

## **CHAPTER 7: James H Cone and Black Theology.**

### **7.1 The Questions: some initial remarks**

In chapter 5, I proposed a number of questions which I claimed any person having an adequate conversation with the Bible should be able to answer. I now intend to put these questions to Cone. In doing so, I am not only testing Cone, but also my questions and the structure I have developed.

A general set of questions such as these may appear unrelated to the specific concerns of a particular theologian. Therefore, as I put the questions, there will be a certain amount of wrestling with them and a matching of them to the material they address. For example, there are major themes which recur in Cone's writing: oppression and suffering; violence - especially the violence of the repression of blacks by whites, and the possibly violent black responses to that; the authenticity and authority of the black view; black traditions of opposition and resistance; liberation from all sorts of slavery and oppression; the nature of racism as heresy and sin. In fact, discussions on these themes do arise within the course of my conversation with him about his conversation with the Bible.

There should be, too, an awareness of the methodology I have advocated and attempted. This will imply two things. First, it implies the need to sustain a recognition of the self-awareness which shaped the questions. I therefore need to make clear that unavoidable part of this discussion which comes from me (and which does pose problems - a white English man unused to black American rhetoric, and ignorant of the black experience of racism in America). I admit that whilst recognising the truth of many of his accusations I find difficult his complete denial to white churches of any right to be called Christian because of their complicity or worse in racism. Another problem for analysts of his work is the range of genres and styles he incorporates in his attempts to persuade: he uses in turn autobiographical material, systematic treatments, and the rhetoric and drama of apologetics. This needs to be taken into account in any consideration of his work, since (for example) it leads him into what might in other contexts be thought of as over-statement.

Second it implies that it is those things which are left over when I have fitted the material and questions together, or which are left unsaid, which may constitute the most important part of my

critique of Cone. This way of analysing Cone's work gives only one slant on it: the sum total of his thinking and his contribution to theology will not be covered by this thesis, just as it is not all reducible under the heading of a conversation with the Bible. This is only one way of approaching the material; however one of the more oblique tests of my series of questions will be the extent to which it is considered that I have done some justice to the whole range of Cone's writing and thinking.

## 7.2 Background

The middle and late 1960s were times of great difficulty for the black community. Malcolm X was murdered in February 1965, and between 1965 and 1968 there were 300 urban riots. Martin Luther King's murder in April 1968 confirmed both the evil of white America and the insufficiency of King's strategy. It was followed by weeks of riots. At the same time, the Nixon 1968 Presidential campaign saw pledges to reverse civil rights, a decrease in open housing, a halt to school bussing for desegregation, a reduction in Government funding for urban ghetto improvements, gutted affirmative action policies, and counter intelligence programs to disrupt black protest organisations.<sup>1</sup>

It is against this background, in which Cone saw both threats to his own people, and a more militant Black Power movement which was increasingly dismissive of the Black Church and its relevance, that Black Theology was born.

## 7.3 The Questions Applied

### ***7.3. 1) a) How has he fulfilled his responsibility for the rationality and clarity of the conversation?***

Cone writes very clearly for the most part, and with a passion and urgency which makes the reader keep on turning the pages. Although his writing is in places densely packed with images and ideas, he ensures that his sentences are not overlong, and his thoughts are ordered, so that it could not be called heavy or opaque.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hopkins : Black Theology USA and South Africa (Orbis 1989) p 42

Cone trained as a systematic theologian and this shows itself in the intellectual achievement which becomes apparent in the wide systematic development of Black Theology which he gives: for example, having laid down his basic hermeneutic principle - of God's activity of liberation for the oppressed peoples of the world - he proceeds to look at a variety of topics. In his very first book Black Theology and Black Power<sup>2</sup> Cone lays out a number of directions in which Black Theology is to be developed - for example "What is the Church?", "Eschatology" and so on. By God of the Oppressed<sup>3</sup> - to my mind the most complete of his books - he is setting out the framework for an Ethic of Liberation as well as for a whole range of other theological issues.

In all this, there is a sense of a theology being born; we are reading these things fresh and new, and from the hand of the person who, principally, is roughing out the whole shape of the picture that is Black Theology. As well as this creative achievement, there is an analytic one: Cone's description of the racism inherent in white Christianity is clear and damning; it leaves no room at all for anyone to hide - not even those blacks caught up in it. This is important for people to hear, and Cone makes sure that they do.

There are a number of issues raised by Cone's style of writing. A major point is that he does seem unsure of his audience. A second, wider point that his writing denies some of his readers the right to criticise has already been made.<sup>4</sup> The range of styles he uses has also been mentioned.

Dealing with the last first, I give five examples, which cover a range of what can only be described as rhetorical styles:

"The debate is over. There will be no more meetings between liberal religious whites and middle class Negroes to discuss the status of race relations in their communities. Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through *action*. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism. .... 'Revolution aims at the substitution of a

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2 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969)

3 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975)

4 see Chapter 5 Section 5.2

new system for one adjudged to be corrupt, rather than corrective adjustments within the existing system..... The power of revolution is coercive."<sup>5</sup>

"The black experience is the feeling one has when attacking the enemy of black humanity by throwing a Molotov cocktail into a white owned building and watching it go up in flames."<sup>6</sup>

"White rulers in society seek to evade the reality of their end by devising recreational hobbies. They play golf, vacation in distant lands, live in all manner of luxury..."<sup>7</sup>

"We have survived slaveships, auction blocks, and ....."<sup>8</sup>

"..... one's Christian identity is defined more by one's commitment to the liberation of the poor than by repeating a confession of faith in Jesus written by Europeans."<sup>9</sup>

There are some problems with using rhetoric. First, its normal context is live, and with an audience. It does not easily lift off the page in the way it can do when spoken and heard, and its overstatement seems more gross. Second, certain sorts of rhetoric are intended for certain sorts of audience - and presumably in this case black audiences<sup>10</sup> – who would have the cultural background to interpret it. Thirdly, and because of these two points, rhetoric is more open to misunderstanding than some other styles and genres of writing. Fourthly, Cone's rhetoric lies alongside other styles, (for example using words like *kerygma*<sup>11</sup>) so that the reader has constantly to change 'gear' (interpretative rules and strategy).

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5 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969) pp 135 f

6 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 25 Anderson wryly comments : "Although such a position seems revolutionary enough, such an act of racial frustration is not likely to transact cultural fulfilment." Anderson : Beyond Ontological Blackness ( ) p 89

7 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 136

8 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 206 There is almost an *anamnesis* here (cf "A wandering Aramaean was my father..." Deuteronomy ch 26 v 5 – as repeated in the Passover Haggadah)

9 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 86. The sense of Cone's argument here is that he sees Christian identity as defined by what you do rather than what you say - that is, both ancient and modern confessions of faith are under attack. It is hard to see in what sense those who wrote the creeds could be described as Europeans.

10 This is born out by the declared agenda of his first book: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) in which he sets out to be an apologist for Christianity to proponents of black power. Wilmore also uses similar rhetoric: eg "Cone erupted into print again in 1970 with a ringing challenge to almost two thousand years of white Western theological domination." From: A critical reflection on: Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation - Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Orbis 1990) p 146.

11 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 111

There is a further related problem - Cone's choice of books as the medium for his message. In other writers it would perhaps matter less, but in Cone, who has been so sharp about denying whites (presumably among the potential purchasers of his books) the right to comment, it does seem to be a weakness. If he writes for poor blacks, why in expensive, academic tomes? if for whites or middle class blacks (in the hope that they will be changed - and rightly) why deny their questions any validity?<sup>12</sup>

In picking out the following occasions where Cone's thinking is inconsistent or unclear, it should not be inferred that he is unusually (or usually) so. First, relating to the limitations of history and culture, Cone accepts that

"there is no place we can stand that will remove us from the limitations of history and thus enable us to tell the whole truth without the risk of ideological distortion. ... But this concession is not an affirmation of unrestricted relativity. We can and must say something about the world that is not reducible to our own subjectivity."<sup>13</sup>

However, later in the same book, he attacks Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley for tolerating slavery:

"We cannot say that Luther, Calvin, Wesley and other prominent representatives of the Church's tradition were limited by their time, as if their ethical judgements on oppression did not affect the essential truth of their theologies. ... they were wrong theologically because they failed to listen to the Bible - with sufficient openness and through the eyes of the victims of political oppression."<sup>14</sup>

Now, Cone is perhaps right that it should always have been seen that slavery is wrong.<sup>15</sup> But sadly, we are conditioned by history and culture, and we do accept things that later generations will see as scandalous: we do not always manage to make these leaps of understanding, nor even to follow

<sup>12</sup> Cone would respond (I think less than adequately) that once again blacks would be in the situation of seeking authority from whites.

see, for example Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (2nd edition: Orbis, 1986) pp 8-10 see also note 4 (relating to page 7) printed p 143 NB I think there is a misprint in the book here and notes 4 and 5 have been transposed.

see also eg: Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) : p 118 "...Black Theology is not dependent on white perception."

<sup>13</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury 1975) p 102

<sup>14</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury 1975) p 200

<sup>15</sup> See the references given above in the Introduction for a discussion of alternative interpretations of the *Haustafeln*

promptly those enlightened people who do stand out from their contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> If Cone takes to himself the right to judge people outside their context, he will end up with a Marcion-like guillotine of the Bible. But in fact Cone has accepted the truth of this earlier (as the first of the two quotations – “there is no place we can stand...” - shows) and later has to admit the truth of it as it relates to himself.<sup>17</sup>

As well as this inconsistency, there is an historical inaccuracy. The examples he gives were from different periods and different cultures and the institution of slavery was very different in each setting. The highly racist large-scale slavery to which Cone reacts so strongly was a product only of the West during the eighteenth century. In any case, at least one of the leaders quoted (John Wesley) did oppose slavery, as did some other Christian leaders of the time, and many ordinary people from Methodism and other denominations.

Second, the need for roots and traditions has led to some less-than-careful thinking. Of course a great deal of research has been done into the survival of African language and thinking under slavery. It has been shown that there are survivals in the Caribbean, but that in the United States of America survivals may be rarer because there was a greater dispersal of slaves<sup>18</sup> so that one slave owner might not own two slaves from the same tribe, and there was a more repressive system,.

From Marcus Garvey onwards, there has been a movement to return to Africa, and also to find roots.<sup>19</sup> Associated with this is the need, pointed out by Wilmore and others, for Cone to find black sources for Black Theology, because otherwise it will be defined by white theology - even if only in opposition to it. Perhaps the clearest symbols of this are discussed in Martin and Malcolm and America<sup>20</sup>, where Cone comments on Malcolm X's encouragement for blacks to love Blackness. The phrase 'black is beautiful' seems to have come out of the thinking of the Universal Negro

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16 I wonder if future generations will consider us all barbaric because most of us eat animals.

17 He comes to accept that his attitude to women and sexism has been unenlightened. See below 134; see also Chapter 9 Section 9.4

18 This dispersal was part of the repressive system – it was thought to reduce the likelihood of rebellion. See below 112 and footnote Error: Reference source not foundError: Reference source not found

19 see Alex Haley: Roots (Picador 1977 and other editions)

20 Cone: Martin and Malcolm and America (Fount 1991) see p 200 ff

Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey and others in 1914 in New York. For example, Bishop George Alexander McGuire, Chaplain General of the UNIA and founder of the (black nationalist) African Orthodox Church set up a painting of a Black Madonna and Child at the 1924 UNIA Convention in Harlem, New York.

Another source of this thinking is the idea of *negritude* which first arose in two black French-speaking poets: Leopold Senghor (born 1906, writing in the 1930s, President of Senegal 1960 - 1980) in Senegal in West Africa, and Aime Cesaire (born 1913) in Martinique in the Caribbean.

This second source is unacknowledged by Cone;<sup>21</sup> perhaps it is inadvertent but it does stand as a symbol of the fact that Cone, although a Black American, is not an African. The way in which Africa is seen as a unitary culture, with language, tribal, and religious differences glossed over by many Black American writers seems to me to show an ignorance of the realities of Africa which underscores the point that (sadly) many of their roots have been destroyed; no amount of wishful thinking can bring these roots back; I guess that in fact many or most Black Americans would find a return to their African roots uncomfortable. The real tragedy is that at the same time Black Americans are, as Cone points out, also dispossessed in America; they are not allowed to share in the American dream either. Neither Martin nor Malcolm can achieve what they want. Like refugees, in truth they have no place either in the country from which they came, nor in that to which they have gone.<sup>22</sup>

The third example of not thinking things completely through has to do with the way in which Cone deals with his black opponents. For him, white opponents are easily dismissed: they are racist, sinful and heretical, and black theology need take no account of them. Cone reserves some harsh words for black opponents who have 'sold out to the enemy'; for a share in the American pie they have forgotten their poor and oppressed brothers and sisters:

21 in fact the first source is not shown clearly either!

22 cf J Deotis Roberts : A Black Political Theology (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1974) p53 "Most blacks do not need a *real* home in Africa; they need a *symbolic* home there."

cf Kee : Domination or Liberation (SCM 1986) p 53 "It is strange that in all the talk about Africa in American black theology, it is Africa as an idea which is important, and not the contemporary experience of Africans."

cf David Bosch : "Currents and Cross Currents in South African Black Theology" in Journal of Religion in Africa Vol 6 No 3 1974 "Africa – particularly South Africa borrows from America [in the field of Theology] but America adopts virtually nothing from Africa. The reason for this is obvious: the American Negro lacks the real cultural context in which African Theology is taking shape. He is, religio-culturally, simply not an African any more. . . . The traditional kinship system of the West African Negroes who were shipped to the Americas centuries ago as slaves was in this process totally destroyed. Their American descendants of today can find no real anchor any more in that cultural past."

"Indeed there are First World enclaves in Third World countries in that they share the capitalist values of white Americans and Europeans. The same is true among those blacks in the U.S.A. who define freedom in terms of their equal share in the American capitalist pie with no thought whatsoever of changing the economic system so that the true causes of poverty could be eliminated not only in the U.S.A. but throughout the world."<sup>23</sup>

Even those who share Cone's unease with a system based on greed for the acquisition of goods might think that Cone's words amount to a kind of cultural imperialism against those - black and Third World capitalists - who do not share his views. When dealing with Roberts (who opposes Cone on questions of violence and integration and reconciliation<sup>24</sup>) Cone initially exhibited similar tendencies.<sup>25</sup> If you claim that theology arises out of experience, those who share the experience but not the theology cause great difficulties.

There is another example (of thought not carried through) also connected with the relation between experience and theology in the same book. Cone's first premise, as I have said, is that theology must arise out of experience, and he has a fairly exclusive view of experience:

"Only black women can do black feminist theology: their experience is truly theirs. Therefore, even if white feminists were not so racist and black males were not so sexist, there would still be a need for black feminist theology. The need arises from the uniqueness of black women's experience. If theology arises out of the attempt to reconcile faith with life, and if black women have an experience of faith in God that is not exhausted by black women or white men, then there is a need to articulate the faith of black women so that the universal church can learn from their experience with God."<sup>26</sup>

Later in the same book he develops this point:

"Every theology ought to move beyond its particularity to the concrete experiences of others. No theology should remain enclosed in its own narrow culture and history. That has been the awful mistake of the dominant theologies of Europe and North America. They talk about God as if Europeans are the only ones who can think....."<sup>27</sup>

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23 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984): p 145

24 Deotis Roberts : Liberation and Reconciliation : A Black Theology (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1970) see Chapter 9 Section 9.5.1

25 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 239 see below : Section 7.3.2.a where I discuss Cone's view of oppression as a validation 123 ff

26 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984): p 135

27 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984): p 173



This implies a vision of a universal church informed by the particular experiences and theologies of all its members, each authenticated for itself by the experience which gives it birth.<sup>28</sup> However, Cone also wishes to apply his hermeneutical principle of the liberation of the oppressed, so that only a particular class of experiences can validate - only the poor can develop truly authentic theologies. There is a sort of imperialism: that only one kind of experience really counts.

