no justice without memory-without remembering the horrible crimes committed against humanity and the great human struggles for justice. But oppressors always try to erase the history of their crimes and often portray themselves as the innocent ones. Through their control of the media and religious, political, and academic discourse "they're able," as Malcolm put it, "to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal to look like the victim."⁹

In our current moment, there is no justice because white supremacy has created a geofence of determined ignorance and innocence (in the Baldwinian sense). White evangelical seminaries and colleges demonstrate a persistent ignorance toward black suffering and pain when they absolutely disregard the "1619 project" and Critical Race Theory as antithetical to the gospel.¹⁰ Although scholars might be critical of components of the

³Ibid., 80.

⁴ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933, 1968) 10.

⁵ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1970) 64.

⁶Ibid., 67.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 18.

⁹James Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of Black Theology of Liberation, 1968 – 1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 132.

¹⁰George Schroeder, "Seminary Presidents Reaffirm BFM, Declare CRT Incompatible," *Baptist Press*, 20 November, 2020, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/seminary-presidents-reaffirm-bfm-declare-crt-incompatible/>.

"1619 project" and Critical Race Theory, the uncritical criticisms, disregard, and even conflation concerning the two, speak toward the willful ignorance of white supremacy concerning black life and history in America.

What does it mean to ban Critical Race Theory without any meaningful engagement with Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Cheryl Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, or Patricia Williams? What does it mean to ban CRT while perpetually ignoring theologies of liberation? If white evangelical schools have used Christianity to mask biases against CRT and the "1619 Project," what might be the basis for their determined ignorance? If not the gospel, then what?

One might find a confluence of thought with a memorandum from the Executive Office of the President, dated September 4, 2020. A section in the "Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies" states

The President has directed me to ensure that Federal agencies cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund these divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions. Accordingly, to that end, the Office of Management and Budget will shortly issue more detailed guidance on implementing the President's directive. In the meantime, all agencies are directed to begin to identify all contracts or other agency spending related to any training on "critical race theory," "white privilege," or any other training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil.¹¹

The memorandum continues stating, "The divisive, false, and demeaning propaganda of the critical race theory movement is contrary to all we stand for as Americans and should have no place in the Federal government."¹²

The memorandum and white evangelicals' critique of critical race theory point to Cone's claim regarding the oppressors' attempt to erase their crimes' history. Furthermore, one might conclude that if the memorandum suggests that it is unamerican to keep track of America's racist past, then the white institutions might indicate that it is unamerican and unchristian.

Before Cone could construct a black theology, he had to "deconstruct white theology and white and black churches."¹³ Cone says,

I had to deconstruct white theologies to destroy their effects on my mind so that I would be opened to listen to the black voices from slavery, emerging from the ashes of the black holocaust. I had to look back and *recover* the black heritage that gave birth to me.¹⁴

Cone's deconstruction of white theologies to construct a Black Theology that centers the voices and suffering of black people speaks to Cone's unmasking. Cone's deconstruction allows him to keep track of how white supremacy not only ignores black history but the ways that white supremacy actively dis-members black people from the memory that funds our theologies. Indeed, the re-memory of black voices from our past re-members and brings us together with our history, and the God of liberation in our history.

The fires associated with the Detroit rebellion in 1967, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X's spirit of blackness shattered Cone's mask. Cone's theological trinity, King, Malcolm, and

¹¹Russell Vought, "Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies," *Executive Office of the President Office of Management and Budget*, 4 September 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/M-20-34.pdf>.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 46.

¹⁴Ibid., 41.

Baldwin helped Cone deconstruct and reconstruct a language about God that connects Cone to the voices of the past. This deconstruction was a dismantling, or one may even say, a *defunding* of "the oppressive, white theologies...that not only ignored black people but blinded [Cone] to the rich treasure in the black religious tradition."¹⁵

However, one should not reduce the unmasking associated with Cone's deconstruction of white supremacy as ideological. Cone's unmasking is theological in that he locates the suffering of black people in history with the crucifixion event. If God reveals God's self in solidarity with black pain and suffering in the crucifixion event, then the erasure of the history of black suffering and pain severs God's revelation from black suffering. Therefore, we might ground Cone's unmasking and deconstruction in God's revelation. White supremacy seeks to destroy that revelation.

