

# BLACK THEOLOGY and BLACK POWER

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Today, many people can summarize what they believe God has to say about the liberation of women, about the liberation of lesbians and homosexuals, and about the rights of people with disabilities. Such movements and their related theologies have by now had a major impact on American culture. However, relatively few people recognize or acknowledge that all of these theologies were inspired by what Rev. Dr. James Cone had already articulated about what God has said about the liberation of African Americans. That is one among many reasons that James Cone is now acclaimed as one of the most brilliant and significant prophets of the 20th and 21st centuries. His book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was published at the end of one of the most turbulent decades in American history. Cone's book has provided answers to fundamental questions about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and these answers have sent shockwaves throughout all churches, black and white, and theological seminaries around the world. It has also inspired a wide variety of theologies later associated with a wide variety of liberation struggles that gained momentum during the decades following the publication of Cone's first book. Cone's theology was a radical shift from classic European theology. He rejected the notion that one was "free from sin" if one was free of private habits such as smoking, gambling, and "dirty dancing," and that God was somehow disengaged from this world. Instead, Cone focused on evils that were built into the structures of major societal institutions that oppressed African Americans and privileged white Americans. He identified God's abode as being among those trying to dismantle these structures, by any means necessary.

*Black Theology and Black Power* was the first of a series of books that both articulated Cone's theology of liberation and explained various aspects of both the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements among African Americans. His other books include *A Black Theology of Liberation; God of the Oppressed; Black Theology, Volumes I & II* (edited with Gayraud Wilmore); *[Malcolm X] & Martin & America: A Dream or A Nightmare*; *Risks of Faith*; *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*; *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism Liberation and Black Theology*.

## FULL TEXT

### BLACK THEOLOGY and BLACK POWER

Today, many people can summarize what they believe God has to say about the liberation of women, about the liberation of lesbians and homosexuals, and about the rights of people with disabilities. Such movements and their related theologies have by now had a major impact on American culture. However, relatively few people recognize or acknowledge that all of these theologies were inspired by what Rev. Dr. James Cone had already articulated about what God has said about the liberation of African Americans. That is one among many reasons that James Cone is now acclaimed as one of the most brilliant and significant prophets of the 20th and 21st centuries. His book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was published at the end of one of the most turbulent decades in American history. Cone's book has provided answers to fundamental questions about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and these answers have sent shockwaves throughout all churches, black and white, and theological seminaries around the world. It has also inspired a wide variety of theologies later associated with a wide variety of liberation struggles that gained momentum during the decades following the publication of Cone's first book. The book came off the presses in 1969, at the end of a decade of worldwide assassinations and political coups,

both within and outside the United States. In 1960, Cuban leader Fidel Castro and, Bolivian Che Guevarra forced Fulgencio Batista into exile, and then Castro nationalized, i.e., allowed his government to take over businesses that the United States had been operating in Cuba. In effect, he invited American businesses out of his country. In the aftermath, America cut off all diplomatic relations with Cuba. One year later, on January 17, 1961. African Head of State, Patrice Lumumba, was gunned down in the Congo. Two months later, over a two-day period, the United States bombed Cuba's airfields, and landed 1,500 Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs in an effort to overthrow Castro's government. Roughly one year later, the militaries of the United States and Russia - the world's two great superpowers - faced each other in the waters outside Cuba. The confrontation lasted for seven days, until Khrushchev backed down, all over the Soviet attempt to ship additional missiles and construction materials into Cuba.

Two years later, on November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas, Texas. Two years after President Kennedy' death, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City. One year after Malcolm X's assassination, Ghanian President Kwame Nkrumah was driven from office by the Ghanian military. Marxist revolutionary Che Guevarra was found murdered in Bolivia less than two years later (10/9/67). About one year after that, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee (4/4/68). Robert Kennedy was gunned down in Los Angeles while campaigning for the U.S. presidency roughly two months later (7/6/68).

Reporters, political analysts and historians throughout the world published the idea that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had carried out all of these assassinations and coups, and that the events were somehow connected. This decade also saw thousands of young American men drafted into the jungles of Vietnam, and being brought home in body bags. By the end of the decade, there was no end in sight to the Vietnam War. Moreover, leading news magazines in those days were carrying the cries of many white theologians: "God is Dead!"