Yet another inconsistency here relates to the claim that theology must arise out of the experience of oppression - without assistance from the oppressor. Yet Cone cites the support of Douglass as a key factor in the approval of the resolution on women's suffrage from the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.<sup>29</sup> However, Douglass, whilst black, was also a man. Is this not an example of the oppressor's support for the oppressed? How does this square with Garnet's claim quoted approvingly by Cone that 'if slaves would be free, they must themselves strike the blow'<sup>30</sup>.

These are very minor problems, yet they serve to illustrate some of the basic difficulties with Cone's thought - especially with regard to the relation between different sorts of theology owned by the different parts of the Christian community.

***7.3. 1) b) How has he fulfilled his responsibility for the content of the conversation – having appropriate knowledge of philosophy, literary critical theory, Biblical studies, theology, the world as it is (politics, economics... ), the current intellectual climate etc – and a willingness to learn?***

Clearly this is not a difficult set of questions for Cone to answer - he would not have gained a doctorate, and become a professor at Union Theological Seminary, without a great competence in a

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28 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984): footnote 78 printed on p 219

29 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984): p 123

Frederick Douglass : "The Rights of Women" (first published in the North Star) in ed Philip S Foner : The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass (International Publishers, New York 1950) pp 320-321

see Benjamin Quarles "Frederick Douglass and the Women's Rights Movement" in Journal of Negro History Vol 25 No 1 (Jan 1940) pp 35-44

30 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 39

H Garnet : "Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" (1843) reprinted in Henry H Garnet and David Walker : Walker's 'Appeal' and Garent's 'Address to the Slaves of the United States of America' : American Negro : His History and Literature Series (Arno Press, New York 1969)

whole range of intellectual disciplines. However there is still some interest in the answers to the questions.

First, although a systematic theologian himself, he does pay attention to Biblical studies. For example in A Black Theology of Liberation looking at the concept of God in black theology, he examines the Genesis accounts of the creation and argues that the priestly narrative, put together during the Babylonian exile (and therefore at a time when Israel was suffering oppression), makes assertions about God's relationship to the oppressed of the land.<sup>31</sup> Later, in the same book, he argues that because Genesis 3 was probably written during the time of Solomon (that is - after the Exodus), it is a theological reflection on the experience of alienation from the source of existence (that is God and the Exodus) couched in universal terms.<sup>32</sup>

He is, of course, passionately concerned about theology: Black Theology is "a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the Gospel to black people under white oppression."<sup>33</sup> "It is a prophetic word about the righteousness of God that must be spoken in clear strong and uncompromising language."<sup>34</sup>

Cone feels that theology addresses the ultimate and central questions of our time - racism and oppression and resistance to them. It is no academic game, designed to keep him in a job, but a life and death matter for the black people he wishes to serve. He will marshal his knowledge of Biblical criticism, and of other areas of theology, to this one central aim: speaking a liberating word to the oppressed peoples of the world.

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31 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 75

32 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988): p 105

However, in God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) where pp 72-81 Cone discusses the New Testament and the way in which the Gospels reveal God's work, he does cite parallels, but there is a sense in which he is using a harmonisation of the Gospels with an emphasis on Luke, rather than pursuing the distinctive view of each particular gospel. For example, on p 78, he refers to Matthew 11.28-30 (my yoke is easy...) which does not have any synoptic parallels, having focussed on Luke 4.18-19 (The spirit of the Lord is upon me) (again no parallels) on p 75. On p 79 he looks at the Lucan version of the beatitudes, without examining the Matthean version and the differences between the two. By p 80 he returns to Matthew 18.10 (do not despise these little ones, they have their guardian angels ...) again without parallels.

33 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969): p 31

34 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988): 1986 Preface: p xii

In his earlier writings, as Wilmore<sup>35</sup> points out and Cone himself admits, Cone started from an intellectual and academic foundation.<sup>36</sup> It was unavoidable that he should do this, because these sorts of tools were all he had. He needed to do this for academic credibility, so that even when he turned to black sources he reviewed what scholars have said:

"... slave songs have been assessed from a variety of directions. It is important to note briefly this history of scholarly interpretation, in order to define the scope of the present study."<sup>37</sup>

As has been pointed out, he turned to black sources only after he had written his first two books; at first he treated the question of sources as an academic question, balancing Barth's view of the Bible as the primary source against Tillich's view of culture as the primary source<sup>38</sup>. At this point he seems to write in an academic, almost detached way, as if there were a choice of sources available for a community. However later, and in response to criticism, he uses black sources more centrally.

He employs a range of other academic and philosophical sources: Feuerbach and Marx<sup>39</sup>; Tillich and his method of correspondence<sup>40</sup>; Pannenberg<sup>41</sup>; Niebuhr<sup>42</sup>; Barth<sup>43</sup>; Sartre and the existentialists<sup>44</sup>. Again it is worth noting that these references are largely from his earlier books; later Cone is more confident and more equipped to proceed without reference to other academic writers, and more orientated towards other, black, sources such as spirituals and slave sermons.

35 Gayraud S Wilmore : Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York 1973)

36 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988): 1986 Preface: pp xii, xviii ff, etc

37 Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992): p 9

38 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988): p 21 Cone refers to Tillich : The Theology of Culture (Oxford University Press, New York 1959) p 28 and Tillich Systematic Theology: (University of Chicago Press 1951) Vol 1 p 47 and to Barth : The Word of God and the Word of Man (trans Douglas Horton : Harper and Row, New York 1957) p 68

39 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 178 f  
Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 39 - 41

40 see Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 21, 59  
and also Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 40

41 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 117

42 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 85 - 87

43 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 21

44 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 11, 28

Since this question is about the level of mastery of academic and intellectual skills, it is appropriate to include here a discussion of Cone's manipulation of the symbol of 'blackness'. I have already outlined a brief history of the origins of the 'black is beautiful' theme, which was taken further with books like Cleage's: The Black Messiah<sup>45</sup>, and which Malcolm X<sup>46</sup> and then the Black Power movement took on. The employment and development of 'black' as a symbol is central to Cone:

"In this connection we may observe that black theology takes seriously Paul Tillich's description of the symbolic nature of all theological speech. We cannot describe God directly; we must use symbols that point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally. Therefore to speak of black theology is to speak with the Tillichian understanding of symbol in mind. The focus on blackness does not mean that *only* blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America."<sup>47</sup>

Cone refers to the acceptance by the black community of any symbol as his test for it: "Black theology cannot create new symbols independent of the black community and expect blacks to respond."<sup>48</sup> The symbol of Blackness and Cone's development of it have been a key part of Black Theology, and much debated, as we shall see.

We have already touched on the idea of a Black Madonna and Child, and of the Black Messiah.<sup>49</sup> Cone speaks of Jesus as the Oppressed One<sup>50</sup>, and as the Liberator<sup>51</sup>, and, since the black community is oppressed, and Jesus is existentially relevant to them, Jesus is black: "If he is not black as we are, then the resurrection has little significance for our times..... The definition of Jesus as black is crucial for christology if we truly believe in his continued presence today."<sup>52</sup>

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45 Albert Cleage: The Black Messiah (Sheed and Ward; New York; 1968)

46 Cone: Martin and Malcolm and America (Fount 1991) pp 290 f

47 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 7

48 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 59

49 see above 112

50 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 117

51 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 120

52 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 120

From this, the link between 'black' and 'poor' and 'oppressed' can be surmised, and Cone does indeed make these links<sup>53</sup>; 'oppressed' and 'minority' link up with the idea of 'Jewishness' - and Cone makes that link too:

"It is on the basis of the soteriological meaning of the particularity of his Jewishness that theology must affirm the christological significance of Jesus' present blackness. He *is* black because he *was* a Jew."<sup>54</sup>

In much the same way, Cone links blackness with liberation, with God's Kingdom, with the oppressed community, and with eternal life. He contrasts 'blackness' with 'whiteness' - so that: "Reconciliation to God means that white people are prepared to deny themselves (whiteness) and take up the cross (blackness) and follow Christ (black ghetto)."<sup>55</sup>

In other words, Cone describes the process of conversion as a change from whiteness to blackness - and this is the only way of hope and salvation for whites: "There will be no peace in America until whites begin to hate their whiteness, asking from the depths of their being: 'How can we become black?'"<sup>56</sup>

As I pointed out above (in the discussion under 1) a) about Black Americans and Africans<sup>57</sup>) there is a sense in which this symbol of blackness is an ambivalent symbol, because whilst Cone and those before have reclaimed blackness as something very positive - in a very important way - there still remains the fact that it also represents that severed link with Africa. Martin and Malcolm, also used as symbols by Cone, show this very well:

"Martin and Malcolm represent the two sides in W E B Du Bois's concept of double identity - they represented, respectively, the American and the African, the two warring ideas struggling to make sense of the involuntary presence of Africans in North America. During the early part of their participation in the black freedom movement, their answers to Du Bois's question, 'What am I?' were clear, emphatic, and opposite: 'American' was Martin's answer and 'African' was Malcolm's. The battle between them, to a large extent, was fought in the white media, which portrayed them as adversaries. But they were not. On the contrary, they were like two soldiers fighting their enemies

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53 see Cone: [A Black Theology of Liberation](#) (Orbis 1988) p 24

54 Cone: [God of the Oppressed](#) (Seabury Press 1975) p 134

55 Cone: [Black Theology and Black Power](#) (Seabury Press 1969) p 150; see also pp 147 - 152

56 Cone: [A Black Theology of Liberation](#) (Orbis 1988): 1986 Preface: p v

57 see above 112

from different angles of vision, each pointing out the other's blind spots and correcting the other's errors. They needed each other, for they represented - and continue to represent - the 'yin' and 'yang' deep in the soul of black America."<sup>58</sup>

There is one other point which belongs here: although Cone uses Tillich and his method of correspondence,<sup>59</sup> and existentialism - and these are fundamental to him - in fact he can be seen as a structuralist. Structuralists see the world in terms of pairs of binary<sup>60</sup> opposites which give meaning to each other. Cone is very near to this position in his use of blackness and whiteness: although they refer initially to skin colour, of course whites are not actually white nor blacks black; again in extending them to become symbols Cone needs to use them in opposition to each other to give each other meaning; thirdly, if whites had not been so racist, colour would have been irrelevant, but as it is blacks need to reassert blackness:

"Among other things, this [II Corinthians 5.19] means that the wall of hostility is broken down between blacks and whites, making colour irrelevant to man's essential nature. But in a white racist society, Black Theology believes that the biblical doctrine of reconciliation can be made a reality only when white people are prepared to address black men as *black* men and not as some grease-painted form of white humanity."<sup>61</sup>

He makes a similar point about the Black Christ<sup>62</sup>.

One aspect of this structuralist view is the need to see everything in sharp terms, and on opposing sides. In a world where the oppressors blame the victims, and load guilt onto them, it is probably important to have clear enemies. Indeed, one of the main criticisms of liberals from revolutionaries is that by making the situation a little better, but still loaded with inequality, you keep the oppressed

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58 Cone: Martin and Malcolm and America (Fount 1991) pp 270 f

59 Tillich Systematic Theology (University of Chicago Press 1951) Vol 3 p 4

60 Anderson points out a weakness of this type of view: "When black life is fundamentally determined by the totality of a binary racial dialectic that admits no possibility of cultural transcendence, the African American theologians hold few prospects for effectively ameliorating the social and existential crises that bind black life." Victor Anderson : Beyond Ontological Blackness ( ) p 117

61 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 147

62 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 123: "But some whites will ask, 'Does black theology believe that Jesus was really black?' It seems to me that the literal colour of Jesus is irrelevant, as are the different shades of blackness in America. Generally speaking, blacks are not oppressed on the basis of the depths of their blackness. 'Light' blacks are oppressed just as much as 'dark' blacks. But as it happens, *Jesus was not white* in any sense of the word, literally or theologically."

quiet, and pre-empt genuine revolution.<sup>63</sup> There are other examples of Cone's use of binary opposites: rich and poor<sup>64</sup>, 'Thou' and 'It'<sup>65</sup> are two pairs.

**7.3. 2) a) *How has he fulfilled his responsibility about being honest and authentic about himself – recognising his own presuppositions and commitments?***

"What theologians regard as the central issues of their discipline, therefore, cannot be separated from their place in society, from what they think, believe, and are seeking to do in society. Hence, the social location and interests of theologians must be critically evaluated in order to understand why they do theology the way they do, and why they advocate certain views and not others. This may appear to some professional theologians as a minor and self-evident point; but the vast majority of white theologians are not always honest about it...."<sup>66</sup>

Cone is therefore concerned about the 'location and interests' of others, and of himself; clearly the very fact that he is black and American is a location for his writings, but the autobiographical nature of My Soul Looks Back,<sup>67</sup> and the more generally cultural nature of The Spirituals and the Blues<sup>68</sup> confirm a more precise recognition of himself, explored below. A question which cannot be answered is whether his location of himself is accurate and complete.

He attempts to articulate his assumptions:

"There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused..... My definition and the assumptions on which it is based are to be tested by the working out of a theology which can then be judged in terms of its consistency with a communitarian view of the ultimate..... The definition of theology as the discipline that seeks to analyze the nature of the Christian faith in the light of the oppressed arises chiefly from the biblical tradition itself."<sup>69</sup>

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63 see Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 26

64 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 94, 95

65 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 23 etc

66 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 29

67 Cone : My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986)

68 Cone : The Spirituals and The Blues (Orbis 1972, 1992)

69 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 1 f

It is interesting (since what causes problems is precisely his view of what the Christian community is) that in fact he does not return to "a communitarian view of the ultimate", nor does he explain more fully what this means. Nor is it transparently the case that this type of theology arises chiefly from the biblical tradition itself; if it were, then why have so many Christians so easily missed the point? One answer might be, for example, that they were blinded by affluence and power; those living in poverty and under oppression were not so blinded, and therefore saw the biblical tradition clearly. However, if this is accepted, it shows that the crucial thing for a correct understanding is the situation of the person looking at the Bible, and not the Bible itself - yet Cone seems to be wanting to get his authority for his view of theology from the Bible interpreted solely by itself. This is not a problem peculiar to Cone.

At the centre of Cone's self-perception is the claim to share the injustices experienced by blacks, by the poor, and by the oppressed. "Middle-class white and black Christians, whose daily experience of injustice is minimal when compared to that of the poor, are in no moral position to tell poor people what to do about injustice. We earn our right to speak for the poor when we share their lot."<sup>70</sup> (He also speaks of "...the hermeneutical privilege of the poor"<sup>71</sup> and of God's option for the poor.) This claim gives him the right to assert his authority and credibility. In a section on authority in his first book, Cone writes: "Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters."<sup>72</sup>

However, aware that many preachers (both white and black) have abused their positions of authority, Cone attempts to distance himself from that. Writing about black male attitudes to black women, he criticises "Black ministers" who "use all available intellectual and religious resources, including twisted biblical interpretations reminiscent of slave-owners' sermons, in order to justify their privileged position."<sup>73</sup> However, he is more gentle with what he sees as a slightly different abuse of power when he alludes to the scandals about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X which at one time were raised by various people:

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70 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 72

71 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 104 and  
Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 151

72 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 120

73 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 90, p 122



"However compliance with their professed moral code is not the central criterion for judging the degree or quality (of the two men's - Martin's and Malcolm's) religious commitment. I contend that the depth of any religious commitment should be judged by one's commitment to justice for humanity, using the liberation activity of human beings as the lens through which one sees God."<sup>74</sup>

To define Cone's location more precisely, I turn briefly (having already covered much of this ground above) to three root areas - his experience, his theological and philosophical models, and the current situation.

