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Alan Berryhill

*Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University*

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# James Cone: Subject of Tradition and True Reformer

Alan Berryhill

*Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University (Berkeley, CA)*

## **Abstract**

*James Cone is widely respected as the ‘Father of Black Theology’ and one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. Yet at the same time, he is in many circles too quickly dismissed as a dangerous theological radical. This article presents two hermeneutical strategies that are designed to help Catholic readers better appreciate Cone’s agenda. As a ‘Subject of Tradition,’ some of Cone’s most challenging theological positions are shown to be the result of Cone actively and creatively wrestling with existing theological traditions. As a ‘True Reformer,’ Cone’s career is interpreted in light of Yves Congar’s criteria for authentic reform in the church. James Cone remains a challenging theologian, but these strategies can be utilized to encourage deeper engagement with Cone in pastoral settings.*

## **Background**

This paper emerged from a pastoral question: what is a pastorally responsible strategy for introducing the early work of James Cone to Catholic parishioners who are already willing to talk seriously about racism, yet like many Christians, have a perception of Cone as a radical, not to be taken seriously? In my well-educated and predominantly Asian American parish, anti-Asian racism has often been discussed, but anti-Black racism has rarely been grappled with.<sup>1</sup> That changed with the events of 2020, and I began to offer monthly lectures on notable Black theologians.

The session on the early work of James Cone (1938-2018) was perhaps the most difficult to prepare. James Cone was born in Bearden, Arkansas, and grew up in the segregated South

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<sup>1</sup> I intentionally use the categories of Black and non-Black throughout this paper, rather than categories of White vs non-White. As an Asian American, I find this framing helpful to the extent that it better names the anti-Black racism perpetuated by the Asian American community. However, both of these paradigms cease to be helpful when they suggest that Asian Americans must pick a side in a supposed White-Black racial dichotomy. See Ki Joo Choi, *Disciplined By Race: Theological Ethics and the Problem of Asian-American Identity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 15-20.

attending the African Methodist Episcopal Church. After writing a dissertation at Northwestern University on the Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth, he went on to develop a ground-breaking theology of Black liberation that emphasized God's identification with the oppressed. Cone would become a longtime faculty member at Union Theological Seminary until his death, and is often credited as the 'Father of Black Theology.' He was the 2018 recipient of the Grawemeyer Award in Religion, was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and has been described as the most important theologian of his time.<sup>2</sup> Several factors motivated me to focus on his early work. Historically, his early works are essential reading for understanding Black liberation theology. Pastorally, it provided an opportunity to educate the attendees on the Black Power movement, which is so often minimized in favor of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>3</sup> As a practical matter, key ideas from his later work had been indirectly introduced through a previous lecture on his student Kelly Brown Douglas. Cone had drawn a parallel between crucifixion and lynching. Just as the Roman empire used public crucifixion as an instrument of terror, white Americans had since the time of the Civil War utilized public lynchings to intimidate and terrorize Black Americans. Douglas extends the parallel to include the psychological intimidation of contemporary mass incarceration and 'stand your ground' legislation.<sup>4</sup>

### Introduction

In this essay, I will focus on debunking the perception that Cone is a theological radical who potentially falls beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. To be sure, such assessments might be

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Wallis, "Why James Cone Was the Most Important Theologian of His Time," *Sojourners*, May 2, 2018, accessed Jan 26, 2021, [sojo.net/articles/why-james-cone-was-most-important-theologian-his-time](https://sojo.net/articles/why-james-cone-was-most-important-theologian-his-time).

<sup>3</sup> Cone himself would later argue that the Black Power and Civil Rights movements needed each other. See James H. Cone, *Malcolm & Martin & America: A Dream or a Nightmare: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 171-203. Compare with James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), especially 30-31 and 152-166.

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influenced by anti-Black racial bias or even the subtle anti-Protestant bias in my parish and in other parishes nationally. Nonetheless, I believe the perception of theological radicalism is worth engaging at face value. It is worth noting that my audience was highly receptive to Bryan Massingale and Kelly Brown Douglas, who are also prophetic voices challenging deeply held racial biases. But while these authors primarily offered theological critiques of culture and practice,<sup>5</sup> Cone may be perceived to be more radical because he often critiques theology itself. His theology is also innovative in ways that often seem radical. He has rejected the notion that heaven is a reward, and affirms that God is Black and Jesus is Black. Moreover, Cone even identifies himself as a political radical, especially when contrasting himself with the slow progress of white liberals.<sup>6</sup>

