

## THE LIBERATING THEOLOGY OF JAMES HAL CONE – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: “Black Freedom, Black Power, Black Theology”  
 Conveners: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana  
 C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
 Moderator: LaShaunda Reese, University of Loyola, Chicago  
 Presenters: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
 SimonMary Asele Ahiokhai, University of Portland

The final presentation of the three-year Interest group, The Liberating Theology of James Hal Cone, focused on the theme, "Black Freedom, Black Power, Black Theology."

In the weeks that followed the 2023 CTSA Convention, the United States observed two federal holidays that commemorate hard-won struggles for freedom. Juneteenth Independence Day, celebrated June 19, was established in 2021 to remember the day in 1865 that the last enslaved African Americans, a group in Galveston, Texas, received official word of their freedom, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed. Fourth of July Independence Day remembers the signing of the 1776 Declaration of Independence that proclaimed the American colonies free from the rule of Great Britain. Little more than two weeks apart on the calendar, these two celebrations conjure up contradictory meanings of the concept of “freedom” in American life. This session is another installment in the ongoing dialogue between esteemed ancestor James Cone, considered the Father of Black Liberation Theology, with Catholic scholars focused on a critique of US Christian tradition and the construction of theology that liberates and empowers God’s beloved in the ongoing freedom struggle of Africans in America.

C. Vanessa White set the tone for her presentation, “James Cone’s Spiritual Journey,” by playing BB King singing the blues: “There Must Be a Better World Somewhere.” She introduced Cone as a theologian whose works are rooted in Black religious experience that freed him over the course of his vocation to speak dangerous truths in the face of public tragedies and the ongoing terror of white supremacy. She described spirituality according to Michael Downey and lifting up core characteristics of Black spirituality—God-centered, biblically rooted, joyful, contemplative, holistic, justice- and liberation oriented, an aural-oral tradition—White traced Cone’s spiritual evolution, asserting that self-love of his Blackness and devotion to his community inspired Cone’s theological work. For him, Black music, especially the spirituals and blues, radically expresses Black experience that is essentially the cultural and spiritual source of Black freedom, resilience, and hope. White concludes with Cone’s final book, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*. In this work, she said, Cone details his own spiritual evolution to reinforce the conviction that the spiritual life is one that journeys in freedom and liberation in becoming one’s true self in Christ.

What is freedom without the ability to wonder and imagine new ways of being in the world? This is the question at the heart of SimonMary Asele Ahiokhai’s analysis of the contributions of two eminent scholars to the theological world and the response to coloniality operating in the Black world. In his paper, “A Decolonial Anthropology

of Freedom: Insights from James H. Cone and Franz Fanon,” he drew from the insights of the theologian Cone and psychiatrist Fanon to argue for an anthropology that decenters the narrative inherent in whiteness—a decolonial vision of surplus that defines the human person. Aihiockhai described whiteness as “the mode of being in the world that is anchored in the hegemony of racism and colonialism.” He offered Fanon’s understanding of Blackness as a construction of whiteness that devalues, renders invisible, pathologizes persons labeled Black. Cone, he suggested, accuses the US legal system of historically denying the personhood of Black bodies, disallowing them freedom and justifying inhumane violence against them. According to Cone, US law creates a hierarchy of human being—affirming, recognizing Black personhood only when it serves the profit motives of white persons. Fanon’s interpretation of Blackness as pathology, Aihiockhai asserted, refers to the “enduring (Black) embodiment of lack or scarcity” constructed by white power, racism, and colonialism that hold Black psyches captive.

To escape Fanon’s pathological dialectic of Blackness, Aihiockhai turned to Cone’s (and Albert Camus’) perception of rebellion as a ritual of freedom to discuss Blackness as an icon of saturated freedom. Black rebellion, saying “no” to injustice, represents movement away from scarcity towards a surplus of meaning and possibilities of encounters where fullness of life in God is experienced. In Cone’s point of view, Aihiockhai asserted, the rebellion of Black Americans is an affirmation of God and the Blackness of the God in them, a rejection of racism and colonialism, an emptying of the word Black of its diminishment and scarcity to reclaim through the power of the Holy Spirit, “its iconic possibilities for mediating surplus humanities, surplus imaginations, surplus historicities, surplus memories, surplus encounters, surplus hospitalities towards all.” Concluding his presentation, Aihiockhai lifted up Cone’s appreciation of the Black spirituals as an authentic expression of rebellion against systemic oppression from the days of slavery to contemporary social injustices. The spirituals, he suggested are a testimony to the “wonder and surprise” that ensue when Blackness is the conduit through which believers engage with the God of solidarity.

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