

Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology

Vincent Lloyd

Black theology, it often seems, consists of movement in two directions, one political and one cultural. Black theology is the religion of black power, and black theology is the religion of the black community. The task of the black theologian is to explain how these two directions complement each other, joining them into a unified project. What sutures them, somehow, is theology. Secular reason alone is not up to the task. It is only when secular reason is supplemented by the language (or concepts, or beliefs) of faith, God, Christ, and Spirit, that radical black politics and black culture no longer seem independent of, or even at odds with, each other. When God is aligned with the poor and oppressed, and God's work is to free the poor and oppressed, it means that God is to be found in the language and practices of the black community – the community systematically oppressed. God's work is to free this community from oppression, work that is necessarily political.

When black theology is presented in this way, a worry quickly emerges. Black theology would offer a solution to a problem defined in secular terms.¹ Radical politics and black culture in this picture are, at their root, understood in the same way in both secular and black theological discussions – the black theologian just adds something on top of the secular understanding. Black culture *not only* is X, *it also* is where God is at work in the world. Recent critics, both from the secular and theological academy, have pointed to the contingency of such a position:

¹ I elaborate on this point, framed rather differently, in Vincent Lloyd, "Black Secularism and Black Theology," *Theology Today* 68, no. 1 (2011): 1-5.

our “secular age” is relatively recent, and carries with it deep, highly specific, assumptions.²

Theology may appear autonomous as a supplement to the secular, but in fact its autonomy is lost; the secular sets the terms for the theological. What would it mean for black theology to start from a commitment to the genuine autonomy of the theological?

I do not mean to suggest that a response to this question would be particularly novel. Indeed, it is my contention that a response is implicit in, for example, the early work of James Cone. My interest here is in making those implicit commitments to the autonomy of the theological explicit by emphasizing the role of paradox and tradition in black theology. This pair of terms presents a means of affirming the primacy of the theological while at the same time articulating core commitments of black theology. Moreover, the language of paradox and tradition returns black theology to its radical roots. Not only does the theological come before the secular, but *black* theology emerges as the only orthodox theology; white (and ostensibly color-blind) theology emerges as crypto-secular heresy.

Recent Critiques of Black Theology

Two recent critiques of black theology, from quite different directions, have underscored the aporias that result when a theological project starts from secular foundations. First, recent reformulations of liberation theology have argued that the purported focus on the poor and oppressed which once motivated liberation theology has been lost.³ In some cases, this loss is due to an aspiration for middle class status which overshadows a commitment to the struggles of the oppressed. In other cases, this loss is due to a celebration of specific communities or cultures

² Most notably Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007) and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

³ Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008). See also Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

– for example, Asian-American, or African, or female Hispanic, or “queer” – that overshadows the reason that these groups were originally of interest, namely, their oppression or poverty. Yet oppression and poverty in the world has not gone away, nor has the need for concrete projects to address them diminished. In the face of neoliberalism and the unchecked power of international financial institutions, these critics contend that what is needed is to marshal those reduced to systematic poverty by these policies and institutions. For such a project, cultural issues are understood to be made use of pragmatically, for mobilization, but they are ultimately of secondary concern.

The advocates of this revitalized liberation theology level a powerful critique at black theology. When the emphasis of black theology becomes a celebration of black culture, when *de jure* racial oppression becomes *de facto*, and when a black middle class develops in whose interest it is to celebrate black culture while ignoring *de facto* racial oppression, black theology easily strays from its seminal commitment to the struggle of the poor and oppressed. This critique naturally leads to a condemnation of “black” as a name for the poor and oppressed, where the critic objects by pointing to the purported empirical facts that (a) there are poor and oppressed people who are not black, and (b) there are black people who are neither poor nor oppressed. Below I will argue that such a condemnation is not the necessary result of this critique.

This first critique of black theology is immanent criticism, arguing that black theology does not live up to its own commitments (to the poor and oppressed), rather than a theological critique. The critic proceeds through secular reason, using empirical data to identify who qualifies as poor and oppressed and in doing so appears to expose an inconsistency in the black theologian’s own position. In contrast, the second critique of black theology is thoroughly

theological. These critics charge that a careful genealogy of race reveals that race is a theological problem, arising because of Christian heresy.⁴ White theology is not a recent problem; it names the theological heresy of supersessionism. White theology refuses to grapple with the theological significance of Jesus's Jewish flesh, instead imagining a radical break between Judaism and Christianity. The old law of the flesh overturned, white theology sees Jesus as inaugurating the age of the spirit – in the process race is invented as that which Christians are not, quickly slipping into that which Europeans are not. In other words, black theology is a defense of theological orthodoxy that offers the only avenue for addressing the (ostensibly secular but actually theological) problem of racism in society.

Advocates of this second line of critique lament the thin theology that has become characteristic of black theological reflection – too little talk about pneumatology, about the economy of the trinity, about the theological tradition.⁵ In order to combat problematic theology, it is necessary to offer better theology, for example, to explain how white theology differs from the Christology found in Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor. The early work of black theologians offered some promise when it emphasized the similarities between God's identification with the Jewish people and God's identification with blacks, restraining inclinations towards supersessionism. But early work in black theology also tended to rely on the theological concepts of white theologians like Karl Barth and Paul Tillich who, like many mid-

⁴ This argument is made by J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

⁵ In addition to Carter, *Race*, see J. Kameron Carter, "Black Theology: A Review Essay," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (2003): 117-138 and idem, "Christology, Or Redeeming Whiteness: A Response to James Perkinson's Appropriation of Black Theology," *Theology Today* 60, no. 4 (2004): 525-39.

twentieth century white Protestants, sometimes evince a commitment to supersessionist positions.