Cone's unmasking liberated him to talk about God in relation to the suffering of black people in America unapologetically. When President John Bennet of Union Theological Seminary questioned Cone's claim that "the white church is the antichrist," Cone said, "I mean it literally—every word of it.' I spoke in a direct manner, looking him in the eye with no concern about protecting my job."¹⁶ Cone was unapologetic because his God-talk was accountable to black people and their fight for justice. His turn from the predominant language of Barth, Niebuhr, and Tillich turned toward the voices of black freedom fighters, poets, novelists, and artists.

Cone's offensive language witnesses to the way that Jesus was offensive to the Roman empire that lynched him. Cone says, "the truth of the gospel is always offensive and unpopular because it expresses solidarity with the powerless and those on the margins."¹⁷ He continues, "If we are going to understand and embrace [Jesus'] liberating message today, we must see Jesus through the experience of the oppressed black people who are crying for justice in a white racist society."¹⁸

Cone's offensive theological language, grounded in the experiences and language of the oppressed, gives theological guidance in a post-Cone era. Cone's *Risk of Faith* challenges black theologians, religious scholars, and ministers to take off their masks and put forth a genuinely radical and enduring race critique. Cone attributes the lack of offensive theological language to black theologians' adjustment to "dominant Christian and integrationist tradition in African-American history." In this way, black theologians have left Malcolm behind as they have closely identified themselves with King (although they are both important). Furthermore, the close identification with white institutions (academy, church, and society) and its privileges has masked the "radical edge of our race critique."¹⁹

Indeed, Cone was critical of the theological language of hope that did not emerge from black suffering in America. Cone says, "It was the fall of 2007, and Barack Obama was about to be elected America's first African American President. It was a time of hope and change, and "Yes, We Can." But the nooses sent another message: "Not so fast!"²⁰ The experiences of the oppressed grounded Cone's cautionary word.

Similarly, Black Lives Matter begins its meetings with libations, calling on God's name, ancestors, and the names of the black lives stolen by state-sanctioned violence. The memory of the Black God is weaved with the witness of Fannie Lou Hammer, Ella Baker, Malcolm, and the names of murdered black lives at the hand of the state. Similar to the Black Power movement, Black Lives Matter affirms the dignity

¹⁵Ibid., 41.

¹⁶Ibid., 51.

¹⁷Ibid., 18.

¹⁸Ibid., 18.

¹⁹Cone, *Risks*, 134.

²⁰Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 131.

and personhood of black lives by grounding its language and organizing in a way that is accountable to black people and their fight for justice.

In Mark's account of the gospel, Jesus cries out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"²¹ People who were so close to the cross were so far from Jesus' suffering. This is indicated in their theological misinterpretation regarding Jesus' God-talk. They assumed that Jesus was calling on Elijah as opposed to calling on God. Perhaps the bystanders could not understand the theological language due to their proximity and identification with Jesus' experience of suffering.

In our time, white supremacy bearers stand down and stand by the crosses of black people in America, intentionally undetermined to hear their theological cries. When black people say black lives matter, they hear, only black lives matter. When black people call for the state to be nonviolent, they hear violence. When Kaepernick called for justice, they heard disrespect. When black people say defund the police, they hear chaos and destruction. "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?*"

The prophetic thrust of Cone's unapologetic black theology is rooted in his understanding of liberation. Cone's liberation "means that no one could deprive you of your dignity, your right to be black and free, no matter what white people did to you." How might this freedom inform theology in the face of the current manifestations of white supremacy and its death-dealing consequences? Cone's theological challenge in the wake of Antichrist theologies requires a radical freedom to unmask and defund white supremacy. Cone's challenge calls for a defunding of white theology.

"The blood of black people is crying out to God and to white people from the ground in the United States of America."²² Are white theologians, scholars and clergy *Abel* to hear the cries? Are we *Abel* to witness to talk about God in relation to the suffering ones in our society today? Are we *Abel* to be free? Or are we Cain?

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²¹Mark 15:34, NRSV.

²²Cone, *Said I Wasn't*, 171.

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