

CHAPTER 6: Why Cone and Novak?

6.1 Criteria

6.1.2 *Not Biblical scholars*

My choices¹ of Cone² and Novak³ as writers whose use of the Bible I shall examine needs some justification, for there are certainly other political theologians I could have chosen, and in addition, neither of them is professionally a Biblical scholar or hermeneuticist. In fact, however, this is a positive factor rather than a negative one: the emphasis in this thesis needs to remain evenly balanced between the Bible and its interpretation on the one hand, and political theology on the other. Again, given the practical, pragmatic, aspect of my analysis which I hope would be useable within other spheres beyond the academic, it will be helpful to be looking at writers without a particular Biblical expertise. There are a few theologians who may perhaps be seen as writing political theology, starting from Biblical or doctrinal foundations. I have in mind here writers such as Bauckham, Rowland, Corner, Fowl, and Gregory Jones. This is in contrast to those writing theologies of liberation, who have in common their decision to take as their norm their experience of oppression. But it is important to engage with those who take norms outside the obvious theoretical ones normally discussed in hermeneutics, and I have made my choice accordingly.

One further point could be made: both writers are American, and American culture, with its strong Christian, indeed Puritan roots, is steeped in Christianity and the Bible. A (Catholic) President such

¹ Practically speaking, Cone and Novak were brought to my attention by Professor Chris Rowland.

² James Cone - biographical remarks

James Cone is a black (or Black or African - the term currently preferred) American theologian; born in Fordyce, Arkansas in 1936, he grew up in Bearden, Arkansas as an active member of Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church, and studied at colleges in Little Rock and then at Garret Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois where he took a Ph.D. in 1965 on Karl Barth. He began teaching as a systematic theologian at Philander Smith College in 1964, and then moved to Adrian College, Adrian, Michigan in 1966 and is now Charles A Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

³ Michael Novak - biographical remarks

Novak was born in 1933 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to a Catholic family of Polish extraction. He pursued a vocation to the priesthood, attending seminary for twelve years before leaving his studies within months of ordination. He received a B.A. from Stonehill College in 1956, a B.Th. from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1958, and an M.A. from Harvard in 1966. He has taught at Harvard, Stanford, Syracuse, and Notre Dame Universities and holds the George Frederick Jewett Chair in Religion and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington D.C. think tank. He married Karen Ruth Taub in 1963, and they have three children.

as Kennedy could compare the American gaining of independence from Britain with the Exodus; Billy Graham has led prayers at Presidential Inaugurations. Biblical language is one of the registers which American orators naturally use.

6.1.3 Prolific

A more important criterion for my study is the quantity of writing produced by my chosen theologians: the greater this is, the more it will be possible to see their own conversations with others, and with their own situation, and the more it will be possible to see these conversations moving on.

6.2 Political Theologies

The majority of theologians writing political theology are working in the area of theologies of liberation. Liberation Theology (proper, if one may give it that adjective) springs from the South American situation, and is perceived as using Marxist tools in its analysis of poverty and the power structures within which it operates. Here such theologians as Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Segundo, Gutierrez, Fierro, and Bonino would have been possibilities. Dalit Theology, with writers such as Devasahayam, Azaraiah, and Massey, is highly Biblical, understanding itself as tackling caste rather than class. This would have made a good candidate, and could have been contrasted with more traditional Indian Theology, which has tried to draw on Hindu thinking, and has been concerned with issues of indigenisation. However, there does not seem to be a pair of writers sufficiently prolific, and in any case my interests have lain in other directions.

6.3 Black Theology and Cone

Black Theology (except for Black African Theology, which deals more with the issues of indigenisation⁴) on the other hand, is concerned with questions of racism – which ties in well with my initial interest in the examples in the introduction. It may be said to have begun, in America, on July

⁴ though the debate continues: see Emmanuel Martey: *African Theology: Liberation and Inculturation* (Orbis 1993) see also David Bosch : “Currents and Cross Currents in South African Black Theology” in *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol 6 No 1 1974 referring to W Eteki-Mboumoua : “Africa’s Cultural Revolution” in *South African Outlook* Oct 1969 where Eteki-Mboumoua points out the dangers of taking as resources cultural elements which have been vegetating, rather than being rethought, remade, refuelled: there is a danger of creating a “zombi” Christianity.

31st 1966 with the response to the then new phenomenon of Black Power in a 'Statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen'⁵, although of course (as Cone points out) the tradition of black religious and secular resistance to racism in America goes back to the start of slavery there. South African Black Theology's Mosala, and North American Black Theology's Wilmore,⁶ Roberts, (Deotis) West, or Hopkins or British Black Theology's Beckford would have been possibilities.