If this first critique of black theology takes theology to be implicit in its political point, the second critique takes politics to be implicit in its theological point. For the latter, once the theological problem is resolved, the intellectual apparatus that authorize racism will be crippled with the consequence that racism itself will crumble. Each critique is compelling, but the two are at odds. Each builds on the flaw targeted by the other: the first critique builds on the sort of thin theology targeted by the second while the second critique ignores the centrality of the poor and oppressed recalled by the first.

Rather than forcing an artificial resolution to such a tangle – and just pulling the knot tighter – perhaps the concerns raised can be alleviated when the terms of the debate are altered. To show how this might work, I will focus on the work of James Cone. A story is often told about Cone's work, sometimes by Cone himself, that divides his writings into two stages. In the first stage, including *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), he was heavily influenced by white theologians, particularly Barth and Tillich, and white philosophers, particularly existentialists. After being criticized for simultaneously proclaiming his independence from white theology and relying on white theological categories, Cone turned to resources within the African American tradition to undergird his theological position.⁶ He proceeded to write *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), and relied on these black musical traditions in *God of the Oppressed* (1975). In contrast, I will argue that Cone's first works offer a novel account of theological paradox. In a sense, my task is to translate the *secular* existential

⁶ Among other places, this criticism is made forcefully in a book by Cone's brother, Cecil Wayne Cone: *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: AMEC, 1975). James Cone describes how he grappled with these critics in his *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1982), 61.

idiom of Cone's early work into a *theological* idiom of paradox, where the human encounter with paradox indicates a participation in the ultimate paradox, that of Jesus Christ. With this translation, we are able to address questions such as: What does it mean when Cone writes, "The logic of liberation is always incomprehensible to slave masters"?⁷ Might it mean something deeper than an accusation of willful ignorance or false consciousness? Might it suggest that there is a fundamental link between the incomprehensible, the black, and the theological? And might this incomprehensibility be linked with the fundamental character of black life, which Cone describes as filled with contradictions?⁸

Defining Paradox and Tradition

Before turning to Cone's texts, I want to sketch what I mean by paradox and tradition. These are both concepts irreducible to a vocabulary authorized by secularism. From the secularist's perspective, there can be no genuine paradox. Moments of perplexity or incongruity can be explained through secular reason, with the tools of the natural sciences, social sciences, and even humanities. It might seem as though things don't fit together, but from the secularist's perspective ultimately they must – even chaos has a theory to explain it, even *anomie* has a sociological explanation. And from the secularist's perspective, tradition is obsolete. Just because something has been done before is no reason to do it again. Tradition is better described as a community and its history, stripping away the normative connotations. It is something to be rationally studied, or romantically embraced; either option is taken by the autonomous agent.

⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 10.

⁸ For example, Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 5 and idem, *God of the Oppressed*. Revised Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 2.

Paradox and tradition might not be part of a secular vocabulary, but are they thickly theological? Are they even uniquely Christian? Cornel West, following Kierkegaard and others, suggests that at least paradox is: “The paradox of the Christian tradition is that it precludes its own descriptions from grasping the truth; that is, the Christian notion of the fallenness of human creatures does not permit even Christian descriptions to be true. This is so, because, for Christians, Jesus Christ is the Truth and the reality of Jesus Christ always already rests outside any particular Christian description.”⁹ This might sound like a trendy morsel of Eastern wisdom – *the Truth cannot be spoken* – except West goes on to assert that there is a very specific test for this ineffable truth. The test is the person of Jesus Christ. Certainly, every description of Jesus gets Him wrong, but all descriptions are not equally wrong. The paradox doubles: not only does Christian discourse claim to speak truthfully and claim that all speech is untruthful; it also claims that there is an embodied criterion for truthfulness, but that embodied criterion itself can only be spoken of untruthfully. Unlike Beckett’s dreary tragi-comedy – “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” -- West presents this Christian tragi-comedy with the glass half full, paradox as joyfully difficult. From a secular perspective paradox brings frustration; from a Christian perspective, with an existential commitment to its embrace, paradox brings salvation.

By paradox, then, I simply mean moments of irresolution, without the possibility of resolution through secular means. Paradox without tradition is blind; tradition without paradox is empty. Theologians too often forget this, either wallowing in the fallenness of the world, in

⁹ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 98. Cf. James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), ix: “Since theology is *human* speech and *not* God speaking, I recognize ... that *all* attempts to speak about ultimate reality are limited by the social history of the speaker.”

paradox, or triumphantly proclaiming the Christian story absent even a hint of genuine humility. A commitment to paradox means a commitment to trying as hard as possible to understand the ultimate paradox, Christ, knowing that one's efforts will always fall short. There is no quick and direct access, no shortcut. It is a difficult task, working through the accumulated tryings and failings of the centuries and of one's contemporaries, of the visible Church's stammering as it seeks to speak in one voice with the Church invisible. In other words, a commitment to paradox means immersion in thick tradition. But immersion in thick tradition all too often leads to paradox being forgotten. It starts to seem as though one's descriptions are right, that one's feelings are true, that one is indeed participating in the Body of Christ. That is when paradox humbles. Paradox reminds that as soon as one feels comfortable with one's commitments – one's descriptions, one's feelings, one's participation – those commitments are misdirected. Christian commitment is ultimately to paradox, to the One who is Paradox, the God-Man, and to nothing else.