There are a number of ways to interpret James Cone that push beyond the label of theological radical. Diana Hayes emphasizes the importance of Black history and the Black church, highlighting that Cone was among the first to utilize Black religious experience as a legitimate source for theologizing.<sup>7</sup> Joseph Caldwell argues that white readers often overlook the significance of the Black Power movement, and fail to appreciate that Cone was filling an apologetic need for a distinctive Black Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Andre Johnson argues that the aggressive radical tone of Cone is the result of adopting a prophetic persona, which should be seen in light

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas critiques the ‘stand your ground’ culture of Anglo-Saxon privilege, fear of Blackness, and Manifest Destiny. See Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, especially 3-123. Massingale critiques the ways that the culture of the US Catholic Church has been influenced by a broader white privilege in US culture. Notably he does not critique the theology of Rome. See Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), especially 1-82.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 30-33.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Hayes, “James Cone’s Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (Dec 2000), 609-631.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph W. Caldwell, “A Starting Point for Understanding James Cone: A Primer for White Readers,” *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 1 (Feb 2020), 25-43. I would extend this to non-Black readers in general.

of the history of the Old Testament prophets and prophetic African-American Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Karen Teel emphasizes that white theologians have often failed to interpret Cone well because of deeply ingrained racial fears and biases.<sup>10</sup> Many contemporary audiences should also be reminded that Cone's anger was born out of the grotesque realities of lynching, and that one of the catalysts of the Civil Rights movement was the gruesome murder in 1955 of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. Cone repeatedly emphasized that white American theologians, even progressive ethicists like Reinhold Niebuhr, consistently failed in their moral obligation to protest lynchings.<sup>11</sup> All of these approaches are helpful in appreciating the complexity and circumstances of Cone and begin to reverse the perception that he is a radical not worth taking seriously.

This paper makes the additional proposal of two hermeneutical strategies that more specifically address the perceived theological radicalism of James Cone: (1) Subject of Tradition and (2) True Reformer. These strategies are complementary to the other interpretations of Cone mentioned in the previous paragraph. But the strategies presented here can be particularly valuable in non-African American parishes that are willing and able to engage racism from a theological perspective, but have had little prior exposure to liberation theologies. In my own parish, these strategies have helped to enable a serious dialogue with James Cone in an environment that was unexpectedly open to hearing such a sharp (but valuable) critique of our mainstream theological traditions.

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<sup>9</sup> Andre E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology", *Black Theology: An International Journal* 8, no. 3 (Nov 2010), 266-285.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Teel, "Can We Hear Him Now? James Cone's Enduring Challenge to White Theologians," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 3 (Sep 2020), 582-604. I find this applicable to Asian American audiences as well, to the extent that we have also been guilty of anti-Black racism in our communities.

<sup>11</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 30-64.

### Subject of Tradition

The first strategy utilized in acquiring a more comprehensive understanding of Cone is an ecumenical extension of M. Shawn Copeland's assertion that there is a "Black Catholic Subject of Tradition."<sup>12</sup> A "Subject of Tradition" is a Christian who is actively receiving and interpreting existing theological traditions.<sup>13</sup> Copeland highlights, for example, that in Cyprian Davis's *History of Black Catholics* (1990),<sup>14</sup> Black Catholics are portrayed as active subjects, rather than passive objects of white ministry. She especially cites the theological maturity of the lay-organized Black Catholic Congresses of the 1890s.<sup>15</sup> The Congresses placed social justice firmly in the center of Catholic identity, before we had a clear Catholic Social Teaching tradition—the seminal *Rerum Novarum* had only been published in 1891.<sup>16</sup> The Congresses also implicitly understood the baptismal priesthood of all believers seventy years before the Second Vatican Council would affirm the same in *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>17</sup> To affirm the "Black Catholic Subject of Tradition" is to affirm that Black Catholics have been actively receiving, interpreting, and creating Catholic traditions.

To see Cone as a Black Christian Subject of Tradition is to see him as one who was actively interpreting existing Christian traditions. It begins to challenge the perception that he was a radical who *dismissed* traditions; rather, he *wrestled* with, and even innovated on, traditions. This can be seen throughout his career with the ways that Cone has creatively drawn

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<sup>12</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "Tradition and the Traditions of African American Catholicism," *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (Dec 2000), 632-655.

