

## JAMES CONE'S HERMENEUTIC OF LANGUAGE AND BLACK THEOLOGY

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*[The author looks at the emergence of Black theology as a liberation movement by focusing on the way in which James Cone developed a hermeneutic of language that fostered such an emergence. Black Americans elaborated a theology around Jesus the Christ whom they experienced as God's expression of solidarity to humanity, especially Black humanity. The author explains how Cone's calling God/Christ Black expresses a true metaphor and then discusses Black historical experience as narrative and the theological meaning of Black hope. Finally, she raises six foundational questions for the future of Black theology.]*

THE YEARS FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II were ones of great flux in the United States and around the world. Individuals and nations were beginning to look at their situations and to raise questions that, combined with a praxis that emerged from reflecting on their lives and experiences historically, led to revolutionary efforts to change the status quo. In the U.S., African Americans who, despite the end of legal slavery, still lived, especially in the South, tied to the land they worked for others, began to challenge "Jim-Crow" laws that restricted every part of their lives. Those who had experienced the freedom of other countries during the war questioned their inferior status at home and vowed to change things.

In the Christian churches globally, new ideas and understandings were also emerging in the aftermath of the horrors that had taken place during the war. What was the responsibility of the Church in the secular realm? Should it challenge the oppression that continued to exist or work to overcome it? In the U.S. as federal legislation opened the doors to higher learning for many who would otherwise have taken up jobs in the facto-

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ries and mills of the country, they too began to question their faith and church teachings and practice in company with theologians in Europe and elsewhere. The resulting “raising of conscience” was a factor in the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement for American Blacks and the calling of the Second Vatican Council for Roman Catholics, movements that resulted in changes that swept the nation and the Church, challenging former beliefs and habits while empowering those who had previously been silent and invisible.

In this article, I look at the emergence of Black theology as a liberation movement by focusing on the way in which James Cone, one of the earliest to call for a new way of “doing” theology by critiquing the ideological distortions of the Christian tradition, developed a hermeneutic of language that fostered that emergence. Black theology is grounded in the experience and praxis, most particularly, of those whose ancestors had endured centuries of slavery and second-class citizenship within the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Cone used the language of symbol and metaphor, narrative and testimony to bring about a critically different understanding of the role that Christianity had played and continued to play in the lives of African Americans. He and other Black theologians recognized that “. . . the task of theology invites not only the critique of nonreligious ideologies that dominate the consciousness of societies, but also the critique of those very ideologies permeating and fostered by religious traditions.”<sup>2</sup>

Although several different methodologies may be discerned in the work of Cone ranging from the existential anthropological stress of his earliest writings to the sociopolitical-cultural emphasis of his later work, it is his hermeneutical language which most clearly presents, in my opinion, the importance of the Black historical experience in the U.S. as a source for theologizing.<sup>3</sup>

It should be understood from the outset that Cone has not designated

<sup>1</sup> I use here the terms African American and Black American interchangeably as do most Black theologians. It can be asserted, however, that the appropriate term for those who trace their ancestry back to the time of slavery in the U.S. is African American while Black American is a more inclusive term covering not only African Americans but any person of African descent living within the U.S. today regardless of intermediate places of origin, i.e., the Caribbean, South or Central America, and countries of Africa.

<sup>2</sup> *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 1.71.

<sup>3</sup> See Carlyle F. Steward III, “The Method of Correlation in the Theology of James H. Cone,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 40 (1983–84) 27–38 and *A Comparative Analysis of Theological Ontology and Ethical Method in the Theologies of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982); also Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology: United States and South Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) chap. 1.

any particular methodology as his own. As with most liberation theologians who theologize from a contextual basis, his starting point is not a method but a people—the lived experience of an oppressed and marginalized group. Thus, his emphasis is not on method but on praxis. The act of doing theology in a viable manner (orthopraxis), living one's faith out in the world, is the first step; reflection on that action, the second step, results in theology. Both steps are of equal importance and, in reality, usually interact.

Rather than speaking of a hermeneutical circle from which such theology emerges, I prefer to speak of a hermeneutical spiral which more clearly reveals that liberation theology does not simply repeat itself but builds upon praxis and reflection leading to greater understanding as well as a change in the circumstances of those "doing" the theologizing at every level. Thus Cone's hermeneutical language provides the lens through which we come to an understanding of Black Christianity and the critical role it played in the formation and survival of the Black community in the U.S. It also enables us to understand that community of faith and its influence upon Christianity itself in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

Cone's presentation and development of the symbols and language of the Christian message reveal his grounding in the Black Church and community and result in a startling shift in how we see and understand God the Creator and Jesus Christ. His message is one directed to two audiences, White Christians, in an effort to reveal to them their abuse of their Christian faith, and Black Americans in order to enable them to see how God has worked in their lives and continues to do so.

The Black historical experience serves as the content and method for Cone's hermeneutics. That is the "situation" out of which he theologizes. His anthropology is that of Black humanity and it is around that humanity that his theological investigations are organized. Thus, the gospel message is seen as a contextual one that must be re-interpreted by each and every generation. It cannot be and has never been static. Cone affirms that any experience of God, to be genuinely and authentically Christian, must be identified as such by the Christian community and, for Cone, that community is Black.

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

<sup>4</sup> Most Roman Catholics are familiar just with Latin American liberation theology and see it as the earliest and only form of liberation theology. In actuality, Cone's articulation of Black theology emerged in 1969, prior to the publication of *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez. This fact is significant because it supports my contention that liberation movements emerged spontaneously and individually all over the world during the 1960s.