Of course, this decade, and the one immediately preceding it, had also seen the rise and fall of the non-violent phase of the Civil Rights Movement. It saw Dr. King, through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), conducting non-violent demonstrations throughout the South and later in the North, and a gradual withdrawal of support from whites as King began to speak out against the Vietnam War. In the wake of the riots following King's assassination, the decade saw a surge in the Black Power Movement and witnessed the determination of a new generation to achieve economic equity for Black people, by any means necessary.

The impact of these events was also felt throughout African American churches. However, at that time, the Black church, in general, was still divided over whether to support the Civil Rights Movement. During this decade, and because of this issue, the Progressive Baptist Denomination split from the National Baptists. As the Black Power Movement gained momentum near the end of the decade, an Ad Hoc National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCCC) began to meet, feverishly trying to figure out what ail of this meant for the Black church. In the wake of the riots that followed Dr. King's assassination; ministers cried out for answers. They didn't know what to tell the members of their churches. Moreover, they didn't know what to do themselves. They realized that traditional "Pie in the Sky" sermons were no longer acceptable to their growing congregations, particularly those of the younger generation.

Eventually it was to James Cone, an African American theologian then working at Adrian College in Michigan, that they turned for answers. They asked questions like: Is the Black Power Movement of God? What do we tell our members about the meaning of these events? What should the church be doing in response? What, if anything, do these events actually tell us about God? In fact, Where is God in all of this?

No doubt many were astonished when Cone answered that God was not dead, as so many white theologians at the time were saying, but that God could be located fighting on the side of the oppressed in the Black Power Movement!! Cone told them that, in fact, Jesus Himself was Black, and was, that very day, among the oppressed. Cone spelled out all of this in his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, which came off the presses in 1969, roughly one year after Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination.

Cone's answers stood in stark contrast to those that too many Black churches had been adopting from white

churches since the very beginning of the Black church in America. Cone studied classic white theology for six years in graduate school and had yet to locate a white theologian who dealt with the issue of race and racism in American society. In fact, he found most American theologians turning their heads away from America altogether, and looking mostly to German theologians to tell them what God was currently doing in the world. He said that most theologians were busily reading papers to each other at academic conferences, while turning their heads away from the plight of the poor.

Cone said that white churches, for the most part, also ignored the Civil Rights Movement and the race issue in America, and that both white theologians and white churches were thereby contributing to the conditions that were giving rise to Black rage in America. Cone pointed out that one of the major problems in the Black church was that it borrowed white theology, rather than developing a theory of its own, based on the experiences of its people. White theology, he informed, was a theology that told Black people to ignore the conditions of this world and wait, instead, for a reward in heaven. Cone did not apologize for the angry tone that many white church leaders and theologians accused him of. He reminded both Black and white critics that he spoke just like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

Cone's theology was a radical shift from classic European theology. He rejected the notion that one was "free from sin" if one was free of private habits such as smoking, gambling, and "dirty dancing," and that God was somehow disengaged from this world. Instead, Cone focused on evils that were built into the structures of major societal institutions that oppressed African Americans and privileged white Americans. He identified God's abode as being among those trying to dismantle these structures, by any means necessary.

He also radically reinterpreted biblical passages, associating the Black Power Movement with the movement of the Israelites out of Egypt under Moses. Cone also radically shifted from focusing on creeds and platitudes to human experience, primarily the experiences of the oppressed. In essence, he directly associated Black Power with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Black people were no longer the "other," but were the dwelling places of God. All in all, Cone's theology gave the struggle of Black Power theological legitimacy.

Black Theology and Black Power was the first of a series of books that both articulated Cone's theology of liberation and explained various aspects of both the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements among African Americans. His other books include A Black Theology of Liberation; God of the Oppressed; Black Theology, Volumes I & II (edited with Gayraud Wilmore); Malcolm & Martin & America: A Dream or A Nightmare; Risks of Faith; For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church; Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism Liberation and Black Theology.

This year, Dr. James Cone is being honored for lifelong achievement in Black theology at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, which takes place in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Cone was born on August 5, 1938, in Fordyce, Arkansas. He grew up in the Black church. He earned a B.A. degree from Philander Smith College in 1958, and then attended Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, where he received the bachelor of divinity degree in 1961. He received both his master of arts and doctor of philosophy degrees in Systematic Theology in 1965, from Northwestern University. Since 1970, he has been teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he occupies the distinguished Charles A Briggs Chair in Systematic Theology.

Cone's books are available from Orbis Books, and via Web sites such as the Akiba Booksales ([www.tucc.org](http://www.tucc.org)), Amazon.com and Ebay.

### **Author Affiliation**

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## **DETAILS**

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