<sup>13</sup> Copeland is following Yves Congar's understanding that tradition is an active process of handing on, rather than a passive reception. A 'subject of tradition' is a person who is actively carrying out the traditioning process. See Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, tr. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 9-82.

<sup>14</sup> Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (Crossroad Publishing, New York: 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Copeland, "Tradition and the Traditions of African American Catholicism", 637-643. See also Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 163-194.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is widely acknowledged as the founding papal document of modern Catholic Social Teaching.

<sup>17</sup> For Vatican II's affirmation of the universal priesthood, see *Lumen Gentium* §10.

on the traditions of the Black church. But in his earliest writings, this can also be clearly seen in important ways with Cone's complex relationship with German Protestant theology. This is not at all to suggest that legitimate theology must conform to traditional European questions—an expectation far too often used to disregard liberation theologies. I am simply making the observation that in his early works, Cone frequently borrows ideas from German Protestant theology, and then creatively applies them to new questions. Such creativity is typical of theological genius, and I propose reading this creativity as the active traditioning of a Black Christian Subject of Tradition.

A first example comes from Cone's eschatology. Cone voiced a concern that standard approaches to eschatology, with their emphasis on the rewards of heaven, are yet another “white lie” reducing Blacks to complacency. He writes sharply that “[Black theology] is not concerned with the ‘last things’ but with the ‘white thing’ [of white racism].”<sup>18</sup> But rather than simply dismissing eschatology, he develops a constructive proposal rooted in German Protestant eschatologies. He specifically aligns with Jürgen Moltmann, who had begun to incorporate the transformation of oppressed communities into eschatology.<sup>19</sup> While mainstream approaches to eschatology had often emphasized the rewards of heaven as a hope for the *next* world, Moltmann had articulated an eschatology focusing on how the promised future endows a hope for *this* world. “Moltmann’s analysis is compatible with the concerns of Black theology. Hope must be related to the present, and it must serve as a means of transforming an oppressed community into a liberated—and liberating—community.”<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that when Cone wrote these words in 1970, the so-called “school of hope” was in its infancy. Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*

<sup>18</sup> Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> See especially Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, tr. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 140.

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(1964) was published in German six years prior and translated into English only three years prior. His important followup *The Crucified God* (1974) was not yet written, and neither was Johann Baptist Metz's seminal *Faith in History and Society* (1979). Cone is not passively receiving and regurgitating a well-established tradition. Rather, he is making an active choice to join an ongoing renewal effort, helping to shape a new justice-oriented tradition of eschatology that emphasizes a hope for this world more than deferring hope to the next world.

A second example is Cone's argument that God is Black in *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970). Cone's proposal has been criticized for inappropriately essentializing Blackness.<sup>21</sup> The objective here is not to defend him against such critiques, but rather to highlight that his proposal is a creative reappropriation of renowned Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich: "to speak of Black theology is to speak with the Tillichian understanding of symbols in mind."<sup>22</sup> In Tillich's theology, symbols are not *merely* symbols, but rather the symbol is ontologically connected to the symbolized. Symbols "point beyond themselves to something else" and "participate in that to which it points." A flag participates in the reality of the nation it symbolizes, so that an attack on the flag is seen to be an attack on the nation itself.<sup>23</sup> Cone reappropriated Tillich to present Blackness as a symbol that participates in the reality of oppression: "Blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America."<sup>24</sup> Blackness is a symbol, not a strict equation, so Blackness is not being simplistically defined by oppression. Nevertheless, Tillichian symbols are ontological, so that the symbol of Blackness says something meaningful about oppression. When Cone speaks of the Blackness of God, this is

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<sup>21</sup> For a summary of these critiques among Black theologians, see Trevor Eppchimer, "Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness* and James Cone's Black Theology: A Discussion," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 4, no. 1 (Jan 2006), 87-106.

<sup>22</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7. Kelly Brown Douglas has also observed that Cone's understanding of ontological Blackness is easily misunderstood when the Tillichian influence is not appreciated. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 58-60.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 46-48. The flag example is Tillich's.

<sup>24</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

not reducible to a pastoral inculturation for the Black church to see itself in the divine (important as that is). Cone is in fact making a profound statement about the Divine Attributes. “God is Black” symbolically expresses the ontological truth of God’s relationship with the oppressed. The logic of the claim, and the profundity of it, rests upon Cone’s masterful reappropriation of Tillichian symbols. Cone received an existing framework but applied it in a way that Tillich would never have expected to make a new contribution to the Divine Attributes.

