

BEYOND NONVIOLENCE: JAMES CONE AND THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Is violence antithetical to the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth? Christian theology and communities of faith often framed violence as oppositional to the Christian faith. In the aftermath of state-sanctioned violence causing the deaths of black people in the United States, protests, uprisings, and lootings ensued. Counterviolence has been met with disapproval and imperatives to employ Martin Luther King, Jr.'s method of nonviolence. In dialogue with James Cone and the black radical tradition, this paper argues that the violent/ nonviolent binary obfuscates how violence may be used as a tool of liberation for those who are oppressed by systemic violence. Black liberation theology's turn from the singular nonviolent approach allowed for it to embrace violence as an option to affirm black humanity in the face of annihilation. Without embracing violence as a normative modality, black liberation theology allows black and brown people to utilize violence as a form of self-love and self-affirmation in the 21st century.

Keywords: black liberation theology, black radical tradition, violence, nonviolence, politics

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther King, Jr., is the quintessential icon of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. In the 21st century, King is often promulgated as the nonviolent, prophetic leader who strove toward his dream of justice "the right way." Amidst systemic violence imposed on black and brown communities and the poor, religious leaders and public figures have responded to state-sanctioned violence by admonishing victims to be nonviolent like King. Because U.S. American democracy and capitalism were built and sustained through violence and systemic violence, the imperative for the oppressed to remain nonviolent is ludicrous and violent itself. A problem with mainstream promulgation of nonviolence is that it often demonizes the counter-violence enacted by oppressed peoples without any critique of people in power who benefit from imposed, sustained, and systematized violence.

Nonviolence has acquiesced to the status quo. Instead of being maladjusted to systems of oppression, it has adjusted itself as non-confrontational. Going beyond nonviolence means (1) considering violence as a revolutionary possibility, (2) reclaiming the radical nature of nonviolence, (3) and going beyond the binary of nonviolence versus violence, properly situating counter-violence as secondary to systemic violence.

Problematizing non-violence for the 21st century is important because it goes beyond the binary of nonviolence versus violence. This allows people to go beyond trivial debates toward approximate justice. In the 21st century, the language of nonviolence has become normative in the wake of lootings, riots, and uprisings in the United States and abroad. How should those with their backs against the wall engage and utilize the practice of nonviolence when it has been misappropriated to further perpetuate injustice and inequality? Considering the continuous state-sanctioned killings of black and brown people on the streets and in prisons in a post-Gandhian and King age, is nonviolence the only viable practice in the 21st century? I contend that while the true spirit of creative, massive, nonviolent resistance needs to be revived, it is one answer and not the only answer to systemic, state-sanctioned violence.

After the catastrophic death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old black man who was arrested and died at the hands of the Baltimore Police Department on April 19, 2015, some protestors responded by looting and

throwing rocks at police officers. These protestors were the center of one pastor's criticism following Gray's funeral. In response to the looting, the pastor called for peaceful protest and order. "Violence is not the answer for justice!" he continuously exclaimed, "Those young people are angry, frustrated, and disrespectful."¹ Along with CNN and other news networks, the pastor advocated for an ethic of nonviolent, peaceful protest in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The commodification of nonviolence in American culture is tantamount to the commodification of the legacy of Martin Luther King. James Baldwin's reflections on the death of Malcolm X are remarkably relevant to the coopting of King's radical vision when he says,

And there is since his death, a Malcolm, virtually, for every persuasion. People who hated him, people who despised him, people who feared him, and people who, in their various ways and degrees, according to their various lights and darkneses loved him, all claim him now. It is easy to claim him now, just as it was easy for the church to claim Saint Joan.²

Baldwin's truth about the uncritical reclamation of Malcolm X is also true for how King is romantically remembered.

Unfortunately, mainstream America has performed a work of taxidermy on nonviolence by removing its *soul force*, rendering nonviolence as nonliving and subsequently non-confrontational. It has become a static, tokenized artifact of history instead of a dynamic method of massive, creative resistance. A closer look at the nature of nonviolence reveals how the term has been coopted to acquiesce to the state's status quo.

NONVIOLENCE VERSUS PASSIVITY

The conflation of nonviolence and passive behavior is one of the most common errors committed by critics of nonviolence. Nonviolence and passivity are not synonymous. Religious scholar and civil rights leader Benjamin Mays states, "Non-violence is not passive; it is active and aggressive. It is not non-resistance; it is resistance of the most positive character."³ Although the action is not violent, it does not negate resistance. Mays eloquently communicates that nonviolence is not non-resistance.