Paradox and Tradition in the Theology of James Cone

The challenge of writing theology, like the challenge of writing good fiction, is to at once tell a compelling story and to tell a story that is fundamentally equivocal. Doing one or the other is sometimes manageable; to do both is impossible. The theologian's prayer is to fail better. It is the aspiration to do both that I find in Cone's theology. It is not that Cone locates one paradox (other than Christ) at the heart of his theological project. It is that in articulating the Christian *logos*, Cone weaves together multiple irreducible paradoxes. Sometimes Cone hesitates, does not fully embrace the moments of paradox (even more often, his readers and critics hesitate for him). These hesitations can give his theology the appearance of excessive alignment with radical

politics or African American culture – that is, the appearance of conceding its heart to the secular. However, Cone’s theological writings, even his early work, grow out of an immersion in African American religious life. In other words, Cone is immersed in the Christian tradition; such immersion always is located in a specific historical and cultural location. But, in his early works, Cone prevents that specific location from crippling his theological imagination through paradox. The pillars which hold together Cone’s descriptions of the African American religion are each paradoxical, either under-defined or defined multiply with each definition in tension with each other. The discussion that follows analyzes these pillars, including blackness, liberation, freedom, and humanity. Though the focus is on showing how each of these concepts, for Cone, is ultimately paradoxical, it should not be forgotten that these concepts are each the pillars of Cone’s explication of the Christian tradition. Cone is explicating tradition equivocally: he is employing what might be called an aesthetics of paradox.

First among the paradoxes woven together by Cone is the paradox of blackness. Cone describes it as both “ontological symbol” and “visible reality.”¹⁰ Does this mean that sometimes Cone writes about blackness in the symbolic sense and other times he writes about it in the literal sense? Certainly not: throughout his writings, and most prominently in his early writings, the word “black” alludes to *both* senses at once. This usage stymies the desire to dismiss Cone’s terminology as “just metaphorical” or as absurdly ethnocentric. At a deeper level, it stymies the desire for theological certainty, for everything to fit together comfortably. Theological certainty is achieved by abandoning theology, by endorsing secularism in the guise of theology. Cone is

¹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7; see also notes 4 and 5 on 203-4. Compare Cone’s earlier *Black Theology and Black Power* where he writes, “Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are” (151). In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone writes of “Christ’s blackness” as “both literal and symbolic” (125).

clear that blackness is an idea of God, not humans, and so is not comprehensible in exclusively human terms: “blackness or salvation (the two are synonymous) is the work of God, not a human work. It is not something we accomplish; it is a gift.”¹¹ Further, “blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality.”¹²

Cone writes autobiographically that his “turn to blackness was an even deeper conversion-experience than the turn to Jesus.”¹³ At times, Cone writes of this turn as a change from understanding himself as a “Negro” – that is, understanding himself in white terms – to understanding himself as “black,” in autonomous, and Christian, terms. To be black is not simply to have a certain skin color, but it is also not detachable from a specific community. Indeed, to be black, to be converted to blackness, means a commitment to a specific racial community, and to the struggles of that community. In a sense, Cone means by a turn to Jesus an embrace of community: seeing oneself as a participant in the tradition of Jesus-worshippers. To turn to blackness means to turn to an impossible position, to confidently claim an identity foreclosed by the world.¹⁴ To turn to blackness is to turn to paradox. Cone’s juxtaposition of his two conversions should not be read as coincidental: they are complementary. It is from within the tradition of Jesus-worshippers that Cone can claim his blackness; his blackness is precarious unless it is rooted in (or hovers above) the tradition of Jesus-worshippers.

¹¹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 66.

¹² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 33.

¹³ James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), xxi.

¹⁴ I have found the discussion of this sort of move by Jacques Ranciere and, in the context of prophecy, George Shulman especially helpful. Ranciere, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

The Black Church thus has a privileged position, politically and theologically. This is the black church invisible, not the black churches occasionally maligned by Cone and recently declared dead.¹⁵ Black churches in the world are repositories of tradition, conveyers of the words and rhythms and performances of dark skinned worshipers of Jesus Christ. But that does not make black churches *black*. Blackness is the paradoxical claim to an impossible position – and so necessarily an identification with struggle (occupying a space that does not yet exist can only take place by force). The Black Church is invisible because it conjoins the paradox of blackness with the Christian tradition. It is an impossible mixture, as tradition and paradox are incapable of binding with each other, yet the effect of this impossibility is to reduplicate the paradox, to elevate the Black Church to the position of ultimate paradox: the Black Church becomes the Body of Christ.

What else can be meant by Cone's statement, drawing on lessons learned from Malcolm X, that "colorless Christianity is a joke – only found in the imaginary world of white theology," or his statement that "No group has been more evil than whites"?¹⁶ Obviously Cone is aware of the historical specificity of race language, not to mention the United States cultural context that frames his remarks. The race language here brings Christ into the contemporary context, bridging the two millennium divide. From our side of the divide, colorless Christianity is a distortion of Jesus into a figure of neutrality, not distinguishing between rich and poor, privileged and oppressed. Translated into our context, the poor and the oppressed are the black. But the gap cannot be forgotten. It is absolutely certain that Christianity is not neutral, but a different sort of

¹⁵ Eddie Glaude, Jr., "The Black Church is Dead," *The Huffington Post*, February 24, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html. See James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986), 112; 121-2.