With regard to his experience of life growing up black in the USA, and the centrality of his blackness, in his first book he writes:

"This present work seeks to be revolutionary in the sense that it attempts to bring to theology a special attitude permeated with black consciousness. .... This work further seeks to be revolutionary in that "The fact that I am Black is my ultimate reality." My identity with *blackness*, and what it means for millions living in a white world, controls the investigation."<sup>75</sup>

And in his second book:

"More than any other text I have written, A Black Theology of Liberation represents the new start I tried to make in theology. Alone in Adrian, Michigan, searching for a constructive way in theology that would empower oppressed blacks, the motive of liberation came to me as I was rereading the Scripture in the light of African-American history and culture."<sup>76</sup>

There is a sense of his taking on the whole of black history and the black experience - I have already mentioned his "*anamnesis*" with regard to the slave ships and auction block; he also talks for example about the rats in the ghetto<sup>77</sup>, and other experiences which presumably he did not share directly.

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74 Cone: Martin & Malcolm & America; p 165

75 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 32, quoting Maulana Ron Karenga

76 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p xxi (1986 Preface)

77 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 28

Cone's theological roots do include such theologians as Barth, but the main influence seems to come from Tillich, and his method of correspondence<sup>78</sup> which says that theologians should begin with questions arising from the cultural situation of humankind, and shape their interpretation of source material (the Bible, tradition) to correspond. Philosophically, he has links with the existentialists, but latterly Marx's thinking has become more important.<sup>79</sup>

At the point at which Cone began writing, there was a sense amongst young black leaders that Christianity was inescapably a tool of the oppressors, and Cone saw himself as an apologist for authentic Christianity - it was in this spirit that he wrote Black Theology and Black Power<sup>80</sup>. This sense of wishing to stand with black Christians and yet also with Black Power, with America<sup>81</sup> and yet also against it, runs right through to his latest book Martin & Malcolm and America, where Martin & Malcolm become symbols for different strands of his thinking.

This survey of Cone's location raises three areas of questioning. The first relates to Cone's claim to authority for Black Theology, which he bases on the experience of oppression and suffering. He describes some experiences in My Soul Looks Back - for example, several incidents from his childhood, and the attitude to his academic career at the Garrett Biblical Institute,<sup>82</sup> and at Philander Smith College.<sup>83</sup> However, would Cone admit that, as Charles Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, his experiences of racism and poverty are now very different from those of the poor blacks on whose behalf he is writing?<sup>84</sup> – even though “racism

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78 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 21, 59 and many other references  
Tillich Systematic Theology (University of Chicago Press 1951) Vol 3 p 4

79 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) pp 107 ff, pp 123 ff  
Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 182

In the notes to For My People (Orbis 1984) on pp 255, 256 Cone acknowledges how Cornel West, and his journeys to Africa, Asia, and Latin America and his encounters with Third World theologians on those continents have influenced him. He cites mostly secondary sources for Marx, and as a further reference : Cone : The Black Church and Marxism : What do they have to say to each other? (Institute for Democratic Socialism 1980)

80 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 32  
Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 215

81 "this is my country" Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 4

82 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 29

83 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 40

84 Of course this cuts both ways because Cone, as a 'middle-class / professional' Black person has in some senses more to lose and less to gain from his attacks on Whites, and also less credibility with the black poor. Alistair Kee : Domination or Liberation (SCM 1986) p 35 makes a related point about Cone's double jeopardy as a middle class black, and possibly as a Reverend 'Uncle Tom.'

runs deep even among seminary professors.”<sup>85</sup> Again, in claiming experience of oppression, Cone needs to distance himself from various elites: "Unfortunately all institutional white churches in America have sided with capitalists, rich, white, male elites, and against socialists, the poor, blacks and women"<sup>86</sup> - yet of course he is male, and therefore one of the oppressors, as well as one of the oppressed.<sup>87</sup>

A much deeper question is whether the experience of oppression is the only validation<sup>88</sup> for theology. Cone rightly points out that the questioning of oppression by those who are not oppressed can be a way of drawing attention away from the real questions<sup>89</sup> and says that experience of real oppression is linked to understanding of real liberation, but his argument here is circular; authenticity is denied to those who do not fit in with what he sees as authentic.<sup>90</sup> Oppression is experienced in different degrees - does this lead to a threshold, below which theology would be inauthentic? - or to varying degrees of authenticity?<sup>91</sup>

A last point on Cone's search for validation and on Black Theology's rootedness in the situation of oppressed minorities is that Black Theology, when looking more widely than itself, turned first to Third World minorities, and to Black and Liberation Theology there, and only then looked in

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85 Cone : My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 28

86 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 182

87 for Frederick Douglass see above 114

NB see above 113 for Deotis Roberts and others who share the experience but not the theology

88 It is an interesting nuance, whilst considering Cone's arguments for validation, that on occasion he speaks of Black Theology almost as something outside himself (see Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 45: 'Black theology agrees with contemporary theology.....According to black theology.....'). Of course Black Theology is something beyond Cone, since he is not the only exponent, but at the point when this was written he was the only published writer, and it feels as though there is an attempt to grasp something not quite in reach.

89 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 148 ff

90 This is the justification for my question above - whether his experience and understanding are authentic?

91 This subjective element to racism and the experience of it has parallels with a current debate on the Lawrence Enquiry: is British law to see racism as a subjective matter – if the victim feels the attack is racist, then it is – or should British law attempt to define racism objectively. See Martin Mears: “Why Sir William was wrong about race” in The Times 1<sup>st</sup> May 2001

America at other oppressed minorities.<sup>92</sup> Now it is true that it was these Third World minorities who first began writing what they called Liberation Theology<sup>93</sup>, and this will have made them visible; but by this time, it was the late seventies, and the situations of such minorities in the USA as the 'poor whites', and the Hispanics were known. There was then a certain lack of awareness which was out of place when claiming to speak for the poor; as truly committed to the cause of the poor, and of justice for all, should black theologians not have made immediate links with their own neighbours? It could be claimed that Cone had done this with his use of the symbol of blackness but this would be to ignore Cone's own insight into the particularity of suffering and the theology which results from it.<sup>94</sup>

The second area of questioning relates to his philosophical roots. Cone recognises that there are Christian problems with Marxism, and black problems with Marxism, as there are Marxist problems with Christianity, and black Christianity. On the first, he says that Christians who use Marxism see it as a tool of analysis rather than as a world-view<sup>95</sup>, but he acknowledges that work needs to be done. It is interesting that Dalit Theology rejects both Marxism (with its class analysis) and Black Theology (with its race analysis) in its dealings with the caste system.<sup>96</sup> Cone himself actually makes a similar point – that Marxist analysis does not deal with racism.<sup>97</sup>

The final area of questioning here relates to the links between the Christian Gospel and Black Power: Cone, in discussing Cleage,<sup>98</sup> is aware that a complete identification is not possible:

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92 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 157

93 Although Cone was writing what he called Black Theology, he has been described as the first to write liberation theology – by Hopkins See Hopkins: Black Faith and Public Talk (Orbis 1999) p 4

94 see below 147

95 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) pp 123 - 138; especially p 131

96 see ed V Devasahayam Frontiers of Dalit Theology (ISPCK / Gurukul 1997) Devashayam: "Introduction" p xiii ; Franklyn Balasundaram : "Dalit Theology and Other Theologies" pp 254 ff

97 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 94 see below page 134 footnote Error: Reference source not found A further (related, but minor) observation. One of the most important categories for Cone in dealing with racism is that of sin and heresy: I discuss this below (144) in more detail, but broadly speaking, he sees racism as both sin and heresy. Whilst the concept of heresy may be said to be found within Marxism, that of sin is absent. Perhaps Marxism cannot analyse racism: the point is not conclusive, but the question seems to stand.

98 Albert Cleage : The Black Messiah (Sheed and Ward, New York 1968)

"Cleage was attempting to interpret the Christian faith in such a manner that it would be antithetical to everything Europeans had said about Jesus and his gospel. He wanted to create a church that would be truly black and Christian, and unreservedly identified with the black power message of liberation as defined by the black radicals..... all members of the radical black clergy supported him in spirit even though many rejected his literalism. Cleage's association with black power led him to conclusions that many of us found questionable on both theological and historical grounds..... On the negative side, his theology illustrates what happens when black theologians reduce the Christian gospel to a *literal* identification with the ideology of black power."<sup>99</sup>

However, this leaves unanswered the question of what the relationship between the two should be. Cone does feel that there should be links, and it is Black Power's rejection of Christianity as inescapably white which leads him to write his first books. This leads to the question of his vision for Christianity.

Cone is passionate about black suffering, and about injustice generally. He also cares very deeply about Christianity, seeing in it a source of hope for despised people, and of liberation for the oppressed. However, his vision of 'what might be' is much more difficult to establish.

At the beginning of Black Theology and Black Power (his first book) Cone writes:

" It may be that the importance of any study in the area of morality or religion is determined in part by the emotion expressed. It seems that one weakness of most theological works is their 'coolness' in the investigation of an idea. Is it not time for theologians to get upset?"<sup>100</sup>

Cone fully meets his own test, in giving importance to black suffering. The claims to authority based on experience of suffering have already been mentioned. His interest in how people manage(d) to survive is another area - and Cone gives a sensitive account of the support felt by blacks during slavery and its aftermath from their faith in Jesus.<sup>101</sup> Another of Cone's tasks (the most important at this point in post-slavery society) is to argue that resistance to suffering and to struggle against oppression are Christian duties. Later in the work just quoted, he uses Tillich's thinking on the association between love, power and justice, and the contrast between Thou and It<sup>102</sup>;

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<sup>99</sup> Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 34 - 36

<sup>100</sup> Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 3

<sup>101</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 192

<sup>102</sup> Martin Buber: Ich und Du / I and Thou (Eng trans : Ronald Gregor Smith : T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1937)

“The new black man refuses to assume the It-role which whites expect, but addresses them as an equal. This is when the conflict arises. Therefore the new black man refuses to speak of love without justice and power. Love without the power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless...”<sup>103</sup>

He wishes to change our ideas about love, to ensure that black people are not trapped by false Christianity.

In the same way, asking us to rethink our ideas on the vocation to suffering, he argues that

'The suffering that Jesus accepted and which is promised to his disciples is not to be equated with the easy acceptance of human injustice inflicted by white oppressors. God cannot be the God of blacks *and* will their suffering. To be elected by God does not mean freely accepting the evils of oppressors.'<sup>104</sup>

In fact he admits that the existence of black suffering causes problems with what he sees as black faith; but that even those problems of meaning and purpose will not deflect blacks.<sup>105</sup> To be sure, the fight against suffering and for freedom will involve further suffering, but this will be suffering freely accepted by black people on their own behalf, and with some purpose.

Faith, too, is tested not 'on theoretical criteria, but on whether it leads people to fight against oppression and despair.'<sup>106</sup> 'Faith [is] necessary if [blacks] are to survive oppression, and analysis [is] necessary if [blacks] are to overcome it.'<sup>107</sup>

Another area about which he is passionate is blackness which becomes, as discussed above<sup>108</sup>, something positive rather than negative; a symbol for righteousness, and being "on God's side".

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103 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 53

104 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 81

105 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 194

106 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 13

see also Malcolm X quoted by Cone: 'I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won't let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion.' Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 71

107 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 197

108 see question 7.3.1.b 114

These reshaped ideas run counter to white Christianity's most longstanding notions - about love and suffering and faith, for it might be said that it pays lip-service at least to more passive, gentle, non-violent views of these matters. Cone would argue that it is only lip-service, since we have been doing and continue to do violence to black people every day. Further, he is not advocating violence (for example) for its own sake - but for the sake of something better - God's coming presence:

"[Jesus'] coming presence requires that we not make any historical struggle an end in itself. We struggle because it is a sign of Jesus' presence with us, and of his coming presence to redeem all humanity. His future coming therefore is the key to the power of our struggle."<sup>109</sup>

However, Cone remains vague about the actual shape of this coming kingdom. 'Walls of hostility will be broken down'<sup>110</sup>; humanity will be transformed<sup>111</sup>; freedom will "include the whole of the inhabited earth"<sup>112</sup>; it will not be male dominated, and will be democratic and socialist; it will include a "rainbow coalition" with all the disadvantaged of the USA and throughout the globe; it will be "accountable to many religious visions"<sup>113</sup>.

Whilst Cone expands his vision a little here, looking beyond the present struggle with oppression,<sup>114</sup> this vision is really expounded in detail only in one section of one of Cone's books<sup>115</sup>, and even there it is in fact vague:

"We need a vision of freedom that includes the whole of the inhabited earth and not just black North America, a vision enabling us to analyse the causes of world poverty and sickness, monopoly capitalism and anti-democratic socialism, opium in Christianity and other religions among the oppressed, racism and sexism, and the irresolute will to eliminate these evils."<sup>116</sup>

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109 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 132

see also Cone: Martin & Malcolm & America: p 294: "The beloved community must remain the primary objective for which we are striving."

110 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 147

111 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 217: "Our intention is not to make the oppressors the slaves but to transform humanity, or, in the words of Fanon, 'set afoot a new man.'" see also p221: "Oppressed blacks and other people of colour are the only signs of hope for the creation of a new humanity in America."

112 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 193

113 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 203 - 206

114 cf Chapter 9 Section 9.1.4.2 for Anderson's comments on Black Theology as a theology of survival : Victor Anderson : Beyond Ontological Blackness (Continuum, New York 1995) p 87

115 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) Chapter X: Where Do We Go From Here?: pp 189 - 207

Even Cone's six specific elements remain vague: an emphasis on black unity through an affirmation of black history and culture; the best in the integrationist tradition; the new social order must be anti-sexist; it should be democratic and socialist, including a Marxist critique of monopoly capitalism; it must be a global vision that includes the struggles of the poor in the Third World; it must affirm the best in black religion.<sup>117</sup>

Again, the nuances of the relationship between his vision of the future and his view of America are complex. He does say that: "we need to do more than try to be assimilated into white American society...."<sup>118</sup> but he also says "I am critical of America because this is my country"<sup>119</sup>. It seems to me that he does in fact care about America as a nation, as well as about its black people (or white), and in contrast to the way in which, say, most European theologians would write about a vision of the future. In other words, and unsurprisingly, his vision has in it a particular place for America (and perhaps the American dream - "we hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal...."<sup>120</sup>). I would argue that the wrestling with these ideas in Martin & Malcolm & America confirms this suspicion.

What is more certain and more clear is his plea for a new way of thinking about and doing theology - as he describes in his first book - "from the perspective of black enslavement"<sup>121</sup>. He returns to this

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116 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 193, 194 He continues (p 201): "The vision of a new social order that we need should not be taken from any one person... and should not be dependent upon the charism (sic) of Martin King or Malcolm X or any current aspirants to the mantle. The vision should be the result of a group of committed persons whose love for freedom is deep and broad enough to embrace and consider many viewpoints..... The chief requirement should be commitment to the freedom of all and a willingness to suppress one's ego in view of the needs of the community."

117 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 202-204 Another example of its imprecision may be found earlier in the same book: (p 137) "I realize that many women give the appearance of accepting the place set aside for them by men as is still true of blacks in relation to whites..... Saying that women like their place is no different from saying that blacks like theirs." Clearly the extreme that Cone describes, of women or blacks having to accept a lowly place allotted to them, is unacceptable; but then the other extreme, where everyone defines their own place, is impossible - and so we may ask, what is his understanding of society and of personhood, and of the good and bad mixed up in human beings? In the chapter under review, when talking about his vision, he repeatedly uses the phrase: "we need a vision that....." setting out requirements, but not what the vision is.

118 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 193

119 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 4

120 The American Declaration of Independence, 4th July 1776

121 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 50



point in the introduction of his second book<sup>122</sup> speaking about a "fresh start" and develops and broadens it in later books as he claims that the right to speak for the poor comes from a sharing of their lot<sup>123</sup> and a valuing of their history and culture. It is here that Black Theology comes to the same conclusions as, and so makes links with, and claims to be, Liberation Theology.

