

THE LIBERATING THEOLOGY OF JAMES HAL CONE – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Thinking Catholic Interreligiously: Black First and Everything Else Second
- Conveners: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana
C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union
- Moderator: LaShaunda Reese, University of Loyola, Chicago
- Presenters: Byron D. Wratee, Boston College
Chanelle Robinson, Boston College
- Respondent: John Segun Odeyemi, Xavier University of Louisiana

“Thinking Catholic Interreligiously: Black First and Everything Else Second” is the second presentation of a three-year Interest Group whose focus is the **Liberating Theology of James Hal Cone**. In his critique of Black Catholic Theology featured in the December 2000 edition of *Theological Studies* subtitled “The Catholic Reception of Black Theology,” the late Cone recalls Joseph Nearon’s challenging inquiry to the CTSA at its 1975 annual convention: “To whom is the black theologian accountable?” and Nearon’s response: “(T)he Black theologian is accountable to the black community” and “(t)he black theologian, like every theologian, is accountable to God.” The Black community, writ large, is an amalgam of cultures and faith traditions practiced throughout the African diaspora. In their vocation as scholars shaped by the Black experience and accountable to God and the Black people of God, Black Catholic theologians are called to interreligious dialogue and collaboration committed to the liberation of the global Black community.

Byron Wratee began his presentation, “James, Malcolm and the Nation of Islam: An Exploration of Interreligious Comparison in Black Liberation,” by characterizing Black Atlantic Religion as interreligious in nature based on the insights of historians Charles Long and Albert Raboteau. Enslaved and free Black communities of faith featured Christian and non-Christian coexistences, dialogue and engagement that have informed the cultures of African Americans even until today as evidenced by a recent Pew Research Center survey. In this work, Wratee discusses James Cone’s black liberation theology in the context of Malcolm X’s theology of black nationalism. Introducing Catherine Cornille’s understandings of comparative theological processes—confessional and meta-confessional—Wratee asserts that Cone’s articulations of theology reflect and confess his African Methodist traditions; however, in its critique of white supremacist Christianity, his liberation theology is meta-confessional in nature.

The Great Migration of 1910-1970, during which Blacks moved east, north and west to escape life in the South with its brutal racial and economic oppression, resulted in new African American religio-racial identities. Against that backdrop, Wratee describes the foundational theology of the Nation of Islam and its revolutionary, self-conscious impact on James Cone, an ordained AME elder and systematic theologian born in Arkansas in the late 1930s. Referring to Cone’s texts, *Martin, Malcolm, and America* and *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*, Wratee demonstrates Cone’s engagement, dialogue, coexistence with Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam that demanded a Black liberation theology accountable to the African American struggle

for justice. Wratee concluded with a call to Catholic theologians to deeper comparative study with the Nation of Islam.

In “‘Beyond the River’: James Cone and Interreligious Ecotheology,” Chanelle Robinson cited Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015) that addresses the interrelatedness of all creation in the current environmental crisis. She adds that Catholic ecotheology must account for the unique experiences of Black people, referring to the late James Cone, who in his essay, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?,” centers a concern for the planet in Black liberation theology. In that light, Robinson proposes that the hierarchies of power that enable white supremacy also denigrate the natural environment. Robinson argues in this paper that an engagement with African Indigenous religions offers a liberative and intergenerational cosmology for ecotheologians.

Building her claim that the resources for thinking ecologically and interreligiously are embedded within an Africana sensibility, she outlines the contributions of Ecowomanism that offers a critical intervention in Black theology, especially because of its diasporic and interreligious resources, its insistence that the ecological experiences of Black women must serve as a primary starting point for theological reflection. Robinson introduces the Bakongo Cosmogram, a depiction of the particular worldview of a West African people, to demonstrate an Africana cosmology. She suggests that in its motif the Cosmogram offers an alternative understanding of planetary belonging. In particular, she focuses on the concept of *Kalûnga* as a site for unpacking intergenerational belonging and ecological healing.

She highlights Cone’s expansion of the category of those oppressed to include the earth and refers to *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* in which he meditates on the Black arts. Robinson continues with a reflection on the African American spiritual, “Jesus, Keep me Near the Cross” in which she suggests that its ecological imagery aligns with a Bakongo vision of the world. She concludes her argument on the note that given the environmental crisis, humanity is at a critical crossroads. Cone’s meditations on the cross and the earth challenge contemporary theologians to think beyond the confines of Western epistemologies to explore intercultural and multi-religious views of the planet and the cosmos.

John Segun Odeyemi and the assembly commended Wratee and Robinson for richly researched and brilliantly presented papers. A native Nigerian, who had recently travelled to his home country, Odeyemi shared perspectives from the continent on Black suffering, equality and the struggle for justice, issues with which Cone wrestled with integrity. He offered that Black theologians, Black Catholic theologians must continue to reflect upon **and** act together as people of faith and for the sake of humanity.

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