¹⁶ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xx; xxvi.

certainty is needed when asserting that Jesus is on the side of specific poor and oppressed, or on the side of black people. These are fallible translations of the eternal and absolute Word into specific historical and cultural circumstances. Translation itself is a misleading term when moving from the register of the absolute to the register of the worldly and contingent. No concept in the latter can accurately represent the former. An image, or icon, perhaps is more promising. But the representational effectiveness of such an icon is proportional to the break it affects with the domain of representation. This is precisely the work of paradox. Two images are held at once, irreconcilable in worldly, secular terms: blackness as at once literal and symbolic.

Black theology is about liberation; it is a theology of liberation. But what is liberation, what is freedom? It is true, but too simplistic, to say that freedom remains undefined, or under-defined, in Cone's work. Freedom plays a central role, an ideal animating Cone's theology, but freedom remains purposefully empty. Writing in the midst of the U.S. civil rights movement, Cone seems to write of freedom as simply the lack of oppression achieved by boycotts, marches, and urban revolt.¹⁷ In the midst of such a movement, the contrast between oppression and freedom seems obvious. But as the movement waned, and as Cone reflected on Martin Luther King's later work against the subtler forms of oppression found in the Northern United States, these terms became more opaque, and appear in Cone's writings less frequently.

Yet even in Cone's earliest writings, the obviousness of freedom is less secure and comforting than eerily, and importantly, hollow. As he writes, "[D]eath is preferable to life, if the latter is devoid of freedom."¹⁸ Freedom evokes a total commitment, but for what? Not for any

¹⁷ For example, Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 4. Cone presents dignity in a similar way in *Black Theology of Liberation*, 16.

¹⁸ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 4. While critics, and to some extent Cone himself, dismiss some of these early remarks as overly influenced by white thinkers (especially French existentialists), Cone critically appropriates the ideas of his intellectual interlocutors in the service of his novel

reason: Cone dismisses rational discourse as sometimes useful but always subordinate to something greater. “Black Power ... is by nature ‘irrational’,” he writes.¹⁹ But this commitment to the death is also not some outburst of madness: it is an “existential” commitment. Black theology makes use of both reason and passion, but it is a commitment to a higher order, to “something that is placed above everything else”, felt “in their guts” by those who “really knew oppression” – this is the commitment to freedom.²⁰ Freedom is pre-rational, pre-linguistic: it does not require justification because it is “self-evident.”²¹

Opressors use the language of freedom in specific ways, attach (often implicitly) specific content to it. When specific content is attached to freedom, it can be rationally discussed, plans can be worked out for its supposed gradual achievement, and methods can be declared legitimate or illegitimate. Concealed in these very rational discussions are deep systematic injustices which will never be addressed so long as the discussion continues on the plane of practical reason – put another way, so long as the oppressor’s definition of freedom is adopted. As Cone writes, white liberals want “change without risk, victory without blood”; the white liberal “is still white to the very core of his being.”²² Black theology involves a commitment to freedom without content, which is just another way of saying a commitment to freedom defined by the oppressed.

On the one hand, freedom is the goal, the outcome of liberation. On the other hand, freedom is achieved in the process of liberation, in the identification with the struggle against

theological endeavor. In the paragraph containing this quotation he turns to both Albert Camus and the words of a black spiritual for support.

¹⁹ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 5.

²⁰ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 4; 5.

²¹ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 6, where Cone closely links freedom and human dignity.

²² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 27. “What he fails to realize is that there is no place for him in this war of survival” (27).

oppression. Cone writes, “No one can tell us what liberation is and how we ought to struggle for it, as if liberation can be found in words. Liberation is a process to be located and understood only in an oppressed community struggling for freedom.”²³ Elsewhere he writes that freedom “is not a pious feeling in the heart. Freedom is a struggle wrought out of the blood and tears of our mothers and fathers.”²⁴ There is no way to articulate freedom, no worldly content of the term, except in the experience of those working for freedom. “To be free in Christ is to be against the world.”²⁵

Equality is achieved through the fight for freedom – which is to say, through the pure struggle. The human being is in solidarity, in communion, with all other human beings when she fights for freedom.²⁶ But something more is also happening in the fight for freedom. The human is not only in communion with other humans, she is also participating in the divine drama. The sense of freedom here is both empty and absolute: “Through Christ the poor are offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes them other than human.”²⁷ Freedom has no worldly meaning, but it has an otherworldly meaning: it is offered by Christ. To receive the gift of freedom means to participate in rebellion against oppression. In other words, the reception of God’s gift of freedom is the work of achieving freedom for others: performing the work of God on earth. The image of God in man is not a little picture but a mirror, reflecting the divine light

²³ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 48.

²⁴ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 129.

²⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 42.