Cone puts it very clearly:

"If God is the God of the poor who is liberating them from bondage, how can we speak correctly about this God unless our language arises out of the community where God's presence is found?

My limitation of Christian theology to the oppressed community does not mean that everything the oppressed say about God is right..... To do that would be to equate the word of the oppressed with God's word. There is nothing in Scripture which grants this possibility.....

..... to be outside this community is to be in a place where one is excluded from the possibility of hearing and obeying God's word of liberation."<sup>124</sup>

It is important and helpful to have the discontinuity between God's word and that of the oppressed community expressed in this way; the identity of the oppressed community within which God's word of liberation is confined is a matter for later discussion.<sup>125</sup> For now there are two points about Cone's view of this word of God: for the oppressed God's word is one of comfort, strengthening, and encouragement; for the oppressors God's word is of prophetic judgement.

When theology is done 'bottom up', holiness becomes a radical challenge to the values of this world, the Gospel a refusal to accept the things that are as the things that ought to be.<sup>126</sup>

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122 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (1990 edition p xii; 1986 edition p xv)

123 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 72  
For My People (Orbis 1984) p 147 & p 166

124 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 9

125 see below, the discussion on question 3)b) 137

126 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 36

### 7.3. 2) b) *How has he fulfilled his responsibility about being open to listening and to changing?*

Although Cone says that he is not interested in white criticism of Black Theology and denies whites the right to criticise,<sup>127</sup> he does explicitly talk about the right and need to ask questions of others:

'It is not my intention to question the integrity of any black civil rights leader or public official, but we do have the right (indeed the responsibility) to put certain questions to all those who say that they serve the people. Why is it that so many of our leaders' actions bespeak concern about their own personal success rather than radical commitment to the black poor? Why can they not think new thoughts.....?'<sup>128</sup>

In fact Cone demonstrates through successive works his determination to take on board the criticisms in several different areas of those he respects. He writes: "By really hearing what they said, we are taken out of the subjectivity of our present. .... Indeed it is when we refuse to listen to another story that our own story becomes ideological, that is, a closed system incapable of hearing the truth."<sup>129</sup>

First, he has been ready to criticise himself publicly.

"...there are still significant problems to be addressed in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of black theology in terms of its origin and present state. And if we black theologians are hesitant to critically evaluate our work, then we should ask: for whom do we do theology - for ourselves or for the black poor? If the latter, then we must critically evaluate our work in order to assess whether it is accomplishing what we claim..... As one of the early interpreters of black theology I cannot claim to be perfectly objective in my evaluation. Despite this limitation, I shall attempt to be self-critical regarding black theology...."<sup>130</sup>

He has indeed carried through this program: "Some of my discussions with white theologians degenerated into shouting matches .... I must admit that I was often as arrogant toward white theologians as they were toward me."<sup>131</sup>

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127 see above in Chapter 5 section 5.2

128 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 199,200

129 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 104

130 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 77 & p 79

131 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation: p xiv (1990 edition)

Second, he has attempted to listen to the black community: "Black theology cannot create new symbols independent of the black community and expect blacks to respond. It must stay in the black community and get down to the real issues at hand....."<sup>132</sup> There are several distinct sections of the black community to whom Cone has been prepared to make himself answerable: other black theologians; the black church; black tradition and sources; black non-Christian critics.

Amongst black theologians Wilmore, and Cone's own brother Cecil Cone<sup>133</sup> have been perhaps the most influential, but others have played their part: Harding,<sup>134</sup> Long,<sup>135</sup> Mitchell,<sup>136</sup> and many others. They highlighted the way in which Black Theology defined itself as a reaction to white theology, its permeation with the American dream, its lack of grounding in black sources. In For My People, Cone devotes the whole of Chapter IV (Strengths and Weaknesses in the Early Development of Black Theology) to this.

Cone responded quickly to the point about black sources<sup>137</sup> and by 1972, two years after the publication of A Black Theology of Liberation, had published The Spirituals and the Blues. In it he began to use the traditions and historical materials of the black church to show how resistance to slavery and oppression had been sustained by Christianity, and what features it still should have. Fourteen years later, he was looking more broadly to talk about a Black religious tradition not defined by slavery.<sup>138</sup>

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132 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 59

see also eg: Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) pp 58 -61 for an evaluation of the importance of the black community in surviving suffering.

133 Cecil Cone : Identity Crisis in Black Theology

134 Vincent Harding : The Other American Revolution (Center for Afro-American Studies, Los Angeles 1980)

Vincent Harding : There is a River (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1981)

135 Charles Long : "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States" in History of Religions Vol 2 No 1 (Aug 1971) Long and Mitchell were particularly important for their work on Black religion.

136 Henry Mitchell : Black Belief (Harper and Row, New York 1975)

137 see Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 61, 82, & 86 for general background and Wilmore's particular contribution.

138 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 1 & pp 17ff

The relationship between Black Theology and Cone on the one hand, and the black church on the other, has also caused him to reflect deeply - again in an entire chapter of For My People (Chapter V: Black Theology and the Black Church), as well as throughout that book. That Black Theology was marginalised by the black church as well as white theology, Cone regards as equally the fault of the black church and Black Theology. Part of the difference between them lies in their different attitudes to capitalism, with the black theologians arguing that black churches and black ministers were too desirous of a share in the American pie, and too conservative, and the black churches perhaps feeling that the black theologians were too radical, and preferring a more pragmatic and less challenging stance. Part lies with the move by black theologians into seminaries and colleges. Cone describes some signs of hope in the involvement of some black theologians in ministerial training, and goes on to hope that the two will turn to each other for the sake of the black poor.

Just as with his attitude to America, it is interesting to note that Cone is emotionally tied up with the black church, and in a completely natural way prepared to criticise the black church strongly from within, whilst being defensive when confronted by criticisms from those outside:

"Rejecting the black church and the Bible would have been like rejecting my mother and father.... Although I recognised some truth in the nationalists' arguments, it was clear to me that, like white theologians, they did not really know the black church they were criticising..... I will never forget the speech that David Hilliard of the Black Panthers gave to black Christians.... I have never heard anyone so rude and insulting as he was.... After hearing Hilliard and others like him, I realised the extent to which white oppression had twisted the minds of our revolutionary leaders..... How could they claim to love the black community when they could not even take the time to understand the role of the church in our physical and mental struggle. I came to the conclusion that I could not participate in a revolution that did not include my mother! And she believed in Jesus and was firmly committed to the black church."<sup>139</sup>

Cone feels keenly his failure to see that women are an oppressed majority, with black men being as guilty of sexism as whites are of racism. By 1984 he was classing lack of gender analysis as a major weakness of early Black Theology,<sup>140</sup> and writing:

"Although black male theologians and church leaders have progressive and often revolutionary ideas regarding the equality of blacks in American society, they do not have

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139 Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) pp 56, 57 Is there an ambiguity here? Perhaps the American Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, as well as Mrs Cone (senior), are referred to in the penultimate sentence quoted.

see also Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 215

140 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 96 ff

similar ideas regarding the equality of women in the black church and community. Why is it that many black men cannot see the analogy between racism and sexism.....?"<sup>141</sup>

In 1986, on the re-issue of A Black Theology of Liberation, in the new introduction to that book, Cone described his embarrassment at this, and made its language inclusive, whilst admitting that this was a small though significant thing to do.<sup>142</sup>

Two other weaknesses Cone describes in that same 1986 introduction are his attitude to other minorities in the world (especially the Third World) and his attitude to Marxism. Again, he had already addressed these in For My People, having by then a broader understanding of oppression and poverty, and the place of Marxism as a tool for the analysis of economic exploitation. There is a more detailed discussion of these above.

The awareness and correcting of these last three weaknesses may be seen as part of the convergence between Black Theology and other Liberation theologies, to which the particular contribution of Black Theology is awareness of the issue of racism: "...Marxist analysis was conspicuously absent in my perspective on black theology, and an analysis of racism was conspicuously absent in [Assman's<sup>143</sup>] theology (and he a citizen of Brazil with more than 40 million blacks!)"<sup>144</sup>

There is one major question put to Cone, to which he admits<sup>145</sup> that he has no answer: William Jones makes the point that if God is truly liberating blacks (as Black Theology says), why are they not now free?<sup>146</sup> Cone's thinking about a black eschatology, in he which also had to cope with this problem, may be a partial answer. The question about the achievements of Black Theology is considered below.<sup>147</sup>

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141 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 123

142 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation: (1986 edition) pp xvii ff (1990 edition pp xv ff)

143 Hugo Assman : Practical Theology of Liberation (Search, London 1975)

144 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 94

145 Cone : My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 62

146 William Jones: Is God a White Racist? (Doubleday, New York 1973)

147 see the discussion on questions 3) b) 137 and 3) d) 167.

This readiness to admit weaknesses and to show that he is prepared to listen, and the glimpses so given of Cone as an emotional, passionate, developing, human being are important in two ways. They make Cone more approachable, and even at his most provocative and disturbing compel us not to abandon engagement with him. Second, that his style works in this way supports my contention in this thesis (and Cone's in his writings) that theology is not an abstract, neutral, unengaged exercise but is done by living, feeling human beings whose personalities and psychologies are to be included as an essential part of the theological points being made.

### ***7.3. 3) a) How has he fulfilled his responsibility to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which raises matters of faith and life?***

"I maintain that the authenticity of black theological discourse is dependent upon its pointing to the divine One whose presence is not restricted to any historical manifestation."<sup>148</sup> In these words Cone is attempting to respond to two criticisms of Black Theology - that it is too completely identified with black politics, and that it is an entirely human creation<sup>149</sup>. He wishes to establish it as orthodox Christianity - indeed as the only orthodox Christianity. However, the quotation serves also as an introduction to this question by showing that Cone is determined to keep God at the centre of Black Theology.

It is noteworthy that there seems to be little in Cone on the Holy Spirit. Of course, that gap might be pointed out in the thinking of most of the churches, but perhaps we might have expected Cone to turn his thinking that way, given the strength of the Black Pentecostal Churches, and given his concern (described below) with what Jesus is doing now rather than what he did.<sup>150</sup> Part of the potential problem for Cone in appealing to the Holy Spirit is that almost anyone (including the rich and oppressors) can claim that the Holy Spirit is active in their lives, but with Jesus, there is the Gospel evidence of his care for the poor.

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148 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 84

149 cf Feuerbach's critique of religion : Feuerbach : The Essence of Christianity (Eng trans George Eliot 1854)

150 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 208, p 222

One of the most important categories for Cone (and, he points out, for black religious thought<sup>151</sup>) is that of God's justice and sovereignty. God is active on behalf of the oppressed, expecting us to be the same<sup>152</sup>; he stands in judgement on all political systems<sup>153</sup>; his love and righteousness contain elements of wrath<sup>154</sup>; he will confront evil, not as neutral judge, but as the judge who wills what is right<sup>155</sup>; his Lordship (and that of Jesus) take precedence over any human lordship<sup>156</sup>.

As creator, God has made human beings in his image - as a designation of their freedom<sup>157</sup>; as an indication that our meaning and purpose are to be found in him, and not, for example, in the attempts of other humans to tyrannise<sup>158</sup>; and as an identity that transcends human barriers<sup>159</sup>.

God - particularly in Jesus - has chosen the poor<sup>160</sup>, has even become the victim in their place<sup>161</sup> and appropriated their ideas and actions as his own<sup>162</sup>, making their condition the battle ground for freedom. He has created and commanded liberation which we must accept by fighting for it so that free from oppression we can be free for God<sup>163</sup>.

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151 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 84

152 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969) p 51

153 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969) p 87

154 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 68 - 70

155 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 100, 101

156 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969) p 137

Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 122

157 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 90 - 94

158 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 75

159 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 82

160 Cone: Black Theology & Black Power: p 36

161 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 80

162 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 98 This seems to contradict somewhat the ideas that: a) God is not to be identified so completely with one particular way of thinking; b) he gives words of his own, as consolation and encouragement, to the poor.

163 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 232, 233

In Jesus' resurrection we see God's decisive sign of hope even in a hopeless situation, for he is not defeated by oppression, but makes a 'way out of no way'.<sup>164</sup> Jesus, since the resurrection, continues to be active in the world, so that we do not ask, 'What would Jesus do?' but, 'What is he doing now?' We find the answer to that in the interplay between our own social context, and the stories of the Bible which tell how Jesus experienced suffering and cried with pain.<sup>165</sup>

It is hard to establish much about Cone's spirituality. In My Soul Looks Back, and The Spirituals and The Blues Cone gives information about the kind of church and style of worship in which he was brought up. In Speaking the Truth, he describes the split between the black theologians and the black church is described<sup>166</sup> and perhaps a further insight is offered when he writes:

“We have heard a great deal about the black church being a *praying* church, and one of its most prominent pastors, Harold Carter, has written an important book on that theme, The Prayer Tradition of Black People.<sup>167</sup> I have nothing against prayer, because it does "change things" and is thus an indispensable element in Christian life and worship. But so is critical theological reflection. Black churches ought also to be thinking churches.... It is important to note here that the growth of anti-intellectualism and a disdain of serious theological reflection in black churches are a recent development. All historians of the black experience give special tribute to black churches for their emphasis on education during and following slavery.”<sup>168</sup>

***7.3. 3) b) How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the Christian (and Jewish) communities, which are creators and carers, and which are interpreters in their own right, with other conversations – some from the past, and some from the present?***

This section has produced the largest amount of material, which may perhaps be partly because Cone's views in this area provoked the strongest reaction in me. However, it is in this section that all of Cone's major themes are to be found: suffering and violence, the authenticity of the black

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164 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 77, p 118  
Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 126

165 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 108 - 110  
Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 208, p 222

166 See above

167 Harold Carter : The Prayer Tradition of Black People (Judson, Valley Forge; 1976)

168 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p118



experience and its tradition, resistance to oppression and racism. This indicates that for Cone too, it is an important area.

It is interesting to think about the process by which Cone came to hold what appear to be his views. The process begins with anger against the white community generally, and the Church particularly, for its racism. The white and black Christian communities are, in Cone's milieu in America, more or less separate in any case, and Cone takes the view that the black Christian community is the only true one, defined by its suffering and solidarity with the oppressed. Even the black community receives some anger and criticism, since parts of it have as Cone sees it been subverted, and parts remain inactive. The task of Black Theology is to recall the black Church to its true vocation; Cone turns to black sources to strengthen Black Theology for this task.

This overview gives a useful shape to the initial part of this section, after which I draw attention to some of the problems with Cone's view which he is aware of, but apparently fails to pursue, and to some which he does not raise at all.

In Black Theology and Black Power, published in 1969, Cone catalogues the failures of the white church:

"If the real Church is the people of God, whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world by proclaiming the message of the Gospel (*kerygma*), by rendering services of liberation (*diakonia*), and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society (*koinonia*), then the empirical institutionalised white church has failed on all counts."<sup>169</sup>

Over the next eleven pages of that book, Cone attacks the white church and its failure. It was not against lynching, it did not fight against slavery, but rather owned slaves, it was relieved to have separate black and white congregations and churches, it has not helped suffering blacks in the poverty of the ghettos, and it has not supported Black Power in trying to help. His conclusion is that:

"It is a sad fact that the white church's involvement in slavery and racism in America simply cannot be overstated..... Racism has been part of the life of the Church for so long that it is virtually impossible for even the 'good' members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the Church..... [but] [r]acism is a complete denial of the Incarnation and thus of Christianity. Therefore the white denominational churches are unchristian."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Cone: Black Theology & Black Power: p 71

<sup>170</sup> Cone: Black Theology & Black Power: pp 72, 73 see also pp 80 - 85  
see also Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 243: "...just because we sometimes worship alongside them should be no reason to claim that they are truly Christians..." and Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 52

Six years later it was still a major pre-occupation for Cone when, in eight pages of God of the Oppressed, he made a devastating critique of the assumptions and mind-set of white American Theology<sup>171</sup>. Nine years on again, in 1984, he was looking at black Catholic experiences of racism<sup>172</sup>, and at white North American leftists using "the Latin American reality in order to avoid the reality of oppression, especially racism in the U.S.A."<sup>173</sup>

Black congregations have been separate from white ones since 1773 when the first black Baptist Church was set up, and 1787 when St George's Methodist Episcopal Church expelled Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and William White from a service, and they went on to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church<sup>174</sup>. It was therefore natural for Cone to consider the black church as quite distinct from the white one, and to exclude whites from the black Christian community.