King saw the conflation of non-action and nonviolence in his criticism of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr mistakenly interpreted Gandhi's movement as pacifism.⁴ For Gandhi and King, nonviolence was not passive, it was a great force of resistance. Gandhi claimed that nonviolence was "the greatest force in the world."⁵ Even the classification of nonviolence as a *force* puts it at odds with passive non-resistance.

The unsung Civil Rights leader and expert on nonviolence, Bayard Rustin, described nonviolence as having an inherent demand for struggle and sacrifice which is far from passive. In his *Negro and Nonviolence* in 1942, he argued that a person must be willing to struggle and die for freedom. "Nonviolence as a method has within it the demand for terrible sacrifice and long suffering," said Rustin.⁶

Rustin, who was largely responsible for introducing Gandhian nonviolence to King and the movement, describes nonviolence as a political praxis that radically confronts violence. This confrontation may cause terrible suffering, struggle, or even death. In his description of nonviolence, Rustin shows how the consequences of nonviolent resistance are substantially riskier than passivism.

¹"Baltimore Pastor: Young People out of Control," *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2015/04/27/tsr-intv-bryant-baltimore-violent-protests.cnn>

²James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998) 426.

³ Benjamin Mays, "Gandhi and Non-Violence," *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003) 8.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," *The Radical King* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015) 46.

⁵ Judith Brown, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 52.

⁶ Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*. Edited By Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise. Second Ed. (New York: Cleis Press, 2015) 9.

Before taking black liberation theology's point of departure from King's nonviolent methodology, we must take militant, creative, and nonviolence seriously. The understanding that nonviolent resistance entails struggle, sacrifice, and militant confrontation highlights black theology's radical turn from King's use of the method. Black liberation theology's turn from nonviolent resistance as a singular response to systemic violence indicates that nonviolence at its best cannot attend to the pain, suffering, and catastrophe visited upon black people.

BLACK THEOLOGY AND NONVIOLENCE

Black liberation theology did not presume nonviolence as the only method against state violence. The violence against black people in the late 1960s, coupled with the shooting of James Meredith and the killings of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., pushed black clergy and Cone to consider counter-violence as an option. The notion that black theologians and clergy would consider violence as an option was a radical shift from the nonviolent method espoused by King. Black religious thinkers and scholars saw themselves more ideologically aligned on the issue of violence with the Black Power movement than with the King.

Not only did King dislike the name of the Black Power movement, he did not accept the method of violence. This is where black clergy and Cone departed from King's methodology. Whereas King emphasized loving one's neighbor, Cone and NCBC leaned closer to Malcolm X, who focused on loving oneself. Cone and NCBC believed that King's nonviolent method placed too much focus on loving the enemy rather than ameliorating the suffering of black people.⁷ The shift from King allowed for black clergy and theologians to focus on loving oneself before loving one's enemy.

The Black Power Statement of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) pointed toward a theological and ideological shift within the civil rights movement.⁸ The statement's focus on Black Power, economic elevation, and black determination signaled a theological turn ripe for an acceptance of violence as a viable option to systemic oppression. Theologically, the Black Power Statement stood in contrast to theologies that promoted servility, humility, and docility among black oppressed groups by appealing to an eschatology that rewarded those who suffered in the afterlife. Cone and NCBC argued for a God of justice in this world as opposed to an otherworldly God who offers justice in the world to come. Understanding the God of liberation as one who empowers those who are oppressed to fight for justice in life, offers a different perspective on the utility of violence in obtaining justice.

Although many Black Power adherents attempted to evade King's methodology completely, as well as Christianity, Cone wrestled. Although Cone embraced the central messages of Black Power and Malcolm X, he did not abort King or his Christian faith. Instead, Cone attempted to reconcile Black Power and Christianity, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. *Black Theology and Black Power* demonstrated Cone's attempt to bring Christianity and Black Power and King and X together. Cone argued Black Power was not the "antithesis of Christianity," but it was "Christ's central message to twentieth-century America."

Cone's thesis departs from King's view of Black Power in that Cone does not necessarily disavow "violence" for the empowerment of those being crushed by white supremacy. For Cone, the gospel is about freedom, and freedom *is* the gospel. *Black Theology and Black Power* attempted to "apply the freeing power of the gospel to the black people under white oppression."⁹ Because Black Power was demonized (like black people), it is significant that Cone juxtaposed the term with theology. The juxtaposition of theology and blackness expresses the wrestling and reconciliation evidenced in Cone's attempt to locate liberation as a black Christian theologian.