For a third and final example, we consider Cone’s chapter on Christology in *God of the Oppressed* (1975).<sup>25</sup> Though insights from Black Christianity are incorporated throughout the chapter, the basic logic of the chapter involves a creative tension between three German Protestant trends in Christology. Under the heading “Jesus Is Who He Was,” he discusses Christologies ‘from below’ that emphasize historical-scientific analysis of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, especially his Jewishness.<sup>26</sup> Under the heading “Jesus Is Who He Is” are approaches that emphasize Christ’s present day activity, a view he associated with Christologies ‘from above’ that prioritize the descent of the Divine Logos in the Incarnation.<sup>27</sup> Finally, under the heading “Jesus Is He Who Will Be,” there is the eschatological approach of the promise of a future liberation through the cross and resurrection.<sup>28</sup> These three sections are not merely a historical survey of the available options, but the preamble to a dialectical resolution: “we do not

<sup>25</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed: Revised Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 99-126.

<sup>26</sup> Cone primarily cites Wolfhart Pannenberg as an example of Christology from below, from the past. Pannenberg is also remembered for a proleptic, anticipatory Christology that emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus. Nonetheless, according to Cone it is still appropriate to classify Pannenberg as ‘from below’ because Pannenberg starts with the historical Jesus and emphasizes the resurrection as a historical event. Cone also sharply criticizes Pannenberg for deferring the Christian’s experience of the resurrected Christ to the end of time. See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 106-112. Compare with Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, tr. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> In associating Christology from above with the present-day activity of Christ, Cone primarily has Karl Barth in mind. Barth had famously rejected the liberal Protestant emphasis on historical science to the exclusion of theological reflection. See Karl Barth, *The Essential Barth: A Reader and Commentary*, ed. Keith L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), especially 44-56, 115-119, and 137-148.

<sup>28</sup> Cone appeals almost exclusively to the eschatological Christology of Jürgen Moltmann. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, tr. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), especially 160-199.

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have to choose between a Christology ‘from below’ (Pannenberg) or ‘from above’ (Barth) or ‘from before’ (Moltmann). These three aspects of his history and person must be approached dialectically.”<sup>29</sup> Cone’s Black Christology emerges from a dialectic of the ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ approaches: Jesus *is* Black today because he *was* a Jew two thousand years ago. Cone further argues that this dialectic tension is only tenable through an eschatological tension between the cross and resurrection: “the cross represents the particularity of divine suffering in Israel’s place... The resurrection means that God’s identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness.”<sup>30</sup> Seeing this helps us to appreciate that Cone’s Black Christology is not reducible to a pastoral inculturation that affirms Black Christians seeing themselves in Christ (as important as that is). Cone is making an ontological claim about Christ’s identification with oppressed persons. He has received three German Protestant trajectories, interpreted them dialectically, and then used them to propose a new tradition of Black Christology that affirms Christ’s identification with all oppressed peoples, but especially with Black Americans. Once again, James Cone is acting as a Subject of Tradition by taking previously accepted theological ideas and applying them in new ways to shape his Black theology.

### True Reformer

The second avenue to understand Cone as an example of active traditioning, vis-a-vis the Subject of Tradition label, is through Yves Congar’s criteria of the necessary conditions for authentic reform in *True and False Reform*.<sup>31</sup> Congar’s book is concerned primarily with

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<sup>29</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, tr. Paul Philibert (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011). French text was originally published in 1950, and revised in 1968.

Catholic ecclesial reform without schism, however a secondary reading of the four-fold rubric he provides is helpful when making general claims about any Christian reformer. Showing that Cone's reformation of theology falls under Congar's rubric of a True Reformer demonstrates that Cone cannot be easily dismissed as a dangerous theological radical.

Congar's first criteria is that a true reformer must respect the primacy of charity and pastoral concerns.<sup>32</sup> Cone himself had emphasized a pastoral theology, writing "if I couldn't preach it, I wouldn't write it."<sup>33</sup> Others, including Dwight Hopkins, have also observed that the pastorally apologetic significance of Cone has long been underappreciated. At a time when many young Blacks were leaving the church to join Black Power and Black Consciousness movements, Cone offered a road to bring these ideas back into the church. Hopkins further credits Cone with saving the faith of an entire generation.<sup>34</sup> Also underappreciated has been Cone's testament to the power of charity throughout his career. Cornel West eulogized that "James Cone was a love warrior with an intellectual twist."<sup>35</sup> Even amidst his sharpest critiques of the failures of white theologians, Cone remained charitable: "It is not my intention to question the integrity of [a white theologian's] personal ethics. My concern is with the identity of Christian theology and the influence of culture."<sup>36</sup> This same charitable yet academic humility can be found in the prefaces Cone wrote for his various books' anniversary editions. In the preface to *Black Theology & Black Power*, he admits his "failure to link Black liberation theology to the global struggles for freedom."<sup>37</sup> In the same preface he also examines his "failure

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<sup>32</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 215-228.