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. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of “how we got over.” For theology to be black, it must reflect upon what it means to be black. Black Theology must uncover the structures and forms of the black experience, because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself.<sup>5</sup>

Christ, therefore, is the Black Christ, Black because he has identified himself in his Incarnation with the poor and the oppressed. He is the norm by which the interpretation given by the Black historical experience is structured, presented, and validated. But it is that experience which also interprets the meaning of Christ as God’s revelation today. For God is present in human experience. Human experience is the location of God’s involvement with humanity and, thus, is the beginning of theological reflection. “The Incarnation is a historical event, but its universality lives on wherever the Church assumes the social and cultural conditions of the people among whom she dwells. . . . The Church must incarnate herself in every race, as Christ has incarnated himself in the Jewish race.”<sup>6</sup>

Cone engages symbol, metaphor, narrative, and testimony as a hermeneutical basis for exploring and critiquing the doctrine of God/Christ (symbol/metaphor) as set forth in the Christianity of the dominant culture and in the Black community, the Black story/history (narrative), and the witness of the Black community and the Black Church (testimony). In so doing, a theology of, by, and for Black Americans evolves. For the symbol of God and Christ Jesus as the creator and liberator of Black people; the metaphor of God and Christ as themselves Black; the story (history) of Blacks in the U.S. and the testimony of their lives as those who have been able to survive because of their faith is the foundation for Black religious discourse. It helps one to understand the hope-filled belief of African Americans in their eventual freedom—social, economic, physical and eschatological—and their conviction that such freedom could only come from God.

### GOD AND JESUS CHRIST AS SYMBOL

Paul Ricoeur affirms in his study on the nature of language and symbol that “. . . man can only understand his own existence, can only understand himself, through the signs—personal and cultural—scattered in the world,

<sup>5</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997; orig. ed. 1975) 16–17.

<sup>6</sup> Anscar Chapungco, *Cultural Adaptation of the Liturgy* (New York: Paulist, 1982) 59.

and he only understands as he interprets those signs.”<sup>7</sup> Interpretation, the discernment of a hidden meaning in an apparent sense, is critical for the development of personhood since it is only in the building up of meaning particular to oneself that a person becomes who he or she is. That meaning can only be built up through interpretation of the signs of the world, interpretation that is, however, affected and influenced by one’s culture, heritage, and traditions, in other words, the community into which one is born and in which one lives and develops self-understanding and understanding of the surrounding world.

Symbols are those signs that develop, change, or grow in meaning, as they move from one worldview to another. As worldviews change and develop, so are symbols enriched or impoverished of meaning. Constant critique of these changes, however, is both necessary and vital, for the symbols and for the worldviews themselves, in order for one to be aware not only of the flow of historical understanding (tradition) but also of the contemporary understanding of them.

Both symbols and worldview influence each other and the observer’s understanding of them. However, it is necessary to have a symbol or set of symbols within a given worldview that controls or colors one’s understanding of all else that arises. In Christianity, this controlling symbol is the Christ as the sign of the unique revelation of God to all humanity. It is this symbol which provides the norm, the criterion for orthodoxy, for to be a Christian, regardless of church affiliation, means to be a follower of Christ.

For Black theology, as articulated by Cone, this is certainly true. Black humanity in the U.S. has always understood itself in terms of those symbols that arose from the experience of slavery and oppression, although they did not label them as such. Black men and women in the U.S. understand themselves by relating to those signs that emerge from their constant struggle against a pervasive racism. Their self-understanding is expressed in their ongoing struggle for freedom, as articulated in the songs, stories, and accounts of the experiences of individual Blacks and the Black community as a whole. These signs define who they truly are, over against a worldview that has for so long depicted Black humanity as nonhumanity.

It is the latter view that they deny, replacing it with an understanding of themselves as created by the same God as those who have historically oppressed them and therefore worthy of the dignity and rights accorded to all human beings by virtue of their creation. God thus as Creator of all humanity symbolizes their struggle for human and civil rights, for God is a God of justice and righteousness. Jesus is the symbol of the liberation promised to all who believe in him, a liberation that is both physical and of

<sup>7</sup> Loretta Dornisch, “Symbolic Systems and the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Se-meia* 4 (1975) 1–19, at 7.

this world and spiritual, beyond this world. These understandings of who God and Jesus are for them, and all who are oppressed, provided the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and served as catalysts for other freedom movements worldwide.

What is the symbol that Cone sees as preeminent for Black theology? It is the God/Christ of the liberation struggle, the Black Christ who is the unique revelation of a Black God.<sup>8</sup> God as Creator, and Jesus Christ as Liberator, are the symbols that provide the hermeneutical principle or norm for Black theology. It is a norm “which is in harmony with the Black condition and the biblical revelation.”<sup>9</sup> It is a norm that pays attention to the encounter of the Black community with God’s emancipative grace and that springs forth from it. It is this norm that, Cone asserts, validates theologizing from the Black perspective.

How have Black Americans developed a theology around this symbol of Jesus the Christ whom they have experienced as God’s expression of solidarity with humanity, especially Black humanity? First, the symbol is experienced.<sup>10</sup> It was in the dehumanizing experience of slavery in the U.S. that the kernel of truth relating to Black being was first revealed to Blacks. For years, they were taught that God was a God who favored the slave-masters; one who taught that the slaves’ only duty was to be obedient and to serve their masters well.

The white man believed he replaced the mediating and liberating role of Jesus Christ. As the anointed Jesus, the white man possessed omnipotent and salvific capabilities. For black chattel to reach God, then, whites forced African Americans to accept the intermediary and divine status of the white race. However, Black folks

<sup>8</sup> For Cone and the majority of Black Christians, there is no critical distinction made in speaking about God and Christ. The two words are interchangeable, serving as symbols of the Divine Other that is present in their lives and that continues to nurture and sustain them. God the Father/Mother is the Being, immanent and transcendent, who participates freely in human history by siding with those who are oppressed in their struggle for freedom. God is Father/Mother, Omnipotent and Omniscient, All-loving and All-caring. Jesus is the incarnation of that love and the manifestation in human form of God’s solidarity with the victims. He is brother, son, child, present here and now in their midst. Jesus expresses for most Black Christians who God is in their everyday lives. Hence I use here, as Cone does, God/Christ almost interchangeably. An excellent example of this practice by Cone is his *God of the Oppressed* which contains no specific chapters on God as Creator, Judge, etc., but deals extensively with Jesus as human and divine.

