

THE LIBERATING THEOLOGY OF JAMES HAL CONE – INVITED SESSION

Topic: The Liberating Theology of James Hal Cone  
Convener: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana  
Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
Presenters: Andrew Prevot, Boston College  
Karen Teel, University of San Diego  
Robert J. Rivera, St. John's University

An original animator of liberation theology, James Hal Cone's Black interpretations of Christian tradition and fierce truth-telling to White Christians have made a way for many other liberation theologies—Latin American, African, Asian, feminist and womanist, for example. His crossing over to glory in April 2018 leaves us with a responsibility to preserve and assess James Cone's legacy, for we face longstanding and reinvigorated problems of racial oppression and other injustice in American society. The Program Committee of the CTSA Board approved President Elect Maria Pilar Aquino's request to include this Invited Session, "The Liberating Theology of James Hal Cone," in the program of the 2019 Annual Convention.

In his presentation, "The Music of James Cone: Spirituals, Blues, and Other Love Songs," Andrew Prevot focused on the songs, musical artists, and black musical traditions that inspired Cone's theological project throughout his life. While discussing his earlier and later uses of the spirituals and the blues, his talk also suggested connections with current theologically significant examples of black pop and soul music. For Cone, none of these musical pieces are mere "sorrow songs," as DuBois once called the slave spirituals, but also songs of a powerful love. They give voice to the depths of black suffering and to hidden sources of transformation and healing. Music, Prevot demonstrated with the help of short audio clips, is vital to Cone's black theological aesthetics.

In "Can We Hear Him Now? Cone's Enduring Challenge to White Theologians," Karen Teel referred to data from the last 20 years of CTSA meetings and issues of Theological Studies to support the claim that white Catholic theologians, by their silence, are complicit in the sin of white supremacy. Her paper argued that the reason many have not fully internalized Cone's prophetic critique of whiteness "must be that we haven't found the courage to recognize that it really does apply to us, both personally and disciplinarily. In short, the problem is fear." She tried to show that the fear-response is rooted in common anti-black biases and stereotypes. Teel concluded by highlighting specific ways that CTSA members could begin to confront white supremacy in our work and discipline.

Bobby Rivera's paper, "James H. Cone: A Theologian for Our Time," read James Cone's 1985 essay, "Theology as the Expression of God's Liberating Activity for the Poor," in light of his posthumous theological memoir *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*. Rivera explored the question: What is at stake for the theologian when doing theology? Drawing on Cone, he argued that theologians discerning, interpreting, and critically engaging the signs of the times, have a personal and political dimension at stake in our work. He looked at Cone's essay and memoir to analyze the ways in which the personal and the political are present in his work, and the ways in which they are

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suggestive for the theological task today. Rivera turned to his Nuyorican context to reflect on the personal and political dimensions of theologizing in light of the current situation of debt, disaster, and diaspora affecting millions of Puerto Ricans.

An audience of about 50 attendees engaged the panelists on their insightful presentations of James Cone's theology: its radical method, confrontational message and musical foundations. Teel fielded several questions and comments that seemed to affirm her observation that Cone's confrontation of white privilege and racial injustice continues to intimidate white theologians. In his response, Rivera emphasized that Cone's is exactly the critical voice we all need to hear today, that his raw analysis pushes theologians to be self-conscious, passionate, personal and political in their scholarly pursuits and in their witness to Jesus Christ. Prevot suggested that scholars committed to a theology of liberation are called, by nature of the vocation, to be reborn through an ever-new self-consciousness, new praxis. Like Cone, who appropriated Black cultural gifts in his theological mission, theologians might benefit from regular engagement in authentic self-examination: Who am I? What am I supposed to do? Who is God calling me to become? What is God calling me to do?

KATHLEEN DORSEY BELLOW  
*Xavier University of Louisiana*  
*New Orleans, Louisiana*