²⁶ Alain Badiou, also drawing on the existentialist tradition, helpfully develops this point in his *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²⁷ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 8.

of freedom onto the corners of the earth darkly burdened by oppression.²⁸ For this reason, Cone can write, “Black rebellion is God himself actively involved in the present-day affairs of men for the purpose of liberating a people. Through his work, black people now know that there is something more important than life itself. They can afford to be indifferent toward death, because life devoid of freedom is not worth living.”²⁹ The Black Church is constituted by those who struggle for freedom: participation in struggle makes the individual a part of the Body of Christ. Participation in the struggle for freedom provides authority: it is the only worldly access to the absolute (Cone asserts that our access to truth through Scripture, tradition, and the visible churches is always already imperfect³⁰). Everything opposed to struggle, Cone suggests, is “the work of the Antichrist.”³¹

This paradoxical status of freedom echoes the ultimate paradox of freedom: Christ’s achievement of freedom from the old law leading to (non)servitude in the new law of love. “Christian freedom means being a slave for Christ in order to do his will.”³² Cone takes on the stark – worryingly supersessionist – opposition all too present in mid-century Protestant thought with the effect of emphasizing how Christ’s liberating work results in a freedom which is itself commitment. Under the new regime the Christian does not wallow in her freedom. She joins in the work of liberation. Her participation in Christ means participation in the work of Christ, a

²⁸ See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 134: “The image of God ... [is that] which makes all people struggle against captivity. It is the ground of rebellion and revolution among slaves.” I have found David Bentley Hart’s mirror imagery particularly evocative. See his “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (2002): 541-561 and *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

²⁹ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 10.

³⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 60.

³¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 120.

³² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 42.

constant battle against the forces of oppression. In this implicit reworking of the imagery of liberation, Cone calls into question the mid-century supersessionism on which he draws.³³ The God of both Old and New Testaments is a God of liberation, a God who sides constantly with the oppressed, with those in slavery that is both material and spiritual. Cone identifies blacks living in America with the Israelites of the Old Testament, finding God on the side of the victims in both instances. But this identification is made possible by the Christ event, allowing for participation in the work of liberation by all those who are oppressed, allowing for the Old Testament narrative to be read as speaking to a twentieth century black American.

Is the freedom offered by Christ a worldly freedom or an eschatological freedom? Cone suggests that both answers are right and both answers are wrong: another knot of paradox. Eschatological freedom has been manipulated by oppressors, specifically white slave owners, in order to pacify the oppressed. They say: just wait until after you die, then you will be free. Through readings of slave spirituals, Cone points out how the referent of heaven was sometimes the North, or Africa: purely secular, worldly ideals. It is hope that joins the eschatological and the historical. On the one hand, “Hope in God’s coming eschatological freedom is always derived from the suffering of people who are seeking to establish freedom on earth but have failed to achieve it.”³⁴ In other words, the struggle for worldly freedom precipitates eschatological freedom. The taste of freedom on earth suggests what might be ahead at the *eschaton*. On the other hand, eschatological freedom motivates the struggle for worldly freedom. By knowing that one is eschatologically free, one is able to act in this world as if one is already free despite living in a world in which freedom is denied. Neither worldly nor eschatological freedom is complete without the other, yet they cannot be identified, or even thought of as

³³ This point is explored in detail by Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, Chapter 4.

³⁴ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 81. See also Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Chapter 5.

perfectly complementary. Paradox is woven in again. Hope is not exactly happy waiting for the *eschaton*, nor is it exactly mournful longing for that which would make life more comfortable. Cone writes that hope “is not patience but impatience, not calmness but protest.”³⁵ As it impossibly holds together the historical and the eschatological, hope elicits participation in struggle – which is to say, participation in the work of God.

Cone emphasizes the commitment of black theology to analysis tied to action, but he also emphasizes the precarious nature of this analysis and action. Freedom means, in part, “the existential burden of making decisions about human liberation without being completely sure what Jesus did or would do. *This is the risk of faith.*”³⁶ Action is dependent on analysis, but analysis is always imperfect. Unless paradox is embraced, we are left with paralysis. Debates about Biblical interpretation and the contemporary situation will go on without end. But faith does not mean reasonable confidence; it means commitment beyond reason. As Cone emphasizes, this means faith is necessarily risky. Flawed analysis can produce misdirected actions. This is not the exception, but the norm. In the fallen world, faith is the aspiration to fail better.

This commitment entailed by the risk of faith is not generic piety. It is not virtuous living. It is not following moral principles, or making the right decisions. Faith, on Cone’s view, is a commitment to one group rather than another, to the oppressed and against the oppressors. Rather than fixating on the subtleties of a situation, the purpose of analysis is to make a cut between two groups, enabling commitment to one.³⁷ How crude a distinction, one might respond.

³⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 102.

³⁶ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 36-7.

³⁷ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 37; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 94. This point is reminiscent of the existential demarcation of friends and enemies proposed by Carl Schmitt as the foundation of

But the point is that all analyses are flawed, that no amount of subtlety will succeed. The aspiration for success – the will to (worldly) truth – is a distraction, a tool of the oppressor. The paradoxical commitment of faith acknowledges finitude, and recognizes the need for commitment not grounded either in the delusion of worldly truth or the aspiration for worldly truth. Commitment is to the oppressed, no matter how elusive they are, no matter how often they are misidentified. The commitment of faith is to fail better at siding with the oppressed, not to fail better at describing the world.

From Cone's perspective, whites don't take risks. Not because of a choice they make to play it safe. Whites don't take risks because they don't see risks. The white vocabulary is sufficiently complete, smooth, slick, that opportunities for risk do not arise. The white world is saturated with descriptions and reasons that fit together just so. The joys of surprise and the sorrows of tragedy are eliminated, replaced with simulacra.³⁸ This make-believe world is composed of the image of man purged of the image of God. It takes upkeep, bloody upkeep. All that does not fit in its spick and span interiors must be eliminated. "[S]in is whiteness – the desire of whites to play God in the realm of human affairs."³⁹ Moreover, "whites have only one purpose: the destruction of everything that is not white."⁴⁰ Cone describes the nature of whiteness as "satanic," and he writes, "Whiteness characterizes the activity of deranged individuals intrigued by their own image of themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what

politics. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³⁸ In contrast, Cone writes of the contradictions of black life, and his own childhood experience: "I do not remember any black church person in Bearden using religion to cover up oppression or as an escape from the harsh realities of life." Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 22.