<sup>9</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986; orig. ed. 1970) 36. A special 20th anniversary edition was published by Orbis in 1989.

<sup>10</sup> As background for this discussion, I rely upon the theory of symbolic knowledge of Paul Ricoeur especially as developed in his *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1970) and *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970).

rejected these scurrilous and heretical faith claims. Though physically bound, slaves nevertheless directly encountered the biblical God in their own theological creativity.<sup>11</sup>

As the slaves learned to read the Bible for themselves, they realized the lie being taught them. They read of a God of freedom, one whose total identity and activity was with the poor and the powerless rather than the wealthy and the powerful. They read of a God who set a people, an enslaved people like themselves, free and carried them to a new life where God became their God and they became God's people. And they read of a God who so loved the poor and the oppressed that God became one with them, a human being born into the world of the poor, condemned to death, and dying for their freedom. They read and they believed.

But they were not an educated people; they were a people of the fields and kitchens with no more than rudimentary learning and basic beliefs. Thus, the meaning that they experienced in this symbol of a liberating God was full of more meaning than they could initially encompass or comprehend. Their inarticulateness gave rise to feelings of joy, feelings of comfort in times of sorrow, feelings of help in times of need. They recognized, in this experience, that they were being addressed by an Other and they rejoiced even while not fully understanding.

This knowledge led to the second step, that of expression of the experience. The slaves had a theology without knowing or fully understanding it and expressed it, not in abstract, intellectual terms, but in the only ways available to them. Thus, the expression poured forth in song—the spirituals, telling of a land where all would be free one day; in story—the tales of Br'er Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, symbols of the weak winning over the strong, not by revolution or strength, but by cunning and outwitting the boss; and in prayer—the prayers of a troubled people trying to “make it over” while searching for a life of decency and humanity on this earth.

This second step can be said to have lasted for several centuries, through generations of Black people struggling to survive in an almost impossible world. To a certain extent, it is still present today as Blacks continue their struggle for full emancipation in the U.S. It was this expression of the experience of God and his Incarnate Son, and what it meant to them, that kept Black slaves alive and able to withstand the degradation of slavery and second-class citizenship. It was the songs and prayers and their belief in their own humanity, as told in stories down the ages, that led to the evolution of the Black Church—a place of refuge that served as a liberating and nurturing force for their lived experience of God.

<sup>11</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources of a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 22.

Slavery eventually gave way to a freedom that existed in name only. It soon became clear, especially in the South, that true freedom was still a long way away. The result of this disillusionment was that the experience of God as loving Creator and Liberator slowly began to erode. This was partly due to the failure of that same Black Church which, founded as a sign of freedom and independence, had been co-opted into the status-quo mentality of the dominant society that saw no connection between faith and one's praxis in the world. However, it was also due to the constant and overwhelming odds against them. But the songs, the stories, and the prayers were still there and they were still being listened to.

Expression gave way to a critical reflection on Black faith triggered by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s. It soon became clear that the reflection was not on a new symbol but on the same symbol reclaimed, reaffirmed, and renewed. Blacks began to reflect once again on the meaning of the God of Christianity for them and the meaning of their existence, aided now by those who had studied theology and questioned the absence of the Black experience. They looked at their situation and questioned it: Who is God for me? How can I worship a God who apparently does not recognize my humanity?<sup>12</sup> These questions burned to the core of Black existence. As Christians, they turned to Scripture to reexamine who this God was, what he meant to them, and what was the meaning of their present suffering. They found, yet again, in Scripture a God who was in solidarity with the poor. They found anew a God who showed his partiality to the oppressed by sending his only Son "to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).

Jesus' death on the cross represented God's boundless solidarity with victims, even unto death. Jesus' resurrection is the good news that there is new life for the poor that is not determined by their poverty but overcomes it; and this new life is available to all. Jesus' resurrection is God's victory over oppression. If this biblical message has any meaning for contemporary America, it must mean that black power represents God's resurrection in Jesus becoming embodied in the consciousness and actions of black America.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As was always true, all African Americans did not participate in this debate. Many never accepted Christianity seeing it as the "White man's" religion and developed religions of their own, such as the Nation of Islam. Others retained their original faith in African religions or in Islam. Others still renounced their Christian faith at this time, seeing no hope in it any longer. See, e.g., William Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973) and Anthony B. Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church; Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) 32-33.

They also recognized, however, that Jesus' death was once and for all. It was not necessary for them to endure injustice and the racial prejudice of others. Unjust suffering was not praiseworthy but suffering in the struggle of faith was.

Thus meaning was restored to their lives, the meaning of God as one who was clearly on their side. It meant therefore that they as a people had meaning as well, a meaning that was bound up in that of God's. They were God's children, created in God's own image and likeness. This they believed. It was now necessary to, once again, act on that belief. For belief requires commitment. It requires a faith that must be professed, despite the fact that all questions have not yet been answered and the way is still a rough and rocky one. It is the experience of God as Liberator that enables one to accept God in one's own being and as constitutive of one's own nature. This belief fueled the Civil Rights Movement and gave Blacks from the cotton fields and church pulpits the courage to "step out on faith" recognizing that unjust laws are not true laws and therefore need not be obeyed.