<sup>33</sup> James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 58.

<sup>34</sup> The Oblate School of Theology, "Black Liberation Theology - Dr. Dwight Hopkins", April 29, 2016, video, 5:45, <https://youtu.be/mw4Ntb5r5qw>.

<sup>35</sup> Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, ix.

<sup>36</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, xxxi.

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to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the Black community.”<sup>38</sup> Such an open admission of failure, the result of charitably listening to his critics, is another example of a willingness on Cone’s part to not only be open to dialogue with a critical academy, but also to understand where his earlier work was insufficient.

Congar’s second criteria is that a true reformer must remain in communion with the whole church.<sup>39</sup> This criteria is based upon Congar’s pneumatological belief that fullness of truth requires listening to the Spirit-given wisdom of all the faithful. Part of the challenge here is that some of Cone’s writings have suggested that Cone lacked interest in dialogue. In *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) he demanded that all theology be Black liberation theology, writing that “in a society where persons are oppressed because they are *Black*, Christian theology must become *Black* theology.”<sup>40</sup> This was likely influenced by both the separatist tendencies in the Black Power Movement and an over reliance on a Barthian methodology anxious to defend the objectivity of theology. Whatever the reason, Cone’s writings seem to clash with Congar’s criterion of remaining in dialogue with the whole church. But as Cone matured, his views evolved. In *God of the Oppressed* (1975), Cone is more open to theology that develops through dialogue. He requests that white theologians listen to his story and acknowledges that he also needs to listen to the stories of others. Cone writes “I cannot and have no desire to prove ‘my story.’ All I can hope to do is to bear witness to it... I hope to avoid imprisonment in my own subjectivity... and to speak the truth when called to give an account of the hope that is in me.”<sup>41</sup> But Cone was not merely open to dialogue; he also actively participated in dialogue. In his posthumously published autobiography, Cone describes how his views were tempered by the

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<sup>38</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xv.

<sup>39</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 229-264.

<sup>40</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, v.

<sup>41</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 98.

intellectual discourse he received from critics like Charles Long and the cadre of students who laid the foundations of womanist theology.<sup>42</sup> Cone was not only in dialogue with these critics but also cognizant of the need for ecumenical dialogue with Catholics on racial justice and Black Catholicism. As Bryan Massingale has summarized, “throughout his career, Cone has shown a willingness to dialogue with and engage Catholic scholarship regarding racial justice that is unmatched by other Black Protestant theologians.”<sup>43</sup> While Cone may have had some isolationist tendencies at the earliest stages of his career, his tendency towards genuine dialogue with others was represented in much of his later writings. In that sense, he should seriously be considered as remaining in communion with the larger Church and its mission.

Congar’s third criteria is that the true reformer must have patience despite delays.<sup>44</sup> We must be mindful that an incrementalist logic of patience has often been used to ignore pleas for racial justice. But Congar was more concerned with reformers whose haste for a solution led to theological shortcuts. Congar writes: “Patience or impatience is not so much a question of the passage of time as the question of a certain spiritual quality in our attitude... holding back when tempted by simple, abrupt solutions or the extremes of ‘all or nothing’.”<sup>45</sup> Congar cites Martin Luther’s polemical haste as a lack of spiritual patience.<sup>46</sup> He similarly chides John Calvin for writing his *Institutes* at the young age of twenty-seven, with only a training in law but not in theology.<sup>47</sup> It can be challenging to see Cone as a patient reformer. He was impatient with injustice, wrote in an aggressive, prophetic tone, and had an all-or-nothing commitment to

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<sup>42</sup> Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*, 85-125. Womanist theology focuses on the empowerment and liberation of Black women. The movement emerged as a critique of the lack of the attention to women of color among White feminist theologians and Black male theologians.

<sup>43</sup> Bryan Massingale, “Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (Mar 2014), 133-155, at 136.

<sup>44</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 265-289.

