

Thinking Theologically

Jesus is Black. James H. Cone (1936-)

- I. **Setting the Tone & Context** – looking back to the reality of African-Americans, in particular in the Southern States, in the early part of the 20th century. Dr. Cone grew up as a child within this context near Little Rock Arkansas with one foot in the reality of the segregated south and one foot in the radical hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.



“Strange Fruit” sung by Lady Billie Holiday in 1939 helped to establish and maintain a political consciousness among black people about lynching. It was written by a white Jewish school teacher from New York City Abel Meeropol (aka Lewis Allen) as a poem in 1937 as his response to the well-known Lawrence Beitler photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, August 7, 1930 (*pictured below*). It was first recorded in 1939 by Billie Holiday it was later performed by many artists but most notably, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone. It is a dark and profound song about the lynching of African Americans in the Southern United States during the Jim Crow Era. It captures the great contradiction in southern culture and the religion that defined it. In which a white man could (and did) affirm that Lynching is part of the religion of our people. (*The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 135) In the lyrics, black victims are portrayed as “strange fruit,” as they hang from trees, rotting in the sun, blowing in the wind, and becoming food for crows upon being burned.

1. Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
2. Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
3. Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop



The authority of the Black Experience – is based upon Scripture & Tradition.

“By looking at the meaning of Jesus Christ in different church traditions, we are given clues to ways of understanding him today. Tradition, like Scripture, opens our story of Christ to other stories in the past and thus forces us to move outside of the subjectivity of our present. Tradition requires that we ask, What has my experience of Christ today to do with the Christ of Nestorius of Constantinople [*the bishop of Constantinople from 428-431*] and Cyril of Alexandria [*the Patriarch of Alexandria from 412 to 444*]?” (104)

II. Some Key Words & Theological Concepts to frame our Conversation

Dialectic:

The combination of seemingly contrary tendencies or truths into one Truth.

An example is that Jesus was both human and divine. Or that God was both with us in Jesus and also abandoned Jesus in his death by crucifixion on the Cross.

Christology:

from the Greek **Christos**- “Christ” or “Messiah” and **-ology** “study of” – in Biblical Studies this has to do with discussion about the who, what, when, where and why of Christ – God becoming Human in Jesus.

Eschatology:

from the Greek **Escha**- “last things”; **-ology** “study of” – in Biblical Studies this has to do with discussion about the last things, the end times, what Jesus talks of when he talks about the Kingdom of God coming, and the tension to which the apostle Paul points when talking about the tension in which we live every day between the now and not yet.

Christology "from below":

Wolfhart Pannenberg (German, 1928-2014) views the person of Christ dynamically in light of the resurrection. He insists upon the resurrection, eschatological coming of the kingdom of God, the consummation of all of creation (the outstanding future of God at the end of time) as reaching back into our present time (and past). History is a period of continued Revelation of God who is continuously creating the world out of inexhaustible divine love. History in its broad scope thus provides the medium and even the content of God’s indirect, not direct, revelation. (such as through historical acts of God not theophanies – like the burning bush).

Christology from before:

Jürgen Moltmann (German, 1926-) a Trinitarian perspective rooted in the dialectical interpretation of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, of both death and life, of the absence and the presence of God. In the cross Jesus is identified with the present reality of the world in all its negativity and subjection to sin. In the resurrection Jesus constitutes God’s promise of new creation for the whole of reality.

Christology from above:

Karl Barth (Swiss, 1886 –1968) insists upon God as self-disclosing, impossible to know authentically except by the divine mercy which reveals God to us, climaxing in the person of Jesus Christ. Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition are the sources to which we can look for wisdom and guidance.

III. Summarizing Cone's Theological Contribution

Dr. Cone starts from wondering how to reconcile his experience of Southern Whites believing in Jesus as God, then oppressing Black (Christians) 6 days a week; followed by one day a week (Sunday) where Black Christians would experience that same Jesus not as oppressor but as liberator, a God who suffers with them that they might be lifted up in freedom with him. Through black faith in Jesus as savior the values and affirmations of white supremacy were reversed, and the love and compassion of God was both experienced and mediated in the world. How can both be true? How can Jesus be for the oppressors and the oppressed?

Dr. Cone writes "We are required to affirm Jesus Christ in terms of his past, present, and future." (120) "The past and present history of Jesus are incomplete without affirmation of the 'not yet' that 'will be' (120). "It is only within the context of Jesus' past, present, and future as these aspects of his person are related to Scripture, tradition, and contemporary social existence that we are required to affirm the blackness of Jesus Christ." (122)

The phrase "Black Christ" refers to more than the subjective states, skin color, or political view of black people at a given point in history. It is derived primarily from Jesus past identity [*wasness*], his present identity [*isness*], and his future coming as each is dialectically related to the others. (124)

Jesus is Jewish. He belonged to the people who had first experienced the liberating truth of the God of the Bible in their exodus from slavery in Egypt. Jesus lived at the time of a new slavery, the oppression of his people (and many others) by the Roman Empire. Salvation for Jesus was religious, concerning God, and also political/economic in relationship to the idolatrous and life-squashing power of Rome. (125)

In Cone's today (as he wrote in the 60s and 70s) the Black population in America was the people that experienced, claimed and longed for liberation through the divine presence in the person of Jesus the Christ. Jesus lived the same experience of abandonment, oppression, and death faced by Blacks in America. His resurrection gives the power to survive, overcome and hope. In this way, Dr. Cone says that today – in today's context – Jesus is Black.

God is hope. God gives hope. "To hope in Jesus is to see the vision of his coming presence, and thus one is required by hope itself to live as if this vision is already realized in the present." (118-9)

IV. The question he asks: If Jesus is Black, what am I to do?

"The ethical question, 'What am I to do?' cannot be separated from its theological source, that is, what God has done and is doing to liberate the oppressed from slavery and injustice?" (180)

"The black struggle for liberation involves a total break with the white past, 'the overturning of relationships, the transformation of life and then a reconstruction.'" (179)

“Because black liberation means a radical break with the existing political and social structures of black life along the lines of black power and self-determination, it is to be expected that white theologians and assorted moralists will ask questions about methods and means.” (179)

“Many white people fail to realize is that their questions about violence and Christian love are not only very naïve, but are hypocritical and insulting. When whites as me, ‘Are you for violence?’ my rejoinder is : ‘*Whose violence?*’ ‘Richard Nixon’s or his victims?’ ‘The Mississippi State Police or the students at Jackson victims?’” (180)

V. **Sharing Questions :**

What does it mean to say that Jesus as Black? What does it mean to say so today in 2018?

How do you experience the dialectical relationship between the *wasness* of Jesus and the *isness* of Jesus today?

What does it mean, or imply for us, to follow Black Jesus?

How can Black religion become a revolutionary alternative to white religion? (121)

How can our specific context of belief become a universal understanding of who and how God is? Is that necessarily false or wrong?

What questions does talking about Jesus as Black raise up in you about your faith, our faith as the church, or the role of the Church in the world?