Having progressed from experiencing the symbol to wagering one's life and livelihood on the truth of that interpretation, the symbol is then recovered by re-experiencing it, this time in the fullness of its meaning, a fullness enriched by ongoing reflection, by ongoing critique, and, most importantly, by ongoing faith. It is by means of this ongoing spiral of interpretation that a theology emerges. Thus, it is in the experiencing of God the Liberator as a second naïveté (Ricoeur) which has overcome the immediacy, the uncritical and unknowing nature of the first experience, or naïveté, which took place during slavery, that contemporary Black theology arises. For Black theology is an attempt to give meaning, in the form of written language, to that symbol of God that the Black community has experienced for more than 430 years since their arrival in this land. It is an attempt to name God in human terms through the Black historical experience of that same God.

Thus, Cone approaches the question of God for Blacks in terms, initially, of God language. He asserts that God's reality is presupposed but it is up to the theologian to analyze the nature of that reality in terms of its meaning to and for the community that is living that reality. He raises the question: Is God merely a symbolic word that, if it loses its power to point to the meaning of Black life, must therefore be destroyed? As a result of the Black Power and Black Nationalist Movements which condemned Christianity for the plight of Black Americans, Cone and other emerging Black theologians queried whether, in order to have an authentic faith, the oppressed might have to renounce their faith in a God who has been used by the oppressor solely to oppress them. The question, therefore, became not whether Blacks believe in God but in whose God: a White God of

racism or a Black God of liberation? Having raised the question, Cone acknowledged the critical significance of God-language and the long tradition that accompanied and supported it. God-language had to be retained in Black theology because it is the source of the Black community's identification with the divine presence. In order for Black theology to be Black and in touch with the Black community which is its source it must use the symbols that come from that community rather than attempt to develop new ones that are alien to that community.

However, that does not mean acquiescing in the biased interpretation of the God that has been disseminated by the dominant society in America. It was, therefore, necessary to disclose the "White" racist God as a false God, an idol used to oppress who must be destroyed, while retaining faith in the God, the true Black God, of liberation. God-talk, therefore, in order to truly be Christian talk about God must be related directly to the liberation of the oppressed. It follows that the oppressed themselves must define the structure and scope of that reality.

For Cone the Black struggle is a manifestation of God. God is using that struggle to show the people of God that their lives do have meaning and that Christ, in the Incarnation, enters human affairs and takes the side of the oppressed. The gospel is a gospel of liberation. It is the source of Black belief in God's nature as being that of one on the side of the poor. It is the historical Christ of the gospel who confirms that divine solidarity not only by his birth in poverty but also by his life's ministry which is an unequivocal proclamation of solidarity with the victims, and, finally and most importantly, by his ignominious death and his glorious Resurrection. Jesus died the death of a common criminal who, at the end, has lost all but his faith in his Father. He was reborn as the Savior, victorious over death and all forms of sin.

For Black theology, God is present in all dimensions of human liberation. His life and death are the revelation of the freedom of God, who takes upon himself the totality of human oppression. His resurrection discloses God's victory over oppression and its transformation into the possibility of human freedom. This same God is also he who gave himself in the Incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth. This man Jesus is the symbol to Black Christians of all that is hopeful and promised of a better world not only after death but of its possibility here on this earth: "He is the Word in their lives, and thus to speak of their experience as it is manifested in the joys and sorrows of black life is to speak of the One they say is the Comforter in the time of trouble, 'the Lily of the Valley,' and 'the bright morning star.'" <sup>14</sup> Jesus Christ and the Black experience converge in the Incarnation because when God became man in Jesus Christ, he disclosed the divine will to be

<sup>14</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed., 33.

with humanity in its wretchedness: "And because we blacks accept God's presence in Jesus as the true definition of our humanity, blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality. This is the theological meaning of the paradoxical assertion about the primacy of the black experience and Jesus Christ as witnessed in Scripture."<sup>15</sup>

### GOD AND JESUS CHRIST AS METAPHOR

From symbol, we move to an exploration of metaphor seen in terms of a logical absurdity. Metaphorical language can be seen as predicative of something that did not formerly exist. The use of a metaphor involves a "twist," a shift of meaning from one level to another making it accessible as subversive language, language that turns reality upside down. A metaphor both creates and reveals meaning. Cone's statement that "God/Christ is Black" expresses clearly what is meant about metaphor. It can be seen as a "calculated error"—one which assimilates things which do not apparently go together. It is "... precisely by means of this calculated error [that] metaphor discloses a relationship of meaning hitherto unnoticed between terms which were prevented from communicating by former classifications."<sup>16</sup> To call Cone's statement regarding God/Christ a calculated error is not to imply that it is erroneous. Rather, it is to call attention to what *appears* to be erroneous because it brings together two ideas thought to be totally incompatible, the being of God/Christ with the being of Black humanity, thereby totally startling the reader/observer/listener.

By calling God/Christ Black, Cone is expressing a *true* metaphor. It is true because it is a metaphor "in which a new extension of the meaning of the words answers a novel discordance in the sentence."<sup>17</sup> New meaning is created—a meaning which "shatters and increases our language . . . for the sake of redescribing reality."<sup>18</sup> It is the function of language to articulate our experience of the world, to give form to this experience. This is what Cone is doing. He is articulating the experience of the Black community in their encounter with God as the One who has and continues to set them free. Christ and God are Black because those who are oppressed in this country and who call upon him to relieve their oppression are themselves Black:

Since the black community is an oppressed community because, and only because, of its blackness, the Christological importance of Jesus Christ must be found in his

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 13 (1975) 29–148, at 79.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>18</sup> *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles Reagan and David Steward (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 132–33.

blackness. If he is not black as we are, then the resurrection has little significance for our times. Indeed, if he cannot be what we are, we cannot be who he is. Our being with him is dependent on his being with us in the oppressed black condition, revealing to us what is necessary for our liberation.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to say that Christ, in his actual physical being, is or ever was a Black man, a physically black man in skin color, although some Black theologians have taken this stance.<sup>20</sup> Blackness must be seen, in Cone's view, as "a manifestation of the being of God in that it reveals that neither divinity nor humanity reside in White definitions but in the liberation from black captivity."<sup>21</sup>