³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 108.

⁴⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 11.

is wrong with the world.”⁴¹ Black theology is less the opposite than the obverse of white pseudo-theology (secularism?). The very nature of black theology is paradoxical, that which cannot be grasped, the image of God in man and nothing more. It sees clearly what is amiss, and endlessly grapples to make right what is forever broken. Black theology’s task is “the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world.”⁴²

Once again, Cone weaves together the paradox of commitment with the other paradoxes he explores: “*Freedom is not a gift but a risk that must be taken.*”⁴³ Commitment and freedom both dwell in the register of paradox. But this statement appears to oppose risk to gift, and the apparent claim that freedom is not a (divine) gift seems to run counter to Cone’s discussions of freedom elsewhere in his work. Here we see the difficulty of translation from the register of paradox to the world. Freedom in its empty and absolute sense, in its supremely paradoxical sense, is certainly divine gift. But divine gift in the world becomes a risk. Pure gift in the fallen world is always already contaminated. The gracious response to pure gift is risky commitment, commitment unsupported by worldly reasons, commitment that may very well misfire.

In that commitment lies yet another paradox. On the one hand, the commitment of faith is a call to identification with the poor and oppressed. On the other hand, it is a call to the liberation of the poor and oppressed. If the poor and oppressed are no longer poor and oppressed, the black theologian will be left identified with the comfortably bourgeois. Consternation about this possibility has motivated some of the recent critics of black and liberation theology. Liberation seems to be liberation into middle class life, with the implicit effect of “liberating” the oppressed by turning them into oppressors. This objection can now be addressed when we are mindful of

⁴¹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 8.

⁴² Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 107.

⁴³ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 48

paradox. The objection arises when liberation is thought of in exclusively secular – non-paradoxical – terms. It supposes that liberation is making poor people richer, so what is needed is a more flexible account of who counts as a poor person (e.g., not every African American). But if liberation is thought *theologically*, not exclusively in secular terms, it means participation in the divine drama of liberation, of commitment not to the oppressed as judged by any empirical measure, but to those who play the role of the oppressed in the drama, as imperfectly discerned by us fallen humans. Blackness is privileged not because of empirical data about African Americans, but because of the paradox that blackness names, at once included and excluded from the secular world, at once oppressed and invisible.

Another moment of paradox concerns the role that humanity, and the human, plays in Cone's work. For Cone, humanity and freedom are closely linked; in a way they are different expressions of the same paradox. "To be human is to be free, and to be free is to be human. ... This is the paradox of human existence. *Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free.*"⁴⁴ Black theology exalts the human and, strangely enough, the black person turns out to be quintessentially human. Cone writes, "Jesus was that reality who empowered black people to know that they were not the worthless human beings that white people said they were."⁴⁵ To be human but to be worthless: this is the paradox of black humanity. Humanity is valued, and blacks are human, so black humanity should be valued – but it is not. Logic fails. The truths of the world shudder in light of the reality of Jesus, an absolute revealed through worldly paradox.

In one sense, the near oxymoron of black humanity is shaped by oppression. It is the oppressors, whites, who set what it means to be black – and what it does not mean. There are no

⁴⁴ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

⁴⁵ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, x.

worldly terms in which to be black besides the white terms. Christianity, when it is not naturalized into a secular vocabulary, provides other terms, or, better, an alternative account. For it is not just another set of terms, a vocabulary for black humanity where there was not one before. A new vocabulary would be parasitic on the vocabulary of white humanity. What black theology suggests is something much more radical. An account of black humanity is an account of humanity as such, and humanity itself has been distorted by racism. Humanity is invisible in the world today, and it is only by making visible black humanity that any humanity becomes visible. What does it mean to make visible black humanity? It means to recognize the paradox constitutive of the human, the image of the ultimate paradox that makes a human being human. It is to acknowledge that *who* we are is never exhausted by *what* we are, and yet each is necessary for the other.⁴⁶ The white world attempts to provide an exhaustive description, but is dependent on a blatant omission (of blacks). Every such attempt fails. Black humanity names that failure, names the impossibility that distinguishes humans, and individuates each human.

There is another approach to the paradox of humanity, one that echoes Cone's discussion of the paradox of freedom. Cone writes, "To be human is to find something worth dying for. When the black man rebels at the risk of death, he forces white society to look at him, to recognize him, to take his being into account, to admit that he *is*."⁴⁷ In other words, from the location of one excluded from humanity, the starkest means of demonstrating one's existence as human is to demonstrate the capacity to become non-human: to die. Here we have humanity without content. The only characteristic of humanity is that it is not non-humanity. While the white person who risks death does so for a reason, for a cause, in terms explicable according to white (secular) discourse, there is no vocabulary to describe the black person risking death, no

⁴⁶ See, for example, Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 78.

⁴⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 8.

reason or cause to which one can point. And yet one does have to point, because risking death cannot be ignored. The only thing to which one can point is humanity itself, black humanity, the paradox of humanity.