⁷Gayraud Wilmore, "Introduction" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1979) 16.

⁸Ibid., 17.

⁹James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1970) 31.

Ironically, divine love can animate violence within black liberation theology. Cone expresses how God's love is witnessed in the affirmation of the self within Black Power. He "Through God's love, the black man (*sic*) is given the power to *become, the power to make others recognize him*," says Cone.¹⁰ Drawing on Frantz Fanon and Paul Tillich, Cone shows how oppressed people can employ riots as a form of self-love amidst murderous-leaning systems of hate and catastrophe. When black people are faced with the threat of nonbeing, divine love might be manifested as self-love in the form of riots.¹¹ In this way, riots cannot be written off as *sinful* violence, but riots have theological value in their ability to love and affirm black humanity.

In the preface of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone identifies the central message of Christianity by stating, "Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation."¹² If liberation is the central component of Christianity (and Christian theology), then Cone understands how Christianity can support black self-love even if it might call for violence. In this text, Cone gives a detailed description of black theology when he states,

Refusing to be separated from that community, black theology seeks to articulate the theological self-determination of blacks, providing some ethical and religious categories for the black revolution in America. It maintains that all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian, the liberating deeds of God. All acts which impede the struggle of black self-determination—black power—are anti-Christian, the work of Satan.¹³

Because white racism is antithetical to the gospel of Christ, Cone can claim that any destructive acts of white racism are divinely sanctioned.

Black liberation theology claims that God is metaphorically black because God participates in the destruction of white racism as God participated in the liberation of God's people under Egyptian bondage and the oppression of the Roman Empire. However, Cone's project is not limited to special revelation, but the revelation of God can be seen in the black struggle for freedom. Cone responds to the Barthian criticism of general revelation, articulating that theology is contextual—Karl Barth's theology is not a universal theology to be applied in all places and times.

For Cone, the gospel empowers people in oppressed conditions to rebel "against every form of slavery" as "being[s] in freedom."¹⁴ Humans were created freely and as beings in freedom. Anything that stands in the way of freedom stands in the way of human existence. What is theological about humanity and freedom is that the freedom ascribed to human existence is "expressed in terms of the image of God."¹⁵ White racism and white supremacy stand in contrast to the God of freedom when it oppresses and commits violence against other ethnic groups. Participation in the dismantling of white supremacy is *divinely* human. It is divine in the sense that God is a God of freedom. It is human in that if human beings are made in the image of God then any liberating act is a human act in response to the God of freedom.

In line with the black radical tradition, Cone shows how the so-called violence of the black power movement is as theological as the nonviolence associated with King. If violence helps liberate the oppressed, dismantles white supremacy, and humanizes the dehumanized, then violence can have a theological dimension. Even as violence has redemptive qualities, violence should not be glorified or normalized.

THE VIABILITY OF VIOLENCE

¹⁰Ibid., 52.

¹¹Ibid., 55.

¹²Ibid., ix.

¹³Ibid., 10.

¹⁴Ibid., 94.

¹⁵Ibid., 95.

In revalorizing violence, I do not seek to glorify or normalize violence—an action Hannah Arendt criticizes Jean-Paul Sartre of reifying.¹⁶ The impact of violence in its myriad forms must be taken seriously and thoughtfully. In contrast, this inquiry seeks to expose the oppressive nature of the normativity of nonviolence. My claim is that while violence should tend toward self-defense, it has liberative dimensions. As such, the arbiters of violence should not necessitate the ethical response of the recipients of violence.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that violence has positive effects when enacted by the oppressed. On the individual level, violence cleanses, while “it rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude.”¹⁷ He later remarks, “Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader.”¹⁸ Before dismissing Fanon, one must ask if Fanon’s view of violence has positive possibilities. Can violence produce positive outcomes? Can it affirm the humanity of a group of people who have been systemically and perpetually dehumanized?

James Cone answers the question of violence in *Black Theology and Black Power* when he says,

If the riots are the black man’s courage to say Yes to himself as a creature of God, and if in affirming self he affirms Yes to the neighbor, then violence may be the black man’s expression, sometimes the only possible expression, of Christian love to the white oppressor.¹⁹

Cone’s language is careful in affirming riots and violence with the words “if” and “may.” Cone is not absolute in his affirmation of violence, but conditions riots and violence with “if” and “may.” His openness to the possibility of violence is empowering for those who are oppressed because the criterion lies with the oppressed and not the oppressor. Cone’s analysis is not simply a pragmatic response to violence, but it is a theological claim of what it means to be human before God.