The black Christian community is, for Cone, defined by its commitment to struggle against oppression: "Faith is that total commitment which gives a people its identity and thus determines what they must do in order to actualize in society what they believe necessary for the attainment of their peoplehood... [it is] commitment to an ultimate concern..."<sup>175</sup> Cone went on to say that Christian faith is in Jesus Christ as Lord, but he argued that what that meant should not be seen as settled by the Nicean and Chalcedonian definitions, but by Luke 4.18 - that is, in terms of good news to the poor and liberty to captives.<sup>176</sup> He put it in a different way in God of the Oppressed, where he said that since God has liberated the oppressed, they must accept freedom by fighting against injustice and oppression. He called it "freedom from oppression for God."<sup>177</sup>

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171 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 45 ff

172 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 48

see also Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 52 for a further look at this issue, two years later

173 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 162

174 see: Rt Revd R Allen: The Life, Experience and Gospel Labors of the Right Reverend Richard Allen - quoted for example in Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 95

175 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 40

176 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 123

177 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 232

see also p 206: "...the koinonia is limited to the victims of oppression and does not include the oppressors."

"How can we speak of God without being associated with oppressors?"<sup>178</sup> (The problem Cone addresses here is the link between Christianity and white oppressors.) Although Cone sets out to avoid this association, there is a sense in which he fails, for the black Christian community is also defined by distinction from the white community, at least in his earlier writings. To write that "the black struggle for liberation involves a total break with the white past..."<sup>179</sup> is already to invoke that white past. Cone is clearer when he says that he does "not care to rest the future of black humanity upon the judgement of white theologians here or abroad."<sup>180</sup> The most he allows for whites is that they should leave blacks alone<sup>181</sup>, or possibly convert and become black, "[b]ut it must be made absolutely clear that it is the black community that decides both the authenticity of white conversion and also the place these converts will play in the black struggle for freedom."<sup>182</sup>

Cone is no less angry at the failure of the black Christian community when he sees that it has allowed itself to be subverted, with churches becoming "amusement centers, arenas for power politics, and an organ for recognition", and with black ministers preaching a white gospel of submission.<sup>183</sup> Cone was here referring to the period after the Civil War, but later comments on their continued subservience.<sup>184</sup> He also has concerns about the sexism of the black churches.<sup>185</sup> His response to this is to take the role of a prophetic voice,<sup>186</sup> and also to turn to black sources and traditions.

Whilst questions about the survival of features of African religions under slavery may not be finally resolved<sup>187</sup> Cone does make the point that from the start black Christianity was distinctive: an

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178 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 56

179 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 195

180 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 101; see also Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 123

181 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 130

182 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 242; see also p 216

183 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 106, quoting Joseph Washington

184 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 115  
see also above: in question 2) b) 131

185 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 150

186 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 117

187 see above 111

see Alfred Raboteau: Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South (Oxford University Press, New York 1978)  
see also Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 131

example he gives is of the redefinition of right and wrong (taking from masters, stealing from each other), truth and lie, in order to survive.<sup>188</sup> Much has been written about another distinctive feature of black religion - spirituals - by Cone and other writers such as Lovell,<sup>189</sup> Fisher,<sup>190</sup> Thurman<sup>191</sup> and Mays.<sup>192</sup> Cone finds four things in spirituals which seem to him a valuable resource for Black Theology in its service of the black church. First, there is the theme of liberation demonstrated in spirituals about Moses, Joshua, and Daniel, for example.<sup>193</sup> Second, there is the theme of justice, a constant theme in black religion.<sup>194</sup> Third, there is the theme of hope and strength to resist: Cone has an extended discussion of what is meant by heaven, rejecting views which argue that the spirituals simply see it as 'pie in the sky when you die'<sup>195</sup> and preferring those views which understand it as empowering and motivating here and now. There are finally existential dimensions to the spirituals, wrestling with an existence in which slaves are denied humanity, and aware of the reality of the presence of God with them in their struggle.<sup>196</sup> In God of the Oppressed, written three years after The Spirituals and the Blues, Cone began to use black sermons and prayers and slave narratives as sources for the development of the themes of justice, liberation, love and suffering.<sup>197</sup>

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188 Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) p 26

189 John Lovell : "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual" in ed Bernard Katz : The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States (Arno Press, New York 1969)

190 Miles Mark Fisher : Negro Slave Songs in the United States (Citadel Press, New York 1953)

191 Howard Thurman : The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death (Harper and Row, New York 1947)  
Howard Thurman : Deep River (Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York 1969 – originally published in 1945)

192 Mays : The Negro's God (Atheneum, New York 1968 – originally published in 1938)

193 Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) p 33

194 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 84

195 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 123 Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues: (Orbis pbk 1992) Ch 5 pp 78 - 96

196 Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) pp 47 ff: Jesus sharing their suffering; pp 67 ff: Jesus sharing their death.

197 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975)  
sermons: pp 10, 19, 58  
songs: pp 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 33, 35  
humour: p 25  
prayers: pp 20, 21  
see also Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 107, 108

Cone became aware that even with this new look at black sources, black religion seemed to be defined by its slavery, and so cast his net more widely, including dialogue with other oppressed peoples in Africa, Latin America and Asia, and becoming involved in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologies (EATWOT).<sup>198</sup>

Cone's sharp division between black Christian communities and white communities to which he denies Christian status has a number of flaws. The first is that his view of the white community is too simplistic: whites are not all equally racist. We have already touched on the fact that slavery was, as he admits, opposed by some Methodists and others.<sup>199</sup> Again, without denying the existence of deep-rooted racism here in England, black experience of it has been perhaps less sharp than in America; Britain is one of the few countries with anti-racist Equal Opportunities legislation which makes racism and incitement to racial hatred criminal acts. Cone does not of course touch on this, but he does admit that "not all whites are our enemies."<sup>200</sup>

The second, correspondingly, is that his view of the black community fails to deal with its complexity.<sup>201</sup> The failures of the black church should have showed him that racism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice are not just white diseases, but are endemic to humanity; this is born out by, for example, the expulsion of Asians from East Africa<sup>202</sup>; and at a more subtle level, take the sending (criticised by Cone himself) of missionaries and bishops from the black African-American churches to the Caribbean and Africa, done without considering issues of indigenisation.<sup>203</sup> An agreed

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198 eg Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 108

199 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) pp 31 ff

200 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 169

201 To be sure, Cone 'has never claimed an exclusive status for black churches or black theology': Cone: Speaking the Truth p 81. Cone also writes: "Thus being a member of an oppressed community does not grant one immunity from error and sin. However, it can grant one the knowledge that God is present with them in the struggle despite their frailty." Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 208 see also pp 98, 102

see also Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 118

202 there are all sorts of issues in this, and any other example, but there do seem to be undoubted overtones of racism by the (black) east Africans against (black - at least in Cone's terms!) Asians; or Brahmins against Dalits

203 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 140

Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 152

definition of racism does not exist<sup>204</sup>, but a brief working definition used by some is that ‘racism is power plus prejudice’. In the situations described in the examples, it is black people who have the power, and can act in a racist way; nevertheless, certainly racism is frequently a specifically white offence. The Christian view (a view supported by the examples) would be that all human beings are in fact mixtures of good and bad; such a realisation undermines the validity of Cone's division between the white and black communities.

Another complexity is that of the range of responses from the black community to such issues as integration with whites. Cone, as I have noted, may be classed with the separatists. There are three examples in God of the Oppressed of his apparent dismissal of his opponents as subverted by whites: first, of Williams, a black ethicist who takes issue with Cone and is more or less accused of being white in his thinking;<sup>205</sup> second of Martin Luther King, whom Cone accused of failing to take white violence seriously in his thinking on justice and love;<sup>206</sup> third of Deotis Roberts whose ideas on reconciliation Cone attacks.<sup>207</sup> In yet another layer of the complexity of the black community we can set the black support of the (right-wing) Moral Majority.<sup>208</sup>

In all this, Cone's narrow view of the black community does not allow him to respond to the challenges to that view set by the examples of rich blacks and so on. They represent counter-examples because they apparently demonstrate that what is in operation is not simply racism, but also (or rather?) economic oppression; it could then be argued that Cone, in responding only to the poverty of many blacks, has shifted his stance from an anti-racist one to one more about the

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204 Cone uses a definition from Webster: “the assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race, and that races differ decisively from one another, which is usually coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its rights to dominance over others.” see Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury 1969) p 15

cf Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 9 & 10 where he discusses American structural racism, and for example the Dred Scott decision on the Declaration of Independence.

cf Cone : Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 39 - 40 where Cone refers to racism as an alien faith and satanic powers getting hold of white man.

205 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 203 ff

Preston Williams : “James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic” Harvard Theological Review Vol 65 (October 1972) pp 483 ff

206 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 221

Martin Luther King : Where Do We Go from Here : Chaos or Community? (Harper and Row, New York 1967)

207 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 239

Deotis Roberts : Liberation and Reconciliation : A Black Theology (Westminster Press , Philadelphia 1970)

208 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 115

distribution of wealth, that is, anti-capitalist, and anti-poverty. Cone's attitude to his opponents can then be seen as giving the impression that only those who hold his politics are acceptable.

The third is the relationship between these two communities. It is as complex as the communities themselves: what could be more ironic than the singing by black communities of *Amazing Grace*, a song written by John Newton, an ex-slaver.<sup>209</sup> More seriously, Cone writes of white destruction of blacks<sup>210</sup> and cites the evidence of life in the ghetto in support of this contention; yet the question should be asked: Is it true? Do whites really wish to destroy, systematically, blacks? (It is true that some whites - the Klu Klux Klan, for example - have tried to destroy some blacks; but this, though terrible, is much less than Cone seems to be claiming.) He matches the violence of this with a violence of his own: "Black theology will only accept a love of God which participates in the destruction of the white oppressor."<sup>211</sup> Again a question: should not it be the destruction of white oppression rather than white oppressor? A final point in this posing the two communities as armed camps is that it apparently presents a choice: "Concretely, ours is a situation in which the only option we have is that of deciding whose violence we support - that of the oppressors or the oppressed.... There is no possibility of neutrality."<sup>212</sup> Now advocates of non-violence<sup>213</sup> would disagree with him, and recognising this, he takes several pages to defend his position, a defence which each will judge according to their presuppositions. But a more basic question is whether the two are really armed camps? If not, then he is attempting to force on us a false choice.<sup>214</sup>

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209 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 4

210 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 10-12

211 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 72

212 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 219

213 Major Jones : Black Awareness : A Theology of Hope (Abingdon Press, Nashville 1971)

214 "We will not accept a God who is on everybody's side." Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 70 Cone is writing about wrath as an ingredient of love.

The fourth is Cone's understanding<sup>215</sup> of racism as both heresy<sup>216</sup> and sin.<sup>217</sup> He seems to use the terms interchangeably,<sup>218</sup> according as he wishes either to blame or to exclude, and it is the link they have with the way a community is characterised which makes it appropriate to deal with this here. The point is important because an understanding of what racism is must be central to the way in which it is dealt with.

In some Christian traditions, some sins have been seen as so serious that excommunication - that is exclusion from the Christian community - is the only response. However, by and large, given a recognition that we are all sinful, the general response has been to hate the sin, but to love the sinner. Heresy would of course be a different matter, traditionally dealt with by exclusion, but even heretics have been considered worth saving, and hence there have been dialogues between them and the orthodox.<sup>219</sup> The exclusion of racists - either as heretics or sinners - from the Christian community is therefore more problematic than Cone allows.<sup>220</sup>

The foundations of Cone's black community seem to be flawed philosophically. His basic definition is, as we have seen, the experience of oppression. He puts this above credal affirmations, and this

<sup>215</sup> see above 125

<sup>216</sup> Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp xiii; God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 36, 84; Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) pp 10, 105

<sup>217</sup> Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 72; A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) pp 14, 18, 45, 104; Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 41

<sup>218</sup> There is a distinction between heresy and sin. Sin implies at least some of the following: membership of the community which is calling something sin; some knowledge of sin and virtue and the difference between; some intentional, or purposeful disobedience to the known will of God. There are unwitting sins which spring from ignorance or inadvertence, but there is always a sense of being able to have acted differently, and of breaking "the Law". Heresy, on the other hand implies the holding of a different set of Laws, or having a different mental frame of reference; from the point of view of the "orthodox" community this alternative frame is wrong, and might well lead to a person doing things which while consistent and right within the heretical framework, are wrong or sinful from the orthodox framework.

Logically speaking then, in a particular person, racism is usually either a heresy (since this person holds incorrect views about human beings and their creation in God's image) or a sin (since the person holds correct views); the two terms are not interchangeable, though it is possible, at least under some views of the two, that they overlap. (See eg David Tracy: Plurality And Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 74 for a view which would have a greater overlap: 'For Christianity, for example, sin is not mere error. Sin is understood as inauthentic existence, at once a state of being and a personal responsibility....The self keeps turning in upon itself in an ever-subtler dialectic of self-delusion.' However, Tracy does not go on to define or distinguish heresy.) However, Cone does not define them, nor make a distinction between the two.

<sup>219</sup> Cone does not entirely disagree: cf Cone : Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 10

<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, Cone is right to point out that, "if there is no distinction between truth and error, gospel and heresy, then there is no way to say what Christian Theology is. We must be able to say when language is not Christian." Cone : Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 10 He also writes about heresy in action as well as word.



leads him to include black non-Christians as judges on the validity of white conversion:

"Whites must be made to realize that they are not only accountable to Roy Wilkins but also to Imamu Baraka. And if the latter says that reconciliation is out of the question, then nothing the former says can change that reality, for both are equally a member of the black struggle for freedom. Unless whites can get every single black person to agree that reconciliation is realized, there is no place whatsoever for white rhetoric about the reconciling love of blacks and whites."<sup>221</sup>

This is a community which no-one could recognise, which has no coherence but his own rhetoric. More limited statements about the identity of those in the community are equally problematic. For example, he writes: "A black Christian ethic cannot ignore the fact that we are an African people";<sup>222</sup> he goes on to admit that the fullest meaning of that affirmation will emerge in struggle, but wishes to make a distinction between African and European. I presume that he wishes to say that white Americans are European, black Americans African; both those assertions are open to dispute, and perhaps even that way of pigeonholing people is in fact racist.

The truth is that Cone has an idea of orthodoxy and orthopraxis as supported by the Bible, by black experience of oppression and by black tradition in an apparently reinforcing circle.<sup>223</sup> Now circular arguments have their place, and Cone certainly has shown that a Black view of the Bible and Theology stands up, but it is not valid to use that to exclude other sections from the Christian community. The existence of one set of views, supported by circular arguments, does not preclude the possibility of the existence of other sets of views.