<sup>45</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 269.

<sup>46</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 270.

<sup>47</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 270.

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liberation as the center of the gospel message. But in other ways, Cone does seem to exhibit the traits of a Congarian patient reformer. He wrote a doctoral dissertation on the anthropology of Karl Barth and had a deep intellectual and spiritual understanding of German Protestant theology. He also conducted extensive research on the Black religious experience.<sup>48</sup> Though his theology was controversial at times, it was thoughtfully developed and well-researched within existing theological traditions. He reports that it took ten years to research *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1991).<sup>49</sup> His final work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011), also took ten years of active work, building on at least three decades of wrestling with womanist critiques of redemptive suffering.<sup>50</sup> And while Cone was impatient with the glacial speed of progress on racism, he had no illusions of finding an easy solution. Racism was centuries old, deeply rooted, and challenging to eradicate. Throughout his corpus, one finds a deep, spiritual hope that his community would continue to fight, that “nearly four centuries of suffering will be redemptive for our children and grandchildren, revealing to them the beauty in their tragic past, and thereby empowering them to fight the violence of white supremacy.”<sup>51</sup> Patience should not be mistaken for complacency. But seeing Cone as a patient reformer can be a helpful reminder that he was a careful scholar with a deep, spiritual hope and that his theology cannot be quickly dismissed.

Fourth and finally, Congar suggests a true reformer always returns to core principles rather than forcing new novelties.<sup>52</sup> Congar is not so much concerned with novel sources of inspiration (*aggiornamento*), but rather with the importance of rooting theological argument within the tradition (*ressourcement*). Cone was certainly inspired by Black Power, which might be deemed as a novelty, yet his theology remains deeply rooted in biblical tradition. His

<sup>48</sup> For example, see James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1972).

<sup>49</sup> Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 124-125.

<sup>50</sup> Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 126-129.

<sup>51</sup> Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 143.

<sup>52</sup> Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 291-307.

theological arguments for a communal-historical understanding of sin and salvation are not based on Marx, but on the Exodus. Cone writes that “to fail to recognize God’s activity as defined by the community of Israel is to exist in sin.”<sup>53</sup> His hope for liberation from suffering might be inspired by Black Power, but ultimately his theological arguments are rooted in the paschal mystery, as “in the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know that Black suffering is wrong and that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Cone was innovative and did propose new theological ideas. But to Congar’s point, these new ideas were not argued as a novelty to the Christian tradition. Cone consistently defended that the God of liberation, who takes the side of oppressed persons, is a thoroughly biblical image rooted in the Exodus, the Old Testament prophets (especially Isaiah), and the ministry of Jesus.

### **Pastoral Significance**

This paper attempts to defend two related strategies for interpreting James Cone. As a Subject of Tradition, he did not dismiss or simply passively receive tradition. Rather, he actively participated in a traditioning process. He joined Moltmann’s ongoing renewal of eschatology, reappropriated Tillichian symbols to speak of God’s Blackness as an ontological symbol of his identity with the oppressed, and synthesized three German Christological trajectories to propose a new Black Christology. Cone was a brilliant theologian actively wrestling with Christian traditions, contributing to numerous renewals within the tradition. Furthermore, this work of traditioning is reflective of a Congarian True Reformer. His work was eminently pastoral for the Black church and exudes a charitable humility. Though distinctively Black, Cone’s theology develops in dialogue with the broader church. Though impatient with justice, Cone had the

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<sup>53</sup> Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 105.

<sup>54</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 177.

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spiritual and academic patience necessary to produce solid theological scholarship. Though inspired by Black Power, Cone was ultimately rooted in biblical tradition.

None of this is intended to diminish the challenge that Cone's theology presents to us. It is neither possible nor responsible to downplay his prophetic anger. He writes from the unflinching anger of the Black Power movement, protesting a four-hundred year history of injustice including slavery, lynching, and segregation. His theological proposals remain challenging, powerfully critiquing much of our theological traditions. But the concern of this paper is that in many parish contexts (and even in academic settings), Cone will be too easily dismissed as a theological radical. These interpretive strategies are intended to challenge those dismissals. I draw attention to his pastoral impact, his careful scholarship, and his active traditioning *not* out of an attempt to diminish the severity of his critiques. I draw attention to these things precisely in the hope that if Cone can be seen as a Subject of Tradition and a True Reformer, then perhaps more people in our parishes would be willing to truly listen to the message of James Cone. We all have much to learn from him.

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