Yet another knot of paradox is woven into Cone's writings when he addresses the problem of evil. He does not offer a solution. Indeed, he asserts that no rational or philosophical solution is possible. Yes, worldly life involves suffering, but faith in God means commitment without reason, commitment despite evidence to the contrary, commitment in the face of suffering. From the perspective of black theology as encapsulated in the music of the spirituals, the singer "does not really question the justice and goodness of God. He takes for granted God's righteousness and vindication of the poor and weak. Indeed, it is the point of departure for his faith. The slave has another concern, centered on the *faithfulness* of the community of believers in a world full of trouble."⁴⁸ In other words, the commitment to God, which brings with it a commitment to all those who suffer, is in a different register than worldly concerns, including those of suffering. In the register of faith, the register of the absolute, the register of paradox, all that matters is commitment.⁴⁹

Cone's autobiographical writings underscore a lived paradox. In his hometown of Bearden, Arkansas, there was little physical violence or heavy handed racial oppression, but there was pervasive, silent segregation.⁵⁰ On the surface, all seemed to live together happily. But Cone, his brother, and their parents refused a superficial understanding of the situation. The peace of the community was based on the characterization of blacks as inferior, but the Cone parents, and children, refused to accept this characterization. They also refused to wallow in

⁴⁸ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 23.

⁴⁹ One might even say that the object of faith – the descriptions of God – are projections of that commitment.

⁵⁰ See the Introduction to *Risks of Faith*, as well as *My Soul Looks Back*.

anger at the injustice of the situation. Instead, each in his or her own way acknowledged the contradictions of the situation, acknowledged the paradox of superficial pleasantries and institutionalized racism.

Whites in Bearden preached all-embracing love, but they implicitly excluded blacks from that love. Is this not also a paradox, a paradox of white theology alongside the paradox of black theology? The difference is that the former is unacknowledged; it rests on false consciousness. It is commitment to delusion, not commitment to paradox. It is commitment to abstract ideas rather than to lived reality. It is commitment to secular reason rather than commitment to theological inquiry.

It was through tradition that these men in Bearden were able to commit themselves to a life of paradox. Paradox was lived: in sermons and prayers and shouting and dancing and song, each pointing to the paradoxical figure of Jesus. These performances do not arise *ex nihilo*: they are transmitted from person to person, from generation to generation, bodily knowledge that eludes the confines of the archive.⁵¹ Yet black church life was plagued by anti-intellectualism and ignorance, leading to an uncritical faith. Against these limitations of church life, Cone points to the way that paradox was also lived on Saturday nights, in the blues. Cone constructs a dialectical tension between the spirituals and the blues, between Saturday night and Sunday morning, portraying each as performing an aspect of black experience.⁵² Although the activities of Saturday night were ostensibly secular, in Cone's portrayal the secular versus sacred division breaks down. Sunday morning would not be properly Christian without the performances of

⁵¹ A point made forcefully in a different context by Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵² See *The Spirituals and the Blues*, as well as the Introduction to *Risks of Faith*.

despair of the Saturday bluespeople – even if concurrent membership in both groups was impossible.⁵³

Cone finds this difficult synthesis embodied in his own father, a sometime bluesperson, a sometime churchgoer. Implicitly, in this portrait of Cone the father by Cone the son, paradox is embodied: a figure dissatisfied with each answer provided to the same set of problems, to the contradictions of black existence, to black existence as problem. To be either a churchgoer or a bluesperson would be to make the problem too easy, to suppose that a set of answers, from God or the bottle, might prove satisfactory. To alternate between the two, in frustration, is to continue to grapple with the problem as paradox – and when its intriguing and frustrating force abates, to grapple even more.

In Cone's portrait of his father, the image of God in man as paradox shines through. Perhaps in this figure we can see responses to the two recent criticisms of black theology. Against those who charge black theology with losing sight of the poor and oppressed, the blackness of Cone's father is defined not by his skin color (never mentioned) but by his simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the community of Bearden. Poverty, oppression, and, most of all, blackness name this impossible position. Against those who charge black theology with overlooking the richness of theological tradition, for Cone's father the traditions of his people – what they did in church – mattered, but what mattered most was his paradoxical location. He was at once committed and estranged.

Recovery of the Theological in Black Theology

⁵³ Cone suggests that paradox is ubiquitous in blues lyrics: from “I love the blues, they hurt so nice” to “I can't stand you, Baby, but I need you, / You're bad, but you're oh so good.” Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 5.

One of the reasons that black theology seems so vulnerable to the criticism that it is insufficiently political and that it is insufficiently theological is a shift that occurred in the decades after Cone's earliest works. Discussions of black theology in the past three decades have become increasingly oriented by contextualism. This is often presented as a natural movement. Black theology criticized the false assumption of universality presented by previous theologians, yet there remained in black theology of the 1960s and 1970s assumptions of universality that went unquestioned. The first generation of black male theologians, writing with masculine words and styles, purported to speak for both men and women. But what of the perspective brought to black theology by women? Or by West Indians? Or by blacks in other parts of the world? Or by homosexuals? It seems natural that black theology should open the door to myriad theological enterprises growing out of the myriad cultural contexts in which Christians find themselves.