This brings us to questions about the idea of universality: is the Christian message universal in the sense that it applies to all Christians, or is it contextual in the sense that different Christians in different situations will need to emphasise particular aspects, or even in the sense that different situations will require substantially different Gospels? Cone's view of theology as contextual seems to

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221 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 242

222 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 214

223 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 30: "I am aware of a possible pantheistic distortion of my analysis." This implies that he has in mind, behind this, what orthodoxy is.

see also Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 10: "If there is no distinction between truth and error, the gospel and heresy, then there is no way to say what Christian theology is. We must be able to say when language is not Christian - if not always then at least sometimes." Again there is a sense of wishing for clarity rather than demonstrating that it must be so.

indicate the middle line of thought, his insistence on the validity of Black Theology and on the heresy of white seems to indicate the former line.<sup>224</sup>

Some of the above problems are raised by Cone himself; there are several others not raised by him. The first is connected with his tendency to see things in binary opposites.<sup>225</sup> He would like to have a clear enemy, and almost bewails the passing of the simple old days of slavery when enemy and objective were clear: "In slavery one knows what the odds are and what is needed to destroy the power of the enemy. But in a society which pronounces a man free but makes him behave as a slave, all of the strength and will power is sapped from the would-be rebel."<sup>226</sup> This wistful sense of the clarity of the slave past which produced a strong community united in resistance, and creative as it produced the spirituals, is also present in The Spirituals and The Blues.<sup>227</sup> It seems to be this which leads him at times to gloss over the complexities of his position.

The second is that even though the Jews have some stake in the Bible, and have experience both of suffering and of inflicting it, of being both oppressed and oppressor, Cone never mentions them specifically. It may be that he sees the category 'Jewish' (and indeed Hispanic, and Chinese and Asian) as irrelevant, bringing them in under his own categories of black (those who suffer) and white (those who do not). Jews themselves might wish to deal with the way in which poverty and suffering divide their community in a different way. In any case, by not making specific reference to them Cone fails to consider their experience of oppressing and being the oppressor.

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224 see Cone: My Soul Looks Back (Orbis 1986) p 112: "...the future of each of our theologies is found in our struggles together....The universal dimensions of the Gospel message require that we struggle not only for ourselves but for all.... Any theology that falls short of this universal vision is not Christian...."

see also Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 245 and For My People (Orbis 1984) pp 173 - 174

225 see above: Cone as a structuralist 119

226 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 104

227 see eg Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) p 87

The third is that his conception of Christian community is too narrow.<sup>228</sup> That we should not see it as made up of people like us, is exactly Cone's criticism of white Christianity. He should move on from there to say that the challenge and value of Christian community is precisely that we have to learn to be part of a family which includes people with whom we would much rather not be associated, and accept that God is their God as well as ours, that they are his people just as much as we are. A Christian understanding of human nature should lead to the realisation that we are sinners as others are, and that we are not the redeemed but the redeeming community, not the people who have arrived but those on the pilgrimage.

Cone seems to have difficulty dealing with the failures implied either by heresy or by sin. He does have a vision of a wider and greater community to which both blacks and whites belong and worship together<sup>229</sup> but it will require penitence and conversion. He has written about reconciliation<sup>230</sup> and he has a point that, given the history of slavery and racism, whites need to make many moves towards the black community. However, if Christian thinking on reconciliation is based on an understanding of God's initiatives to be reconciled with us, perhaps there ought to be some room for blacks to help the process by not leaving all the moves to the whites? Further, Cone's thinking makes the assumption that the present generations of the two communities are to inherit the sins of their fathers; there is some justification in this, since it is true that they have to an extent respectively inherited the profits and losses of slavery and oppression, as well as having perpetuated the situation. But, to emphasise this too much seems to run counter to the idea that reconciliation calls for and calls forth a generosity of spirit which goes beyond profit and loss. There is indeed a danger here of whites blaming the victims, or of looking for 'cheap grace,' but there is also the danger of "human anger not promoting the justice of God."<sup>231</sup> Events in South Africa over the last few years, with President Mandela and his Government and their successors having to deal with the aftermath of apartheid and with the perpetrators of violent acts both of and against oppression, have been powerful symbols of a different

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228 There is a Biblical precedent for Cone's narrow view of community, with its high standards. The Johanne letters seem to envisage a pure community which excludes all sinners. However, other parts of the New Testament seem to encourage a broader view, with their discussions of forgiveness, their recording of dissent, and so on. Cone does not discuss this matter, nor give a setting for his own view, beyond showing that it arises out of anger at the complicity of white Christians in the racism of America.

229 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 81

230 eg Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 143 ff God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 235 ff

231 James ch 1 v 20

and generous way of trying to heal very deep wounds. When the contrast is drawn with the nascent peace process in Northern Ireland, or the situation in Kosovo, the message is clear.

Finally in this section we ought to look at the achievements of Black Theology for the black community, and for the Christian community in general; the wider Christian community must be considered since I argue that the divisive element in Cone's ideas on Christian community is unhelpful. The different sections of the broad Christian community should work together - so that we contribute to and correct each others' thinking and theology. The white Christian community needs Cone and his ideas - we do not need to be excluded. Perhaps the white Christian community has something to offer to the black as well.

Cone has dealt thoroughly with the seriousness of racism. He has shown it to be pervasive and destructive, and needing to be excised from the thinking of Christians.

He has helped to re-value black sources, and to re-establish reverence and respect for the black tradition.

He has fashioned the symbol of blackness, and in so doing has deepened understanding of Jesus' preference for the poor and the outcast.

He has deepened our understanding of the identity of persons as being linked with their colour, and so helped us to understand more deeply ideas of personhood and the image of God.

However, Black Theology's relationship with the black community has not been so successful.<sup>232</sup> It seems that there is a shift in political allegiance of the black middle class – away from the left, and towards the right<sup>233</sup> – which indicates a certain irrelevance of Black Theology for them; rather, as for whites, there is a desire to benefit from the riches of American capitalism, and to hold onto those riches.<sup>234</sup> By the same token Black Theology may have been irrelevant to the black poor, since presumably they would have done the same as the black middle classes had they been able to: that is,

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<sup>232</sup> see also Chapter 9 Section 9.3

<sup>233</sup> see, for example, reports in The Guardian: Monday 16th January 1995 on “The fight for the legacy of Martin Luther King” by Martin Walker; and Tuesday 31st January 1995 on “The death of liberal America” by Jonathan Freedland.

to take hold of a share in the American pie. Therefore, Black Theology has neither changed their attitude to wealth, nor lifted them out of poverty.

### 7.3. 3) c) *How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the Bible itself?*

'Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people - their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk.'<sup>235</sup> The experience of oppression is Cone's starting point and there is 'no authority more binding than [that. It is] the ultimate authority in religious matters.'<sup>236</sup>

We have discussed Cone's view of life, shaped by black suffering and it comes as no surprise to learn that this is where his starting point with the Bible. He understands that people bring to the Bible a theological norm, by which they interpret it<sup>237</sup>; there is a range of possibilities for that norm, and the claiming of authority for a particular choice of norm is crucial to a particular theological enterprise, but also difficult to justify, for where can a theologian stand which is both inside and outside a particular theological position? Cone attempts to have the best of both worlds by claiming that his position is derived from the perspective of his community<sup>238</sup> and from the Bible itself: 'the essence of the gospel is the liberation of the oppressed from socio-political humiliation for a new freedom in

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234 "Their mental enslavement to their few crumbs from the master's table often negates their desire to share in the freedom of humanity. Therefore, though oppressed, they do not share the consciousness that arises from the dialectic of oppression and liberation in the political praxis of the people. They thus must be liberated in spite of, and against, themselves." Cone : God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) (1975) p 151  
see also Cone : For My People (Orbis 1984) p 145 : "The same is true among those blacks in the USA who define freedom in terms of their equal share in the American capitalist pie."

235 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 117

236 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 120

237 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 21

238 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 36: "In all cases, the importance and use of the Bible are determined by the theological norm which is brought to the Scripture. Theologies with a kerygmatic consciousness would like to think that the norm arises from the Bible itself, but this is not always easy to determine. What is certain is that the theologian brings to the Scripture the perspective of a community. Ideally the concern of that community is the concern of the community that gave us the Scriptures. It is the task of theology to keep these two communities (biblical and contemporary) in constant tension in order that we may speak meaningfully about God. Black theology seeks to create a theological norm in harmony with the black condition and biblical revelation."

Christ Jesus (and I do not see how anyone can read the Scriptures and conclude otherwise)...<sup>239</sup> He admits that there are other themes, but this is the dominant theme.<sup>240</sup>

In this description of Cone's approach to the Bible, there is already a sense of nuancing, from the earliest primacy given to black experience to finding that liberation is the dominant theme within the Bible. This nuancing continues, as he examines the sources of Black Theology: in A Black Theology of Liberation he compares his own views with those of Barth (where the Bible is the primary source) and of Tillich (where culture is primary)<sup>241</sup> and attempts to steer between them. By the time of writing Speaking the Truth he seems more assured as he describes the Bible as the primary source, alongside other sources; part of that assurance comes from the conviction, mentioned above, that the Bible does function as the key to itself because of its central theme of divine liberation.<sup>242</sup> This is Barth's doing theology with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.<sup>243</sup>

A strong point made by Cone is that taking the Bible as the primary source liberates theologians. Because they have a yardstick against which to measure their own social and political situation, they can take it seriously, without being determined by it.<sup>244</sup> This gives a strength to the Bible which was one of the things suggested in the requirements which I am posing for any hermeneutic. Cone had written earlier about this function of the Bible as something outside, and over against, us:

'...the biblical story has its own integrity and truth independent of our subjective states. We are not free to read just anything into the biblical story.....By assuming that the biblical story exists independently of our stories and that it lays a claim upon us in our contemporary existence, *we are forced to move out of our subjectivity and to hear the Word that we do not possess.*'<sup>245</sup>

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239 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 51

240 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 65

241 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 21

242 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) pp 4,5 ff

243 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 57

see also Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 8: the theologian as an exegete of the Bible and experience

244 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) pp 7,8

245 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 103, 104 (Cone's own italics)

see also p 95: 'God's Word remains *his* Word, and not that of the oppressed. But God is free to choose the words of the oppressed as the divine Word...'

The passage just quoted is part of a longer one setting the Bible in relation to some other sources: tradition, under which Cone includes Christian tradition and also traditions outside Christianity (from Africa, Asia and elsewhere) and more personal stories. The next chapter then deals with Jesus - as he is today; again the witnesses to him are primarily the Bible, the social situation of the believer, and then the tradition of the church.<sup>246</sup>

This idea of witness recalls the discussion of Chapter 4. Cone does not refer to Irenaeus<sup>247</sup> who thinks of the Bible as a witness – that is, a friend you can trust rather than a source you can torture – but it seems apposite when Cone discusses black response to historical criticism: 'Instead of asking whether the Bible is infallible, black people want to know whether it is real - that is, whether the God to which it bears witness is present in their struggle.'<sup>248</sup>

Cone's view overall seems to be that the Bible, the black experience, and what one might call the purer parts of Christian (and indeed human) tradition lie in a mutually confirming relationship. They point us to God as liberating his people and Jesus as the Liberator, active not only in the first century, but here and now. We can be sure that in understanding things in this way we are not just picking the parts we like, because the Bible, being something objective and external, has the power to stand over against us. Thus the Bible is our primary source, though that does not mean that we arrive at this understanding through the route of reading the Bible – we do in fact arrive at it through experience of suffering. Having come to this understanding, we can confidently exclude those parts of the Christian tradition which have played down a Liberation view of God's activity. Jesus, is of course above and beyond both experience and the Bible, as they point to him. They are the sources of Truth, he is the Truth itself.<sup>249</sup> He stands over all sources, and yet is not independent of the oppressed. This makes the mutual confirmation of the relationship even stronger!

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246 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 108 ff

247 quoted in Barton: People of the Book?: p 39

248 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 11

see also God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 111: "It is as if blacks have intuitively drawn the all-important distinction between infallibility and reliability. They have not contended for a fully explicit infallibility, feeling perhaps that there is a mystery in the Book, as there is in the Christ. What they have testified to is the Book's reliability: how it is the true and basic source for discovering the truth of Jesus Christ. For this reason there has been no crisis of biblical authority in the black community."

see also Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 31: "The Bible is an indispensable witness to God's revelation.... The guide for checking contemporary interpretation of God's revelation is that it is consistent with the Biblical witness."

249 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 33

This view, whilst attractive, begs at least two questions, both related to Jesus. First: We are to know Jesus as attested in the Bible and in black experience of oppression and liberation; yet the Jesus we know is to stand over our interpretation of both these sources. Second: How can we see Jesus active as Liberator both then and now; 'how can we translate this biblical message into twentieth century America?'<sup>250</sup> Cone has repeatedly rejected ideas of simply imitating Jesus and his attitude to politics and violence.<sup>251</sup> We are to work out what Jesus is doing now, not think about what he would have done then. The strength to carry on Jesus' work comes from the Bible itself: "The Bible is inspired: by reading it a community can encounter the resurrected Jesus, and thus be moved to risk everything for earthly freedom."<sup>252</sup> However, it is the working out of what Jesus is doing now which is so difficult. Even accepting Cone's stress on liberation we are left with the question: exactly what kind of liberator is Jesus?

Having looked more generally at Cone and the Bible, it is to the more specific questions about the Bible that I now turn.

**7.3. 3) c) i) *How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the Bible itself as needing to be known thoroughly and deeply?***

'Instinctively, I went to the Scriptures....'<sup>253</sup> Actually this is not completely true; whilst I cannot claim that the following list of instances when Cone quotes directly from the Bible is absolutely exhaustive, it must be nearly so.

In Black Theology and Black Power he quotes from Exodus 3 times, Psalms twice, Amos twice; from Matthew 4 times, Mark twice, Luke twice, John once, Romans once, Galatians twice, Ephesians twice; making 20 quotes in 152 pages, with 16 other allusions.

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250 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 236

251 see below 162

252 Cone : A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 33

253 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 6



In A Black Theology of Liberation he quotes from Genesis once, Exodus twice; from Matthew twice, Mark 4 times, Luke 5 times, John once, Romans twice, I John twice, making 19 quotations in 142 pages, with 7 other allusions.

In The Spirituals and the Blues he quotes from Exodus 3 times, Job twice, Psalms once, Habakkuk 5 times; Luke once, Hebrews once, I John twice, making 15 quotations in 130 pages with 7 other allusions.

In God of the Oppressed he quotes from Deuteronomy once, Exodus 15 times, Job 4 times, Psalms 10 times, Proverbs 4 times, Ecclesiastes 3 times, Isaiah 19 times, Jeremiah 5 times, Amos 7 times, Hosea 4 times, Micah once, Habakkuk twice; Matthew 7 times, Mark 8 times, Luke 17 times, John twice, Acts once, Romans twice, I Corinthians 3 times, II Corinthians once, Galatians twice, Ephesians 3 times, I Timothy once, Philemon once, making 124 quotes in 246 pages with 51 other allusions.

In My Soul Looks Back (138 pages) there is no Biblical quotation at all.

In For My People he quotes from Matthew twice, Luke once, I Corinthians once, I John once, making 5 quotations in 207 pages, with one other allusion.

In Speaking the Truth he quotes from Exodus 3 times, Amos once; from Matthew once, Mark once, Luke once, John once, I Corinthians once making 9 quotations in 167 pages with two other allusions.

Not counting repeats, of which there are many, this is an average of one quotation every six pages, and of course that would be much lower if it were not for the very high number of quotations in God of the Oppressed. There are 96 allusions to the Bible, on average one every twelve pages. Given Cone's background in the A.M.E. Church, I would have expected far more use of the Bible than I have actually found. I am not so much thinking of direct quotations, as that Cone would be someone so immersed in the Bible, that it would be part of every page. In fact, there is probably a higher density of quotations from Barth and Tillich.

I have already mentioned Cone's use of rhetoric, pointing out that some, at least, of his writing seems to belong to the genre of speeches to a live audience, and designed to stir them. Surely in such a

context a heavier than average (rather than lighter) dependence on the Bible would have been expected?

Further, this is a very selective use of the Bible - with a higher density of use of the Gospels (though not John) than of other books - and many books not represented at all. There is a particularly strange use of the Old Testament - for example the use of Habakkuk; since Cone connects this with quotations from Job in the discussion of suffering, it does have parallels with James' use of Job<sup>254</sup> as an example of a righteous sufferer, much remarked by commentators!