For Cone the literal skin color of Jesus is irrelevant. Although in his theology he is referring to a specific community of people who are Black not only in skin-color but also in thought, word, and commitment, he does not see "Blackness" as a narrowly restrictive term, as one limited to a certain race of people. Rather, to be Black encompasses all who are oppressed whether for reasons of sex, race, or class, or all who take sides with the oppressed by joining, with body, mind, and spirit in the front lines of the oppressed's struggle for liberation. As a Black man, Cone theologizes from the Black experience, understanding that God's acts in history are acts of liberation on behalf of all who are oppressed, and that Christ's life, death, and Resurrection are the signs of God's having chosen them as his people. He thus, affirms that "[I]n a revolutionary situation, there can never be just theology. It is always theology identified with a particular community. It is either identified with those who oppress or with its victims."<sup>22</sup>

In his efforts to describe God and his revelatory activity, Cone draws upon Paul Tillich's statement that man cannot describe God directly but must do so through symbols that point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally.<sup>23</sup> As a result, to speak in terms of Blackness is to speak symbolically, or more precisely, metaphorically, in terms of a reality that is omnipresent in this country, that of the oppressed situation of Black Americans: "The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol of a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America. . . . Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that their humanity is inseparable from man's liberation from whiteness."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury 1969) 213. This was later reissued by Orbis with a new introduction in 1989 and 1997.

<sup>20</sup> See Albert B. Cleage, Jr., founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, *The Black Messiah* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 216.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 25–26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

It is by means of this “shocking” statement, that “God/Christ is Black,” that Cone calls attention not only to the plight of the oppressed but also to that of the oppressor. His statement requires a new look at reality, the reality of Black and White existence in the U.S. It is because the statement “God/Christ is Black” comes as such a shock that he is able to reveal the continued presence of racism and discrimination in America. No one is shocked to hear that God/Christ may be White, that has been the prevailing assumption the Western world, based not on reality but on *hubris*, despite the fact that he was born a Jew in the Middle East. It is in just that juxtaposition of one reality with another which is totally, in the opinion of many, not only unrelated but actually almost heretical that the metaphor is born and that it works: “the metaphorical meaning instituted a ‘proximity’ between significations which were hitherto distant. . . . It is from this proximity that a new vision of reality springs up, one which is resisted by ordinary vision tied to the ordinary use of words.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Cone, in his reality-shattering statement, creates a “memorable” metaphor, one which “has the power of cognitively and effectively relating two separate domains by using language appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other.”<sup>26</sup> He says a reality that could not have been said in the normal terms of discourse and, thereby, succeeds in changing reality.

To be Black in the U.S. is to be oppressed, to be discriminated against, solely and specifically, because of one’s color and what that color signifies to the oppressor. To view reality from an oppressed perspective, one must become “Black,” not physically but ontologically. One must adopt the situation of the oppressed in America and live in it and work to overcome it. Cone contends strongly that no one can speak on behalf of another’s plight without sharing in the experience of that person or that person’s community. To attempt to do so is to place oneself above them as one who decides invalidly on the validity of their claims and their expressions. Thus, White theologians, because of their failure and refusal to participate in what it means to be Black in America, are incapable of speaking about the meaning of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who continue to be oppressed. They cannot be allowed to do so. The language is not the same nor is the interpretation of that language the same. Black theology therefore “must emerge consciously from an investigation of the socioreligious experience of black people, as that experience is reflected in *black* stories of God’s dealing with black people in the struggle of freedom.”<sup>27</sup>

It cannot come from White interpretations of how Blacks should feel or act. As a Black theologian, one must “speak the truth to the people” and

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics” 84.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>27</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed., 15.

also enable the people to speak for themselves. For the truth is inseparable from the struggle of the people. It is inseparable from their hopes and their dreams that arise from the agonies and defeats of that struggle. "Truth is that transcendent reality, disclosed in the people's historical struggle for liberation, which enables them to know that their fight for freedom is not futile."<sup>28</sup> To speak the truth from the Black perspective is to return to the sources of Black theology: the Black experience as expressed and witnessed in the history and culture of an oppressed but undefeated people. It is to return to the symbols that have arisen from that experience: God the Omnipresent Father who has revealed love for the oppressed in the Incarnation of the Son, Jesus Christ, and in his acts of liberation throughout human history.

### THE BLACK HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE AS NARRATIVE

It is in the narrative or story that the symbol and metaphor of God/Christ come together in a meaningful way. Here the historical experience of American Blacks lays the basis for an ecclesiology and an eschatology that are both an affirmation and proclamation of hope. This is the full flowering of contemporary Black theology.

Narrative is a form of discourse developed in the form of a story. This story is presented to a public and constitutes a reflection on past events, whether real or imaginary. Narrative opens a new perspective on life and on the future. It also represents the nature of the temporality of human existence.<sup>29</sup> Here we will be discussing historical, as opposed to fictional, narrative, for it is historical narrative which opens us to what is factually possible in temporality.

The narrative form can be seen to carry the weight of the past, to be marked by plot, to have its meaning perceived when read from the end, and to establish a unity of past, present, and future in the potentiality for being (the world before the text) revealed in the plot.<sup>30</sup> It is the plot that grounds the narrative giving it a teleological structure by calling us toward the conclusion while we continue to reflect on the events that have and are taking place within the story itself.

History presents a "truth-claim" that becomes involved with and ruled by the prevailing worldview. It is "interested" communication done from a particular perspective, with a particular ideology and commitment. The ultimate interest, when doing history, should be to enlarge our sphere of

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>29</sup> John W. Van den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutic of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982) 134–46.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," *Semeia* 13 (1978) 177–202, at 191.

communication. This is done, first, by trying to retain what is memorable—the values, the life and the social struggles of the past—in order to add them to the common treasure of humankind. Secondly, it is done by suspending one's own condition in order to preserve the "alterity" of the other in its difference. All history is about something or someone. It is about an achievement or failure in the lives of humankind as they live and work and play together in the community, society, and nation.<sup>31</sup> Black theology seeks to relate the history of a people who have survived slavery, discrimination and ongoing oppression. Their story is one of continued struggle against frightful odds, of determination against overwhelming pressures, of faith when all reason had fled.