However, James Cone is one of the first and foremost exponents of Black Theology, and certainly the most prolific. Wilmore assesses Cone's work as an "historically unprecedented turning point"⁷ There is therefore, as one reads Cone, an exciting sense of being able to see a theology being born. Cone's writings are available in libraries and bookshops, and they are extensive, covering a wide range of time and responding to criticism and comment - so that a reader can get a good view of his opinions, and consider the changes in them. He writes with passion and commitment, which makes it challenging to engage with him.

6.4 Right Wing Theology and Novak

There seem to be very few writing from the right,⁸ and amongst these Michael Novak stands alone. Novak, winner of the highly prestigious Templeton Prize⁹ in 1994, has been writing prolifically in the area of cultural and political theology and philosophy for 30 years – his first book properly in this area arguably being The Experience of Nothingness in 1970.¹⁰ His influence in the corridors of power is at least a partial justification in itself.¹¹ His thinking, and that of his circle, has actually underpinned a huge social revolution in Britain and America – the New Right. A measure of his political influence is that Lady Thatcher's "memoirs note that Novak 'provided the intellectual basis

5 see Wilmore & Cone: Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979 (Orbis 1979) p 23

6 James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore have published two volumes of A documentary history of Black Theology (Volume 1: 1966-1979: Orbis 1979; Volume 2: 1980-1992: Orbis 1993)

7 Hopkins (editor): Black Faith and Public Talk (Orbis 1999) p 234

8 see Appendix 2

9 Created by John Marks Templeton – a Wall Street Fund Manager – in 1972 to be the largest annual monetary prize in the world as a worthy counterpart to the Nobel Prizes, but in issues of faith and spirituality, which he felt had been overlooked.

10 Michael Novak: The Experience of Nothingness (Harper & Row, New York 1970)

11 Novak, though probably more influential in those corridors of power than Cone, has been less widely known, and his works – except for The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (Simon & Schuster New York 1982) – seem to be less widely available than Cone's.

for my approach to those great questions brought together in political parlance as the *quality of life*.”¹² President Ronald Reagan named Novak US Ambassador to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations in 1981, and to the Berne round of the Helsinki talks in 1986. Novak’s views have changed substantially over his active career.¹³ In 1972, for example, he worked in support of the Presidential campaign of the democrat (liberal) George McGovern; but in 1980 he was active on behalf of the republican (conservative) Ronald Reagan. It is as a conservative, and writing in support of free market capitalism – democratic capitalism – that he has been particularly influential. The dynamic between those parts of Novak’s views which are constant, and those parts which change, makes an interesting and important route to understanding him. From my personal point of view, his concern with economics has been particularly interesting.

Novak is an appropriate counterbalance to Cone for several reasons. Like Cone, he is prolific. Like Cone, he is not a Biblical scholar: Cone is a systematic theologian actually using the Bible rather than a Biblical theologian studying the Bible; Novak would describe himself as a philosopher/theologian or perhaps as a political economist. Although, at first sight, Novak does not seem to use the Bible there is, as we shall see, Biblical material in his writing, and I believe it to be important to engage with the only significant writer on the right in this way. Both Cone and Novak are passionate in their writing, and their thinking is accessible. Both are American – again, passionately so. On the other hand, in contrast to Cone, Novak is writing, mostly, at the other end of the political spectrum; he is Catholic, of Polish extraction, where Cone is Protestant.

¹² Quoted in Awakening from Nihilism: The 1994 Templeton Prize awarded to Michael Novak (Cross & Anderson, editors) (Crisis Books 1995) p 29 The same authors discern Novak’s influence on Pope John Paul II in Centesimus Annus, in 1991

¹³ see Appendix 1 for a synopsis of his books which shows the gradual change.; see Novak : The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (Simon & Schuster New York 1982) p 200 for Novak’s own description of the changes in his thinking.

6.5 Liberation and Liberty

Cone is, in some senses, the first of the liberation theologians.¹⁴ His Black Theology, like many of the theologies of liberation, has an anti-capitalist tendency; Novak, on the other hand, is anti-liberation and pro-capitalism. In fact Novak actually attacks Liberation Theology in the name of liberty. They can be seen as opponents who come at each other sideways, as it were – in fact without either mentioning the other: Cone for liberation, Novak for liberty. Liberation or Liberty, command economies or laissez faire capitalism, affirmative action (positive discrimination) or strict equality: these – and the attempt to balance between them – are major areas of debate in our society, and Cone and Novak raise them all. Their writings, and the comparison between them will test my questions very thoroughly, and be worthy conversation partners.

¹⁴ Cone : Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969) and Cone : A Black Theology of Liberation (J B Lippincott Company 1970) (which contains the statement : “There is no real speech about God, except in relationship to the liberation of the oppressed”) (p 83) both predate the publishing of Gustavo Gutierrez : Telogia de la liberacion. Perspectivas CEP, Lima 1971). See Gary Dorrien : Soul in Society (Fortress Press 1995) p 238: “The claim was original to Cone.”