One image discussed in Chapter 4 is of the Bible as a city or a place to inhabit; there is a sense of this when Cone says that 'it was the Bible that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave masters.'<sup>255</sup> He is showing that the slaves did inhabit the Bible, learn to speak its language, wear its clothes. There are odd glimpses that Cone himself has begun to do this: '...life out of death, the resurrection of bleached and windswept bones'<sup>256</sup>; but the number of allusions seems to me so low that there is here a significant gap.

One of the things which strikes Cone is the concrete nature of Biblical discourse, contrasted with the 'substance language of Greek philosophy'.<sup>257</sup> He makes use of this point with particular reference to Jesus as Liberator, because of the tendency to spiritualise concepts such as freedom/liberation in western thinking. Cone also refers to the parables in this way:

'For Jesus, divine truth was not an abstract Law but God's salvation event happening in history. That was why he spoke the truth in story form. When asked, "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10.29f) he did not offer an abstract ethical discourse on the limits and meaning of duty. He merely told a story...'<sup>258</sup>

The weakness is that Cone has stressed, in the passages quoted from God of the Oppressed, the importance of story<sup>259</sup>. This view is typical of theologies of liberation, and it is one of the weaknesses

<sup>254</sup> James ch 5 v 11

<sup>255</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 31

<sup>256</sup> Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 116

<sup>257</sup> Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 123

<sup>258</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 94

<sup>259</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 102 ff

of the use of the Bible by those theologies. That is, the narrative parts of the Bible fall naturally into categories recognised by theologies of liberation; however the rest of the Bible does not. For example quotations come rarely from the Letters, more from the Gospels, occasionally from wisdom literature, more from the prophets; notice also that there is often an imbalance between use of the Old and of the New Testaments.

Another weakness is that Cone tends to use the Bible in a vague and unspecific way at unconvincing points in his argument. For example, in Black Theology and Black Power, when dealing with the subject of revolution and violence (and advocating it)<sup>260</sup> he calls for 'the substitution of a new system for one adjudged to be corrupt': he does not (cannot?) articulate what the 'new system' should be.<sup>261</sup> He then cites two general biblical principles to support the argument - that allegiance to God must mean disobedience to the state if the state 'violates God's purpose for man' and that 'the biblical emphasis on the freedom of man also means that he cannot allow another to define his existence.'

Those biblical principles are problematic. It could equally be argued that Romans<sup>262</sup> and Titus<sup>263</sup> support some sort of rule rather than anarchy, however oppressive that rule. A possible strategy under oppression would then be for Christians (and Jews) to endure the inevitable suffering with patience<sup>264</sup> and trust that God is in control, and that righteousness will eventually prevail. Daniel and Esther and Revelation can be read in this way. Further, the New Testament writers link freedom to the Law: Matthew's Gospel has Jesus almost confirming the Law;<sup>265</sup> Romans<sup>266</sup> and Galatians<sup>267</sup> on the

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see also p 54: '*the form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of story and its content is liberation.*' (Cone's italics.)

260 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 135 - 138

261 see above 128

262 Romans ch 13 vv 1 - 7

263 Titus ch 3 v 1

264 I Peter ch 1 vv 6-8; ch 2 vv 19-23; ch 3 vv 13-17; ch 4 vv 12-19 see James ch 1 vv 2-4

265 Matthew ch 5 vv 17-20

266 Romans ch 6 v 14, ch 7 v 6

267 Galatians ch 3 & 4 cf ch 5 v 1 & ch 2 v 4

other hand think of the Christian's death to sin and freedom from the Law; Romans,<sup>268</sup> I Corinthians,<sup>269</sup> Galatians,<sup>270</sup> Colossians,<sup>271</sup> and James<sup>272</sup> are clear that this freedom is not for anarchy but for service of God and his Law of liberty.

There is a contrast between Cone's treatment of these arguments from general biblical principles – which could be disputed – and the detail of ten pages devoted to Christian Love and Black Power<sup>273</sup> where there are more quotations from Nygren and Tillich than from the New Testament.

Cone's discussion of suffering in the Bible in God of the Oppressed<sup>274</sup> exemplifies three other weaknesses. I have already mentioned the strange reliance on Habakkuk here; then there is the fact that where Cone quotes from theological works, these are fairly old: his notes 3 - 9 mention books dating 1939, 1946, 1948, 1955, and 1956 - that is, the most recent predates 1975 (the date of publishing of God of the Oppressed) by almost 20 years; the oldest by 36 years. There is nothing wrong with using old books, but he might have looked at more recent books; it does seem to indicate a lack of familiarity with the field. Thirdly there is in this passage a strange use of the Psalms - almost as proof texts.<sup>275</sup>

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268 Romans ch 6 vv 15 ff

269 I Corinthians ch 6 v 20, ch 7 v 22

270 Galatians ch 5 v 13

271 Colossians ch 3 v 24

272 James ch 1 v 25, ch 2 v 12

273 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 47-56

274 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 164 - 177

275 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 164 Cone quotes single verses from 5 Psalms, only two of which deal with suffering (Psalms 41 & 147), when it might have been more satisfactory to have looked at the treatment of suffering in a single psalm: eg Psalm 22.

**7.3. 3) c) ii) How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the Bible itself as complex, and layered; as a (whole) canon; as offering more than one point of view – perhaps even contradictions?**

Cone is well aware of the levels of complexity within the Bible. One piece of evidence for this is his observation of the difficulties in showing that Jesus was non-violent<sup>276</sup>; indeed he raises the question of whether Jesus was in fact a zealot.<sup>277</sup>

A second example may be found in The Spirituals and the Blues, where Cone considers the problem of suffering in the Bible. He discusses the books of Habakkuk and Job, - pointing out some of the complexity in those books: the “contention that God is ‘rousing the Chaldeans’ (Habakkuk 1.6) to put down the wicked Assyrians does not really satisfy the prophet, even though he recognises that the Lord ‘hast ordained them as a judgement; and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement’ (Habakkuk 1.12).”<sup>278</sup> Cone goes on to look at the book of Job, again exploring some of its layers.

Both books deal with the questions: How can the people continue to be faithful?

‘How can they depend on God when so much historical evidence seems to point towards God's being either an evildoer or uninterested in the fate of the people?.... There is no philosophical resolution to the problem of evil.... [but] because the faithful can experience the reality of divine presence they can endure suffering and transform it into an event of redemption.’<sup>279</sup>

Again the Bible's ambiguity is demonstrated.

Another example is to be found in God of the Oppressed:

Since the Bible consists of many traditions woven together, how does a theologian use the Bible as a source for the expression of truth without being arbitrary in selecting some traditions whilst ignoring others? Some critics have accused Black Theology of just that: a decided bias towards the Mosaic tradition in contrast to the David-Zion tradition, toward the Old Testament in relation to the New, and toward the prophets with little reference to the sages of Israel. These critics have the right to ask what is the hermeneutical principle of selection involved here, and how is its validity tested? What is valid and invalid hermeneutics, and how is one distinguishable from the other?

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<sup>276</sup> see below page 162

<sup>277</sup> Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 222, 223 and note 30 p 272

<sup>278</sup> see Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) p 55

<sup>279</sup> see Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) p 56

Black Theology's answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated briefly: *The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognise that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. ....* The test of the validity of this starting point, although dialectically related to black cultural experience, is not found in the particularity of the oppressed culture alone. It is found in the One who freely granted us freedom when we were doomed to slavery. .... Divine revelation *alone* is the test of the validity of this starting point. And if it can be shown that God as witnessed in the Scriptures is not the Liberator of the oppressed, then Black Theology would have either to drop the "Christian" designation or to choose another starting point.<sup>280</sup>

This is a very clear statement of Cone's position; its circularity, and the problems of that, have already been discussed.<sup>281</sup> It is a little disingenuous when set against another statement of Cone's, that he never denied the presence of other themes in the Bible<sup>282</sup> but the two do give a nuancing which perhaps represents his true views. However, Cone never discusses those other themes, so never sees, or allows us to see, that there is a sense of his view being changed by them. It is to some of these that I now turn, giving alternative readings of some parts of the Bible.

To begin with the Exodus tradition, one point not made is that in Moses, God chose one of the rulers, brought up in Pharaoh's household, and not really one of the oppressed; thus he is rejected by the Hebrews,<sup>283</sup> and taken for an Egyptian by the daughters of the priest of Midian.<sup>284</sup> The escaping from Egypt comes as a result of violence which Cone might justify, but which Jews today still mourn in their celebration of Passover.<sup>285</sup> Further, "the Egyptians as Black people were themselves oppressors of the Jews."<sup>286</sup>

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280 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 81, 82 (Cone's italics)

281 see above, in the initial discussion on question 3 c) 150

282 Cone: For My People (Orbis 1984) p 65

283 Exodus ch 2 v 11-15

284 Exodus ch 2 v 19

285 In the spilling of the drops of wine from the glass at the mention of the plagues: see for example The Passover, the Last Supper and the Eucharist (published by: the Study Centre for Jewish Christian Relations 1975) p 13 - or any Passover Haggadah.

286 Thomas Hoyt: "Biblical Interpreters and Black Theology" in eds Cone and Wilmore: Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume II 1980-1992 (Orbis 1993) p 203 Black Biblical Scholars, in their work of reclaiming the Black content of the Bible, have argued that Egypt is part of Africa, and that (biblical) Egyptians were Black. Hoyt attributes the idea to Professor Weems: see Prof Renita Weems: Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible (1988)

Moving generally through the Old Testament, its attitude in many places seems to run against what Cone claims: Shalmaneser and Nebuchadnezzar, oppressors of the Jews are also doing God's work by punishing them; Cyrus and Darius, again rulers rather than of the poor, are seen as God's instruments of restoration; wealth is seen as a reward from God; Wisdom is about surviving in one's station in life; justice forbids favouritism to the poor as well as the rich.<sup>287</sup>

Much the same is true of the New Testament: Jesus' birth was not in the court of a king, nor was he an adviser to the Emperor<sup>288</sup> - but this could as well mean that Christians should eschew politics as that God favours the poor; the journey of the Magi, far from demonstrating Jesus' identification with poor and outcasts<sup>289</sup>, could be viewed as about recognition of his kingly and priestly and prophetic status; in the slaughter of the Innocents, Jesus (the occasion of the slaughter) was not identified with them, but escaped<sup>290</sup>; his baptism was an identification with sinners (which included (Roman) soldiers, tax-collectors and those with two coats<sup>291</sup>) rather than with the oppressed<sup>292</sup>; his disciples were middle-class - James and John owned their own boat, Matthew/Levi was a reformed oppressor, Jesus praised the centurion and went to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, a supporter owned a two storey house in Jerusalem, Joseph and Nicodemus followed him and offered him a grave; he was not simply for the poor and against the rich.<sup>293</sup>

A sad misreading, particularly when set alongside the sensitivity which Cone shows in interpreting<sup>294</sup> the parable of the sheep and the goats.<sup>295</sup> is found in Speaking the Truth, where he says: '[Jesus]

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287 Exodus 23.3

288 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 9

289 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 114

290 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 114

291 Luke ch 3 vv 10-14

292 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 115

293 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 120

294 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 234 Here, he points out that the key to a right attitude to the neighbour is a straightforward human one, an unconscious one rather than a stepping stone in Christian piety - the righteous are surprised that they have done the right thing; the unrighteous, had they known that the despised were in fact Jesus, would have helped them not for their own sake, but for the sake of salvation, which would have been equally wrong. Because they did not know, their deeper attitudes were betrayed and rightly judged.

295 Matthew 25.31 ff

identified with the prostitutes and drunkards, the unemployed and the poor - not because he felt sorry for them, but in order to reveal God's judgement against social and religious structures that oppress the weak.<sup>296</sup> Aside from the difficulty which Cone ignores of writing about Jesus' motives and self-consciousness, does he not ascribe to Jesus a using of the poor as objects (that is as instruments to make a political point) rather than valuable human beings in their own right, which is as oppressive as any slavery?

**7.3. 3) c) iii) *How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the Bible itself as being different and challenging?***

Cone is quite clear about the challenge the Bible represents to white racists, and also to the black church.<sup>297</sup> What is not at all clear is how Cone himself feels challenged by the Bible - where it has made him feel uncomfortable, or made him change his views. Examples of both the strength and the weakness of Cone's position can be seen in his treatment of the particularity of the Incarnation.

Cone sees the humanity and Jewishness of Jesus as central to an understanding of who he is.<sup>298</sup> This particularity implies at least two things: that theology should not be afraid to be particular, which is something Liberation Theologies have always claimed; and that God takes seriously our own particularity, including our colour, which is part of us and of our experience.<sup>299</sup> It is a lack of particularity in American theology which has allowed it to think of generalised human beings, rather

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296 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 42

297 see above where the following are quoted: Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 103, 104 (Cone's own italics) see also p 95: 'God's Word remains *his* Word, and not that of the oppressed. But God is free to choose the words of the oppressed as the divine Word...'

298 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 117 quoting Pannenberg

299 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 6



than oppressed people - so that it fails to speak of human persons in any real sense<sup>300</sup> - and so failing, has further failed to oppose slavery. Jesus' humanity is a guarantee against slavery.<sup>301</sup>

However, the particularity of Jesus' own strategy against violence and injustice is not something which appeals to Cone; he does not deny that the Bible records Jesus' response to oppression as one of 'turning the other cheek' (though he does point out the difficulties in being certain of this<sup>302</sup>). He wishes to argue for a greater readiness to resist violence with force<sup>303</sup>, and so he says that Jesus' actions in the first century are not a literal guide for oppressed people in the twentieth century<sup>304</sup> - ethics is not about what Jesus did then, but about what he is doing now, seen with the eyes of faith.<sup>305</sup>

Again, he seems rather ill at ease and lacking in depth when discussing Jesus' response to suffering. He does concede that "the life of Jesus also discloses that freedom is bound up with suffering. It is not possible to be for him and not realize that one has chosen an existence in suffering;"<sup>306</sup> however, the black communities (Cone says) have not been chosen for redemptive suffering, but for freedom<sup>307</sup> - Christ is not a model for them or for other suffering communities; Jesus' suffering is not a signal that they should suffer, but an assurance that Jesus shares their suffering.<sup>308</sup>

A sharper instance of this is found in Cone's rejection<sup>309</sup> of what he describes as a traditional interpretation of the Beatitudes:<sup>310</sup> He 'refuses to embrace any concept of God which makes black

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300 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 86

301 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 119

302 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 222, 223 and note 30 p 272

303 cf Jacques Ellul : Violence from a Christian Perspective (Seabury 1969)

304 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 138  
see also A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 32

305 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 17  
see also: Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 222

306 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 101

307 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 56

308 see also Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 179 – 181

309 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 123, 124

suffering the will of God',<sup>311</sup> failing (because of the narrowness of his ideas on community) to see that the sort of suffering which is considered in Matthew 5.10-12 may be that suffering shared by all Christians because of their Christianity; it is not the same as the experience of racism and oppression. The traditional interpretation has, Cone claims, been eschatological, and so he attacks traditional eschatology next: 'the Christian cannot waste time contemplating the next world (if there is a next).'<sup>312</sup> He is right to reject 'pie in the sky when you die' but still there is a next-worldly (or new worldly<sup>313</sup>) theme in the New Testament. We might think of symbols of the unquenchable fire of punishment<sup>314</sup> on the one hand, or of the promise of being with the Lord<sup>315</sup> on the other. He resists this interpretation, and also any discussion of suffering from those who have not experienced it.