In his theology, Cone presents a "truth-claim" that is Black. It is a "truth-claim" grounded in the experience of Black people in the U.S. Thus, his narration is the telling of a particular course of events that have meaning to a particular people, and as such, can and do impact upon the world in which it developed but that has also restricted it in its development. It is a Black truth, a transcendent reality, as stated earlier, which fuels the struggle for liberation. It is "a black truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people."<sup>32</sup>

It can be argued that it is precisely because the worldview of Black Americans and White Americans is so different that eventually a Black theology of liberation emerged to relate the true story of a people whose history and very existence has been ignored, denied and trampled upon for centuries. It reveals a different thought pattern—one that views the world from the eyes of those on the "underside of history"—those with no one to turn to but God, rather than from the eyes of the oppressors, who often mistake themselves for God. It would not be possible for Black and White Americans to have the same views about God/Christ because their *Sitz im Leben* has been so drastically opposite.

The story of the Black experience that Cone relates is one that catches our interest and holds it. Yet, it is a story that is still being told, a conclusion that has, as yet, not been written but is being lived out in the daily existence of the Black community. The Black heritage is presented and is identified as being part of each and every Black person, whether they are aware of it or not. Thus, it is history but a history that involves not only the past but also the stories of the present and the future, as the story of the coming to be of a people. It is because of the meaning that has been revealed in their history that Blacks have received the strength to go forward into the future. There is a communal destiny, not an individual one. It is as a people, they realize, that they are freed by their narrative to communicate in the fullest

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>32</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed., 16.

sense with, not only those who are living, but also with those who have gone before them and those who are still to come after them.

As narrative time takes us beyond “the death of antagonists”, it also takes us beyond the individuals’ fate and introduces us to public time,<sup>33</sup> a time that is with and for others. Cone’s presentation of the Black historical experience puts substance into this statement. He enlarges our sphere of communication by capturing and presenting to us those values and beliefs from the past that must be remembered, the “subversive memory” of the redemptive suffering of a people, and by distancing our own desires and preoccupations so that we can come to understand what is different about this world that he has revealed. That experience not only created but sustained community.

The importance of the community is its role as the source—both the past and continuing—of the story as it unfolds. It is the community which makes history by living out its day-to-day existence. And it is the Black community which, in so doing, makes up the Black Church.

#### THE BLACK COMMUNITY AND CHURCH AS TESTIMONY

The language of symbol, metaphor and narrative leads us to a witness, a testimony, a faith lived and believed. This is the faith of the Black Church. “Testimony applies to those words, works, actions and . . . lives which attest to an intention, an inspiration, an idea at the heart of experience and history which nonetheless transcends experience and history.”<sup>34</sup> Testimony negates the limitations of individual destiny. It is both statement and belief. It is the act of testifying and the story of the event which is being testified to. Testimony is both a category which refers back to the problem of evil and finitude and a symbol; it thus serves as affirmation while offering in hope while it, by occurring in the context of trial and judgment, engages the commitment and credibility of the witness in the Black community. It is a living testimony of how Blacks are able to survive. Cone sees the role of the Black Church both historically as it came to be and as it now is, as a challenge to the racism of the institutional Church. For him, the Church is more than buildings or an institution or hierarchy, it is the living body of Christ which exists to transform the world: “The black church was the creation of a black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the

<sup>33</sup> Van den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutic of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur* 144.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1980) 119–54, at 119.

overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power. For the slaves it was the sole source of personal identity and the sense of community."<sup>35</sup>

The Black Church also gave witness to the "loss" of faith that the Black community suffered in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. For it developed from a Church formed as a result of Black peoples' denial of a White interpretation of God for them to a Church that gradually became co-opted by the same White institutional churches from which they had originally departed. Although by so doing, the churches may have, to a certain extent, protected the lives of their people from the effects of racism, in so doing, they also lost contact with that liberating God they had formerly proclaimed.

The true role of the Church as witness to God's revelation in Christ as the liberator of the oppressed and downtrodden is to take action, concrete action on their behalf. For Cone, it is no longer a haven of safety but a radical sign of contradiction as Christ himself was. Its role is to be radically involved and accepting of the role of sufferer with its people.

To be a Christian Church, argues Cone, is to be an instrument of freedom. Justice's struggle must be a requirement for true Christian being. The Church must become politically involved. It must become one in solidarity with the victims, balancing its theology with its praxis.

The Church, as Cone perceives it, is a mission. It is and must be the model for the outreach that is incumbent upon all Christians, whatever their race. The Church cannot serve merely as a service station—where one goes to fill up on the Holy Spirit when one is running low. That time has passed, if it should ever have existed. The Church must be, and it is, a witness to what went on before and what is going on now and what is to come in the life of Black Americans.

For Cone, Jesus' death is also testimony—he is both accuser and accused, condemned and vindicated. His death is a testimony of the evil that can be found in humanity and of the love that can be found in humanity and of the love that is found in God. It forms the basis for belief by eyewitnesses and by those who have only heard and, in hearing, believed and, therefore, also have seen. This is the religious meaning of testimony. The one who witnesses is the one sent in order to testify. S/He does not testify regarding isolated contingent fact but about the radical, global meaning of human experience. The testimony is oriented toward proclamation, divulging, propagation; and it implies a total engagement not only of word but of deed.