It is violent for those who systemically enact violence to instruct the oppressed to be nonviolent when the oppressed have reached an existential ceiling of catastrophe.²⁰ Cone rightly notes the hypocrisy of white Christians when he says,

It seems that the mistake of most whites, religionists included, is their insistence on telling blacks how to respond “as Christians” to racism, insisting that nonviolence is the only appropriate response. But there is an ugly contrast between the sweet, nonviolent language of white Christians and their participation in a violently unjust system.

As exemplified in Cone’s statement, black liberation theology pushes for consistency on the question of violence. One cannot demonize “violent” responses to violence when they participate in systemic violence.

The nuance of Cone’s critique is similar to critiques leveraged by James Baldwin and Malcolm X. When James Baldwin and Reinhold Niebuhr engaged in dialogue, Baldwin spoke about the hypocrisy of those who criticized black people for violence when the state has a history of committing violence. Baldwin says,

I am very struck by the fact that the only time in my own experience and I’m nearly 40 years old, and I’ve never read this in the history books so far, the only time non-violence has been admired is when

¹⁶Hannah Arendt. *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1970) 12.

¹⁷ Fanon, Frantz, and Richard Philcox. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 2004) 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹ James Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1969) 54.

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

Negroes practice it. The history of England, the history of France, the history of this country, is a history of nothing but violence and bloodshed. And we honor it. We are proud of it.²¹

Both Baldwin and Cone expose the violence committed against the oppressed while oppressors enact continuous violence. Malcolm X puts it in this way,

There “[w]asn’t nothing nonviolent about old Pat [Patrick Henry] or old George Washington!” Malcolm frequently proclaimed in his speeches. “Liberty or death” has always been the motto of whites in a contest with their enemies. If whites do not defend their humanity nonviolently, why then should blacks be expected to use that method?²²

Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and James Cone expose the hypocrisy associated with the United States instructing black people to be nonviolent in a violent context. Additionally, they also show (along with Frantz Fanon) that something positive can be gained through violence.

In light of the riots and looting in Baltimore following the murder of Freddie Gray, the dominant narrative was aimed against protestors who were rioting and looting. Not only did the state and the media insist on nonviolence, but even the black church. While I value the intentions of the black church against the state and mainstream media, the push for nonviolence by these groups was violent. This push disregarded the greater violence that had been committed against the people who systemically looted for decades. Even King understood this when he went to Watts. King said, “A mere condemnation of violence is empty without understanding the daily violence that our society inflicts upon many of its members. The violence of poverty and humiliation hurts as intensely as the violence of the club.”²³

It is violent and a disregard of their humanity when oppressed groups experience callous silence to their tragic pain. Systemic violence treats them as if they cannot be seen or heard. Black and brown people who suffer at the hands of economic depravity, should not only be seen or heard when they loot or commit violence, but their humanity should be seen daily. In this way, James Cone was right when says that “violence per se is not the primary question, [but] it is ‘a subordinate and relative question.’”²⁴

Nonviolence must not be seen as a normative response to violence. At times and in a sustained fight against oppression, it may be the best option, but it must always be an *option*. If violence ceases to be an option for the oppressed, then the oppressed will be under a double yoke of bondage—to the oppressor and nonviolence. As human beings, the oppressed should be allowed to choose how they would respond. We must allow room for violence (especially in self-defense) to be an answer to violence.

Conclusion

When the pastor, white liberals, and conservatives chastised young people in Baltimore for rioting and looting, they were distracted from seeing the systemic violence that included the tragic killing of Gray. The violence of the state included dilapidated schools, immense poverty, and unsuitable homes that had been committing a longer, sustained violence against “those young people.” Our understanding of violence must transcend the obvious, tangible symbols of violence to a greater analysis of systemic violence. The rocks that young protestors threw at police officers, as David threw at Goliath, are not worthy of being compared with the thousands of bullets that have robbed the lives of so many black and brown children

²¹ Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of the Birmingham Tragedy*. Reinhold Niebuhr Papers Box 54, folder 11. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1963) 7.

²² James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Markynoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1991), 261.

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr., and Clayborne Carson. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management: 2001) 295.

²⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 142.

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