It would indeed be out of place for those of us who have only to bear the suffering that seems to be the lot of all human beings (illness, anxiety, bereavement, death, and so on) to explain about suffering to those who have had to bear cruelty from the hands of others. But this does not excuse them or us from the conversation about suffering. There are other voices too. For example, in Northern Ireland people have inflicted and experienced suffering for generations; and in South Africa, under President Mandela and his successor and the other leaders, people have been trying to heal the wounds of apartheid; or closer still to Cone, there are the voices of writers such as Roberts<sup>316</sup> and Jones.<sup>317</sup> Every history too bears the scars of suffering – there is nowhere that does not. These voices, and the voices of the Bible, would challenge Cone's thinking – but he does not allow it.

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310 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.' Matthew ch 5 vv 10-12

311 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 123

312 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 125

313 see J A T Robinson : On Being the Church in the World (SCM 1960) Robinson distinguishes between the two: p 15 of the Nicene Creed : "the life of the world to come."

314 Mark ch 9 v 43, 45, 47; Matthew ch 18 v 8, cf ch 25 v 41; ch 13 vv 42, 50

315 John ch 14.1-6; I Thessalonians ch 4 vv 14-18; see also I John ch 3 v 2 cf I Corinthians ch 2 v 9

316 Deotis Roberts : Liberation and Reconciliation : A Black Theology (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1971) Roberts argues that liberation and reconciliation are inseparable in the Christian faith.

317 Major Jones : Black Awareness : A Theology of Hope (Abingdon Press, Nashville 1971) Jones writes about the ethic of non-violence.

There is another set of instances of this failure of Cone's to answer questions which the Bible might put to him. In Black Theology and Black Power he writes eloquently of God's option for the poor, demonstrated in Jesus: 'Those who wish to share in this divine righteousness must become poor without any possibility of procuring right for themselves.'<sup>318</sup> The question which the Bible and the tradition might wish to ask is then: "How does this understanding of poverty and powerlessness square with the desire of Black Power to be empowered so as to gain freedom and equality?"

Cone rejects the imitation of Christ as the way to do Christian ethics, quoting Bonhoeffer to show that the desire to imitate is a desire to claim an authority and certainty which we cannot have.

'We have reached our limit of tolerance, and if it means death with dignity or life with humiliation, we will choose the former. And if that is the choice we will take some honkies with us.'<sup>319</sup>

This is a rejection of the pattern of Jesus who passively<sup>320</sup> endured the crucifixion, and prevented his followers from fighting back, in order to offer the oppressed solidarity and liberation. In the same way he rejects the imitation of Jesus as servant or slave:

'Sometimes because of the very nature of oppressed existence, the oppressed must define their being by negating everything oppressors affirm, including belief in the God of the oppressors. The oppressed must demonstrate that all communications are cut off. In Camus' words: "There is, in fact, nothing in common between a master and a slave; it is impossible to speak and communicate with a person who has been reduced to servitude."<sup>321</sup>

Cone's rejection of the imitation of Christ is also a rejection of Jesus' command that we should imitate him in service.<sup>322</sup> This is not about slavery or servitude, but about *mutual service* which would make slavery impossible, and about a community built on that service. It strikes at oppression and the oppressors, and at those who would resist oppression with the sort of tools Cone advocates. It

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318 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 46

319 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 15

320 in the sense used by Vanstone: The Stature of Waiting: (DLT 1982)

321 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 58

322 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you.' (John 13.12-15)

demonstrates both the failure of white theologians and Cone's narrow view of community. It asks us all questions about our own readiness to be servants. Bonhoeffer's point about ethics does not negate this command: in fact Bonhoeffer devoted much thought to the Christian service of others and about community built on that service<sup>323</sup> and presented Christian ethics as 'formation' in Christ.<sup>324</sup>

A final example of Cone's failure to engage with the Bible is about Law and Order. Cone cites Hitler as an example of law and order gone mad saying: '[Christians] are the ones who believe in the gospel of liberation, convinced that personal freedom is more important than "law and order"!'<sup>325</sup> That statement must probably be seen against Cone's American background, but the Bible is more ambivalent about this issue than Cone. Jews from the days of the Maccabees, and Christians of the early Church after them, had to face repression and persecution from the state because of their faith; they knew about unjust laws and perversion of government, and about being dependent on the whim of madmen. Yet both the Old and New Testaments show respect for, as well as questioning of, government and rulers.<sup>326</sup> Here then, and previously, I am not arguing that Cone is completely wrong, but that he does not seem to allow the Bible to question him.

### ***7.3. 3) c) iv) How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the Bible itself as requiring considered use?***

Cone is concerned to make sure that the Bible is meaningful to the present,<sup>327</sup> to make sure that it is real,<sup>328</sup> to allow it to enable the oppressed to resist.<sup>329</sup> He offers his own hermeneutic principle:

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<sup>323</sup> D Bonhoeffer : Life Together (SCM 1954 Eng trans from the 1949 edition by John W Doberstein) especially the chapter on "Ministry".

<sup>324</sup> D Bonhoeffer : Ethics: (Fontana 1964)

<sup>325</sup> Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 129

<sup>326</sup> see above 156

<sup>327</sup> Cone : Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 31

<sup>328</sup> Cone : Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 11

<sup>329</sup> Cone : God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 31 see also Cone : A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1986) p 33 quoted above 153

*The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognise that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. ....*<sup>330</sup>

This principle is reiterated in other books:<sup>331</sup> Cone is arguing that the Black experience of oppression gives to Black people the key to interpret Scripture, a key which is in fact already in Scripture, but which white oppressors have not found. He is therefore attempting to do two things – to value adequately Black experience, and to say that it is a primary source for Theology; but also to maintain that Scripture is a primary source, and that the perspective (of liberation from oppression) and therefore the interpretation of Scripture derives from Scripture itself.

### Model

This seems to be a Canon within the Canon, which is certainly Scriptural, but which fails to bring in quite large ranges of the Bible. In this light a consideration of which model of the Bible fits most closely for Cone is interesting: that of the quarry. He is uncovering, excavating, a particular line of thinking which has become overlaid.<sup>332</sup> He follows the seam once exposed; he discards unwanted material, and makes great use of that which suits his purpose. Is not his attitude to his other sources the same? He has not so completely been shaped by them (the spirituals and the blues, for example) that they run through every part of him, but rather he comes to them after further conversations (those with Wilmore and other critics)<sup>333</sup> which show him that he needs to look at them. Perhaps this is unfair – it may be that they were there in him, but needing clearer articulation and expression: if so, the image of the quarry may still seem valid.

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330 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) pp 81, 82 see also p 34. (Cone's italics) See above on page 159 footnote  
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331 Cone : Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 49

Cone : Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 1 and pp 4, 5

see Cone : A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 60 where Cone is writing about two hermeneutical principles for the doctrine of God, for a slightly different way of stating this.

332 cf Cone : For My People (Orbis 1984) p 65 “Our concern was to locate the dominant theme in scripture...”

333 see above 131 ff

### 7.3. 3) d) *How has he fulfilled his responsibility to the world?*

We should remind ourselves that Cone began by seeing the need to defend Christianity to (non-Christian) black power activists<sup>334</sup>: from the start then, he had a wide view of his work. It could be argued that in fact he did not continue to develop the breadth of this agenda, for until his latest book he confined himself largely to a fairly narrow application of what he had acknowledged to be greater issues.

For example, he does understand that oppression enslaves everybody:

“Ironically, and this is what white society also fails to understand, the man who enslaves another enslaves himself. Unrestricted freedom is a form of slavery. To be "free" to do what I will in relation to another is to be in bondage to the law of least resistance. This is the bondage of racism..... Whites are thus enslaved to their own egos. Therefore, when blacks assert their freedom in self-determination, whites too are liberated. They must now confront the black man as a person.”<sup>335</sup>

Cone goes on to qualify this:

“While it is true that all are oppressed (and especially those who rule over others), only those whose existence (and thus consciousness) is defined by the liberation of people from social, political, and economic bondage can understand the dialectic of oppression and freedom in the practice of liberation. Therefore when white theological rulers claim, "we are all oppressed!" they are speaking the truth although they do not understand the truth.....

“Because the phrase "all are oppressed" can be understood only from the perspective of the poor, only they are in a position to take seriously the universal dimension of the gospel of liberation.”<sup>336</sup>

This is a point made by Martin Luther King, picked up by Cone.<sup>337</sup>

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334 see: Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 1  
God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 215

335 Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) p 41

336 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 148, 150  
cf also Cone: Black Theology and Black Power (Seabury Press 1969) pp 41 ff where he points out that freedom is a burden which requires maturity.

337 Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p xix  
quoted again in Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 71, 72

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” Martin Luther King : “The American Dream” Negro History Bulletin vol 31 (May 1968) p 12

However there is a point about the universal nature of oppression which Cone does not seem to appreciate: in the complex network of relationships around each of us, power flows in different directions, and the directions can change at different times. I would venture that power never flows entirely towards or away from anyone. There are perhaps very few people, if any at all, who never have any power over anyone else, and even fewer, if any, over whom there is never anyone with power. In some situations we are oppressed, in some the oppressor. Consider for example, parents and children: who has power? It shifts around; out shopping, the parents may hold the purse strings, but the children can scream. Or to take a more political example, consider striking workers and pickets: they feel powerless and try to take power; in doing so, they render others (for example, the consumers of the product they deal with, and other workers associated with that product) powerless.

In a further development, Cone discusses the relationship between different forms of oppression and prejudice, linking racism, sexism, classism, militarism, neo-colonialism and ageism<sup>338</sup> and pointing out that those who struggle for freedom, wherever they are, should support each other<sup>339</sup>. They should do this, not to enhance their own religious piety, but because of the unique value of each human being.<sup>340</sup> Because of his eventual realisation of these links, and because of the universal nature of the Gospel, and of theological discourse,<sup>341</sup> he advocates the linking of liberation theologies, whilst respecting their contextual nature which gives each a different perspective and emphasis.<sup>342</sup>

This is an admirable programme, but leads to the reflection that if the agendas of Theologies of Liberation are so wide, there are other gaps here. Over the last few years, for example, there has been a rise in the prominence given to green issues, (and most lately to animal rights). Cone does not

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338 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 77

339 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 74

340 A point made in the discussion of the parable of the sheep and the goats: Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1988) p 135

341 Cone: God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 7,8 Cone is sensitive to criticism on this issue: he does make theology contextual and so particular; this means, for example, that there is a tension between the particular love he argues that God has for the poor, and the love which it is said God has generally for everyone.

342 Cone: The Spirituals and the Blues (Orbis pbk 1992) p 112, 113

make links to these, yet he might have had much to offer: African or Amerindian sources for theology might very well have furnished much material for reflection.

Cone writes most widely in his last book (Martin & Malcolm & America), even though its canvas, dealing with these two men, at first sight seems narrow. Cone sets them in their political and social milieu, he exposes the manipulation of their images through the media by those in power, he shows their own development as persons. By focusing on these two real people, rather than on more abstract issues, he is able to give a depth and breadth to the whole range of racism and oppression. There seemed to be a hint of this in the autobiographical My Soul Looks Back but it is more developed here. It is not that Cone draws these wider points out explicitly, but that by telling a real story I, and perhaps other readers, are able to make our own links.

### ***7.3. 4) What has been left unsaid? Are there relevant parts of the Bible which have been omitted?***

“The recognition that no last word can be said should not lead to no word being said.”<sup>343</sup> Cone is here writing of the provisionality of Black Theology, but his words stand also for his recognition of the provisionality of this conversation with the Bible and yet the need to have the conversation. He continues: “It is when we refuse to listen to another story that our own story becomes ideological – that is, a closed system incapable of hearing truth.”<sup>344</sup>

In Chapter 9 we shall see the insights some others have had about what more should be said. For now we can observe that Cone apparently ignores some Biblical categories of protest - for example its connections with justice and righteousness; the beatitudes and the righteous poor; the cross and resurrection; the whole of apocalyptic material, which some modern theologians are appraising as a work of protest; and much of the book of Psalms. These, it seems to me, would have been fruitful areas for nascent Black Theology to explore, as it searched for a language of protest.

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343 Cone : God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) (1975) p 98

344 Cone : God of the Oppressed (Seabury Press 1975) p 104 And later still (p 110) : “The truth and meaning of Christ are not exhausted by the questions we ask. There is an otherness which we experience in the encounter with Christ that forces us to look beyond our immediate experience to other witnesses. One such witness is Scripture.”



## 7.4 Interim Conclusion

We need to pause in respect and appreciation for the breadth of Cone's achievement, his passion and commitment, and his courage – all this done in the face of oppression.

He has shown how black people, experiencing slavery and terrible oppression, have managed to survive, to hold onto their identity, and indeed to triumph. He links the power of the theme of liberation with this and with broader themes:

“The debate about the sources of black theology is closely related to the discussion about the relationship between spiritual and political liberation. If the sources of black theology must be derived from oppressed African-Americans, then the central meaning of liberation cannot be reduced to the historical deliverance of slaves from bondage. It must be more than that. The more... is black people's ability to live in history without being determined by its limitations. No event expresses this transcendent truth more clearly than Sunday worship in the black church.”<sup>345</sup>

He has articulated a new theological understanding – set in the context of Black experience of America. He has tackled one of the most difficult but important areas of injustice and inhumanity - racism. He has drawn strength and energy for resistance from the Bible and the Christian faith. He has done this along with other writers and thinkers and campaigners – but he has added his own distinctive insights, and his contributions have been recognised by his colleagues, academic and non-academic. It is an interesting question as to whether his hope that this would engender new respect for Christianity from young blacks has been realised.

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<sup>345</sup> Cone: *Speaking the Truth* (Eerdmans 1986) p 1,2

see also Cone: *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Orbis pbk 1992) p 122: quoting Ellison: *A Very Stern Discipline*: in *Harpers March* 1967: "Any people who could endure all that brutalization and keep together, who could undergo such dismemberment and resuscitate itself, and endure until it could take the initiative in achieving its own freedom is obviously more than the sum of its brutalization. Seen in this perspective, theirs has been one of the great triumphs of the human spirit in modern times, in fact, in the history of the world."

Underlying Cone's work, there is a great optimism: perhaps this is an overstatement, but it is as if Cone thinks that by speaking the truth, and by setting people free, all will be well. More precisely, he writes:

"...many congregations have food programs, jail and hospital ministries, and other special projects designed to "help" the needy and the unfortunate ones. But such projects are not designed to challenge the capitalist system that creates human misery. Churches are often incapable of attacking the root cause of oppression because they are beneficiaries of the socio-political system responsible for it.<sup>346</sup>

Although this sounds negative, the very fact of troubling himself to write, and to write this, implies a hope that things should be, could be, different. He does really mind that America has so failed – and in minding, discloses his own version of the American dream.

In his dealings with the Bible, Cone has shown himself aware of the issues and yet in each part has not carried his insights through to their conclusions. He has allowed this to happen because of his prior agenda, and here I am not arguing that his views are fundamentally incorrect, but only that they do not do justice to the breadth and depth of the Biblical material, and of the Christian tradition. A more balanced look at the Bible would, I think, have strengthened his hand by giving *him* a more balanced view, with which it would have been more difficult to disagree.

As I have argued above, it seems to me that Cone avoids tackling the very wide issue of sin, and especially corporate or collective sin, by discussing the more narrow issue of capitalism. I feel that this is self-indulgent, and again weakens his hand. I have also indicated my concerns at his

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346 Cone: Speaking the Truth (Eerdmans 1986) p 112 Cone goes on to quote a very telling poem "Listen Christians" circulated at a poor people's rally in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Cone does not give a reference):

"I was hungry  
and you formed a humanities club  
and you discussed my hunger.  
thank you

I was imprisoned  
and you crept off quietly  
to your chapel in the cellar  
and prayed for my release.....

So where have your prayers gone?  
What have they done?  
What does it profit a man  
to page through his book of prayers  
when the rest of the world  
is crying for his help?

immoderate attacks on white churches. It is not that he is wrong in his attacks on our racism – but that if he had more thoroughly reflected on sin, he would have found room for both black and white churches as schools for sinners.