It is a revelation of the Absolute, for the testimony is not that of the witness but that of the Other. It is a revelation for all people given in one

<sup>35</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 92.

people. Thus, as the Israelites confessed Yahweh initially by confessing their own deliverance, so Cone relates how Blacks confess God in the language of their own liberation, first from a similar enslavement and, in time, from all forms of enslavement. One who witnesses to the Absolute can do so only by witnessing to the historic signs, the acts of deliverance as they took place and continue to take place in history. Thus, it is in the liberative acts of God in their own history that Black Americans have seen and are able to testify to his meaning in their lives. And it is in those liberative acts of God that they have come to recognize him being "Black" in solidarity with their blackness.

The question has been raised: Do we have the right to invest a moment of history with an absolute character?<sup>36</sup> Cone would answer yes. For what is involved in testimony and its interpretation is the search for original affirmation and absolute knowledge in human consciousness itself, on which it is a judgment.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, for Cone, the story (narration) of Black people that reveals the liberating acts of God throughout their experience is a witness, no, a judgment on White America. For in their suffering and dying, Blacks are the witness who "... seals his bond to the cause that he defends by a public profession of their conviction, by the zeal of a propagator, by a personal devotion which can extend even to the sacrifice of his life. The witness is capable of suffering and dying for what he believes."<sup>38</sup> Blacks serve as witness and judge, as proclaimer of truth and convictor of falsity, as victim (judged) and victor (judge). It is this paradox which gives way to their hope.

God, therefore, for Cone, is an event that manifests itself in the events of history. God's interventions in history are historical facts that form the basis not only for God's revelation but for proclaiming that proclamation. In order to understand the otherness of the event that is God, it must be placed into an historical framework. And as God has remained true to God's own being, as Creator rather than destroyer of life, so African Americans have sought to be "true to their God" as sustainers and nurturers of life.

The Exodus story, as well as the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, are the events, par excellence, revelatory of God's nature. The temporality of these events is not limited or exhausted at the time they took place; rather they "remain an event of hope as the future of the

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, "Testimony" 142.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 154.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 129.

fulfillment of the promise.”<sup>39</sup> It is precisely the Resurrection of Jesus as future which determines the Black person’s future as a possibility that is not dependent on his/her own decision or power. The event is eschatological in character: “black people are now free to be for the black community, to make decisions about their existence in the world without an undue preoccupation with white ideas about ‘odds’ (we have all the guns) or victory (you cannot win). Ultimately (and this is what God’s transcendence means) black humanity is not dependent on our power to win.”<sup>40</sup>

### BLACK HOPE

I end with the formulation of a theological system that explicates the Black contention that God is with, for, and one with Black people. It is the symbol (God/Christ) that participates in making up the metaphor (Black God/Christ) that, in itself, becomes part of a narration (the Black story) that is a testimony to a faith—in God—that creates the beings who profess that faith (the Black Church and community). The Word of God erupts into our lives and transforms them, making us new beings able to reflect on the experience that is given us in his Word. For Cone, that Word is the Word of freedom, of liberation, the proclamation that God has come to free those enslaved. It comes in the form of kerygma which is hope, a hope founded/grounded in God’s liberating Word. God’s Word is a poetic happening, an evocation of an indescribable reality in the live of people. It is the embodiment of freedom.

It is a Word of hope that must be proclaimed. The story must be told. The basis for the hope must be preached also so that all may hear and be transformed by the “Good News.” However, in the proclaiming of that hope, there also lies the responsibility of living it—in solidarity with those who are oppressed. It is not a hope merely to be listened to but one that acts to transform those who hear the Word of God. The task of the Church is to proclaim that hope and to live it in witness to the coming of the kingdom.

Cone’s theology, Black theology, is a “passionate language” because it is a language of survival expressed as “God-talk,” a theology that translates into hope for the future. It is a theology committed in hope, a hope that it preaches as a revolutionary hope, a hope that overthrows the powers and principalities of this world in favor of those who are unwanted, unthought of, unloved.

<sup>39</sup> Van den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutic of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur* 225.

<sup>40</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., 77.

The hope that is preached is the hope of the Black community. It is the power that formed them and that keeps them alive today. Black hope gives Black people the courage to be themselves, to live their own lives, and to rejoice in that living. It is a hope that is alive, that is ongoing, ever-active, ever-becoming. It is a hope that “proclaims a yes to history as the primary focus of the manifestation of hope, but, at the same time, a no to any attempt to equate the movement of history with totality.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the kingdom is “here but not yet.” It is not fully realized but the Spirit of the Lord is working within God’s chosen to enable them to overthrow the shackles of poverty and oppression and the work for freedom and justice in this world, but also toward a freedom and justice that will not be totally fulfilled until Christ comes again.

It is an interpreted hope, one necessarily grounded in the faith and texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the texts of Sacred Scripture. To begin right is to begin, not with theological propositions, but from the source of those propositions and it is that source that is “the most originary expression of a community of faith.”<sup>42</sup> Cone would, I believe, affirm this statement while noting that each community must return to that source, to explore and interpret its meaning for itself out of its own lived experience of God’s revelatory events in its life. He stresses the need for Black theology to uncover “the structures and forms of the black experience because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself.”<sup>43</sup> Thus the hermeneutic is one that evolves not as an eternal circle, constantly repeating itself, but as a spiral, building upon the past, reflecting on the present while preparing for and moving toward the future.

In developing his theology of blackness, Professor Cone has explored the use of certain forms of language as they arise out of the Black context. It can be said that he has taken the bare bones of a philosophical hermeneutic of symbol, metaphor, narrative, and testimony and enfolded them, like Elijah, with the lives and voices of a particular people, an oppressed people, who, in the working out and coming to be of their own existence and their reality, have transformed theory into praxis.

### QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF BLACK THEOLOGY

Cone’s hermeneutic of language has served him and the Black community well as his use of symbol and metaphor, narrative and testimony has provided a strong foundation for a Black theology of liberation. In com-

<sup>41</sup> Van den Hengel 228.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 229.