This paper has sketched the outlines of a path not taken in black theology, a path that puts paradox rather than cultural context at the heart of black theology. Cone himself has moved towards an embrace of contextualism, writing in the 1986 preface of *Black Theology of Liberation*: "Theology is *contextual* language – that is, defined by the human situation that gives birth to it." The importance of context is the "central thesis" of Cone's 1975 *God of the Oppressed*.⁵⁴ As early as Cone's 1972 *The Spirituals and the Blues*, the first work in which Cone self-consciously privileged African American sources in both the content of his theology and also its method, the authority of the struggle against oppression slips into the authority of

⁵⁴ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, xi; *God of the Oppressed*, 14. However, in *God of the Oppressed* Cone is still committed to Jesus Christ being the transcendent reality expressed in the songs and stories of black people. This, he writes, "prevents Black Theology from being reduced merely to the cultural history of black people" (29). Later (77) he invokes "the divine One" as distinguishing black theology from secular black politics. One wonders whether the increasing focus on God's transcendence foretells the later slip into a more extreme contextualism.

experience.⁵⁵ By 1997, Cone writes that “black experience” has priority over the Bible. Cone suggests that this assertion makes him particularly aware of “the problematic character of absolutizing any theological claim,” and he concludes that the necessary course of action is to listen to many voices from many contexts articulating many experiences.⁵⁶ My suggestion is that Cone’s early work already took into account a deep humility – but in his early work it was a *theological* humility while in Cone’s later work, as voices from many regions and religions are taken into account, the humility loses its specifically theological nature. Contextualism is another name for secularism.

The aspiration of contextualism is to acknowledge everyone’s perspective: each person reads Scripture and tradition from her or his own social setting; each person worships in the style of her or his own community. Theology has no neutral starting place – but, implicit in this claim as framed by contextualists, is the suggestion that every starting place is an equal one, that God’s love is diffracted through each community, and shines on all. A contextualist might object that there is an important proviso in her position: these are *oppressed* communities – African American, Caribbean, Hispanic, female, “queer,” migrant, etc. Yet, as work in the humanities has persuasively shown, every community creates exclusions.⁵⁷ The idea of pure oppression is illusory, as is the idea of pure domination. To choose particular communities to privilege with the title of oppressed involves political calculation. It is messy, worldly work. But that messiness is concealed, and worldly choices are implicitly issued divine sanction: *these* are the oppressed,

⁵⁵ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 106: “Black people accepted the dictum: Truth is experience, and experience is the Truth. If it is lived and encountered, then it is real.”

⁵⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, xi (where Cone seems to use “black experience” and “black tradition of struggle” interchangeably), xiv.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Cone also writes of the sins of the oppressed, and suggests that all are sinful – it is just that oppressors have the deadly combination of sin plus power. Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 9; Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xxvi.

these contexts matter. At the end of the day, the contextualist finds herself in a position uncomfortably similar to that of the white theologian proclaiming God to be colorblind. Certain worldly interests are advanced under the guise of neutrality. In contrast, when black theology is built around paradox and tradition, when the paradox of blackness reduplicates the paradox of Christ, humility is built in to the identification of any particular community as the privileged oppressed. What remains central is the commitment to liberation; the specifics of the practice of liberation (who? how? etc.) are secondary.

What does this mean for the fruits born of contextual theological inquiry? Does not the embrace of paradox lead to neglect, for example, of the critique of patriarchy? I do not think so, but space does not permit a full investigation of these questions. My point here is simply to suggest that untapped potential remains in the embrace of *blackness* as a privileged term for the theological enterprise, and I would assert that there are resources within *black* theology for the critique of patriarchy. In other words, an embrace of the paradox of black theology is necessarily critical of the simplistic and hubristic assertion of male privilege, for black theology understood in this way is necessarily, and most centrally, a thoroughgoing critique of all idolatry. This seems a more compelling approach than one beginning with the experience of, say, a gendered community, for a community has its characteristic virtues and vocations which are too easily criticized and reformed when the community thoroughly identifies itself with its status as oppressed. Paradox necessarily, perhaps uncomfortably, values tradition – indeed, needs tradition – and it is within the warm embrace of tradition that virtues and vocations are embedded. Yet the ultimate commitment to paradox is a reminder of the contingency of those virtues and vocations, of the potential need not to reform them but to transform them.

Cone notes that even when the theologian is humbled, when the theologian realizes that her vocabulary is a human vocabulary always inadequate to talk about ultimate reality, there remains a criterion by which to judge theology. It is not the suitability or elegance of the theologian's concepts that provide this criterion. It is, like Marx's eleventh thesis, not how well theology describes the world that matters, but how well theology changes the world.⁵⁸ This change takes place not in the vocabulary of the day, not in a secular vocabulary. The task before us is to effect a "revaluation of all values," to formulate "a *new* law and a *new* morality" that will transform humanity.⁵⁹ It is a radical transformation not recognizable in secular terms. As Cone remarks, citing Kierkegaard, "there are no objective scientific criteria" to tell when and where God is at work in the world, and yet, for the faithful, there is absolute certainty, and absolute commitment.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, xii: "Life-giving power for the poor and the oppressed is the primary criterion that we must use to judge the adequacy of our theology, not abstract concepts." Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 14: "The truth of the black faith-claim is found in whether the people receive that extra strength to fight until freedom comes."

⁵⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 127 (drawing on Nietzsche); Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 191 (where Cone sees this taking place in the lives of slaves), 199.

⁶⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 60. See also *Black Theology of Liberation*, 17: "What could the concept of 'winning' possibly mean? Blacks do what they do because and only because they can do no other; and black theology says simply that such action is in harmony with divine revelation."

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