

THE LIBERATING THEOLOGY OF JAMES HAL CONE – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: The Theologian's Task: Resistance, Empowerment and Freedom
 Convener: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana
 Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union
 Presenters: M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College
 Bryan Massingale, Fordham University

“The Theologian's Task: Resistance, Empowerment and Freedom” is the first presentation of a three-year Interest Group whose focus is The Liberating Theology of James Hal Cone. Work and the economy may not be explicit topics of everyday discussion in universities, seminaries and the church where Catholic theologians labor. However, money, employment and economic concerns are uppermost in the minds of God's people, no matter their station in life, as they deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and face the uprising of communities in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd. The late James Cone attributed the stark socio-economic disparities in education, health care, incarceration, income and employment that plague Black communities and communities of color to white supremacy and racism. This session builds on Cone's ongoing and provocative dialogue with Catholic theologians.

In her presentation, “Black Theology and the Present Moment,” M. Shawn Copeland addresses George Floyd's death as a lynching, action purposefully perpetrated by a white supremacist society to control through violence, murder, and other injury, members perceived to be “differently dangerous” to maintain the white racist status quo. In citing a number of contemporary incidents that highlight the prevalence of these seemingly unending lynchings in the nation, Copeland asks what we Christian theologians owe Christ and the people of a God in response. She raises Cone's insistence that to be authentic, Christian theology must necessarily be a Black theology, actively standing for and with the differently oppressed, attending to their experiences, ideas and points of view and uplifting their resistance to oppression with God's work of human liberation. Christian theologians are people of God, disciples of Christ with an inherent responsibility to be “exegete, prophet, teacher, preacher and philosopher” recognizing Sacred Scripture as God's promise to uphold the exploited and deal with injustice. The theologian's duty is to apply the Word of God to the contemporary and everyday lives of God's people in such ways that they can connect the struggle for full humanity in their respective social contexts with God's saving action in the world. To conclude, Copeland uses Cone to emphasize that the theologian's theological praxis must be global in perspective, resisting by “breaking silence in teaching, writing, speaking the truth” to empower the oppressed to do likewise.

Bryan Massingale's presentation, “‘This is What Theology Looks Like’: Cone's Challenge to Black and Liberation Theologies (and Theologians),” begins with a remembrance of a 2015 protest march through the streets of Philadelphia on the eve of Pope Francis' visit to the city. The event was sponsored by PICO National Network, an interfaith community-organizing federation. One of the more startling calls during the three hundred-plus member march was “Tell me what theology looks like” and its

response, “This is what theology looks like.” The activists protesting the injustice of exclusion that marginalizes and oppresses society’s most vulnerable brought to Massingale’s mind a stark disconnect between theology lived by the people and theology practiced by “professionals.”

James Cone envisioned Christian theology differently. Massingale recalls four fundamental elements of Cone’s theological insight. At its core, Cone claims, Christian theology is a liberation theology that by its nature must be social and political, proclaiming the Gospel as good news for the poor and those most at-risk. Cone asserts that Christian theology in the US must become Black, committed to the radical struggle for Black liberation because throughout salvation history, God takes the side of the oppressed. For Cone, while authentic Christian theology stands with the marginalized and despised, as a discipline it is rigorous and critical in thought. Cone insists that, despite the effects of racism, Black theology is rooted in love—Black self-love and concern about the welfare of all people.

Inspired by the marching activists and informed by Cone’s theology, Massingale examined challenges in the general praxis of Black theology today, including white backlash to Black progress and self-determination that results in political and social repression as well as the supremacy of white male theology in the academy that relegates liberation theologies to the margins. As a result, Black theology as a discipline tends to be tolerated, compromised or modulated. Massingale contends that “if one’s intellectual work is too accessible, it is designated and denigrated as ‘popular.’” The academy thus accepts Black Theology only conditionally and up to a point.” Black theologians are called to revitalize the transformative power of Black Theology envisioned and embodied by Cone with renewed commitments to the identity and vocation of scholar-activist.

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