<sup>43</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., 23–25.

pany with other such theologies, it continues to provide a critical voice in academia and a challenging praxis within U.S. society. Contrary to dire predictions at its birth as an articulated theology in the 1960s, Black theology has not only survived, it has served as a catalyst for the emergence of other such theologies, both in the U.S. and around the world.<sup>44</sup> In a sense, Black theology can be seen as "classic" in that it can be understood as a critical retrieval and interpretation of Christian tradition that has withstood the test of time, not just the 30 years since Cone's first writings, but the more than 430 years of conscious interpretation of Christian teachings and tradition that have taken place since the first African was brought to these shores and introduced to Christianity. Its ability to influence the development of other theologies of liberation reveals its value and significance for it encounters us as United Statesians with a definite authority and truth-claim that emerges from the Black historical experience in the U.S.<sup>45</sup>

Questions still remain, however, as we enter the fourth decade of a contemporary Black theology. Is Cone's hermeneutic of language still viable and, if so, what is its response to the critical questions and issues being raised by the second and third generations of Black theologians? While a full answer to this question would require another article or the lengthening of this one, it is important at least to note these questions here, especially as some of them were raised by critics of Cone and the first generation yet have still not been fully reflected upon and resolved.

First, how does Black theology address the issue of class or economic oppression? Ignored initially because of the emphasis on race, the Black middle class continues to grow and, as a direct result of the movements of the 1960s, has been able to move away from the economically depressed inner city to the suburbs. The result has been devastating for those left behind without access to jobs (because they also have moved out of the cities), decent education (because of the loss of a stable working and middle class which paid property taxes), and even access to religious institutions (many of which have moved to join their members). Too often, the churches left behind lack the economic ability to support major social, educational and other programs as the Black Church has done historically. No longer a source of liberation because of lack of contact with or sadly interest in those most in need, the Black Church is seen by many, especially those under 35, as incapable of or unwilling to answer their needs.

<sup>44</sup> In the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power/Black Nationalism Movements which were the catalysts for U.S. Black Theology, other oppressed groups in the United States began to develop theologies of liberation (women, Hispanics, and Native Americans were among the first) as did oppressed peoples in South Africa, Korea, and most recently, England.

<sup>45</sup> See F. Schüssler Fiorenza's discussion of classics in *Systematic Theology* 1.44–47.

Second, the Black Church has historically been one where men led and women listened and worked in the background. Womanist theologians fault the Church and its ministers and theologians for their failure to recognize the participation of women in the Black liberation struggle throughout history. As many of the second and third generation of Black theologians are women from every Christian Church, they challenge it to live in the 21st century as the egalitarian, liberating, and prophetic voice it must be if the Black Church and its theology are to survive. A critical aspect of the much needed dialogue on sexism in the Black Church is the recognition and denunciation of heterosexism which is also blatantly active. Womanists challenge the Church to recognize that oppression comes in many forms, all of which are equally sinful and must be eradicated.<sup>46</sup>

Third, as the Black Church and its theologians discuss the above critical issues, they must also address that of the growing dichotomy between the Black Church (and community) as the location for the praxis of Black theology and that theology's growing captivity within academia. Although it is vital that Black theology maintain ties with the scholarly world in order for critical dialogue and discussion, as well as the training of future Black theologians, to take place, there is a risk of further alienation of Black theologians from the Church and community which was its source. As a liberation theology, Black theology is both liberating for those doing theology and liberative of theology itself. A critical dialectic or tension exists for all Black theologians as they seek to respond to the demands of scholarship as well as the needs of Black Americans and all who are oppressed.

Fourth, there is a growing recognition by both Black theologians and Black ministers of the need for both interreligious and intrareligious dialogue within the Black community. Historically, Blacks have been involved in the former within their families whose members were often participants in different Christian churches, from Roman Catholic to Baptist. Greater emphasis on the need for dialogue across church boundaries within Christianity is needed. At the same time, intrareligious dialogue, something also familiar but rarely addressed in any depth, is also of importance as more Blacks leave the Christian churches to join other religions, especially Islam as well as, in lesser numbers, Buddhism, Judaism, and others. Will these changes continue the fragmentation of the Black community already reeling from economic and social blows or can dialogue enable Blacks to recognize and affirm that their struggle is still a united albeit much broader one?

Fifth, there is also a critical need for ongoing dialogue among theo-

<sup>46</sup> See Kelly Brown Douglas's critically perceptive evaluation of the Black Church in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

gians of African descent in Africa, the U.S., the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, South and Central America, and wherever the diaspora has carried them in order to further our understanding of how God is acting in our lives and how we can involve ourselves and our people at every level in helping to bring about God's kingdom on earth. In accordance with that goal, it is also important that we forge lines of communication with other communities of color in the U.S. and elsewhere in order to form a united front against oppression in all of its forms. Dialogue with those of European ancestry is necessary as well to enable the latter to understand the changes taking place globally where people of color are the overwhelming majority. How can we as theologians work together for the betterment of all humanity?

Finally, we must recognize the growing secularism and emphasis on individualism and materialism that has become a part of the Black community and develop strategies to deal with those who have been, in too many ways, lost to us, especially our youths. How do we reestablish in them a belief in a "wonder-working" God who has brought the Black community this far by faith and continues to lead us on?

Cone's hermeneutic of language emerged from within the Black community and Church. It served to articulate a longing for freedom and recognition of their humanity, heretofore voiced in song, story and words of praise, by a people forced into centuries of captivity and dehumanization against their will. Cone and those working with him to develop a liberating Black theology were able to bring to voice the deeply held faith of a people whose eyes were always watching God. The challenge for us today as Black theologians is to continue to articulate that faith as it emerges from the lives of persons of African descent throughout the world in ways that are expressive of their self-understanding and their ongoing journey with God.