

## James Cone: *God of The Oppressed* and The Hermeneutic Circle

In the book *God of The Oppressed*, James Cone outlines his theology of black<sup>1</sup> liberation, a representation of his “most developed theological position.”<sup>2</sup> His central thesis is “that one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions,” especially within the context of race.<sup>3</sup> He explores how his personal upbringing as well as the events that make up black experience in America, including slavery and the quest for civil rights affects the way he views Scripture: “I am *black* first – and everything comes after that.”<sup>4</sup> Underlying Cone’s statements is a hermeneutic circle that guides shifts in meaning, and becomes different than the dominant culture’s (namely white) theological perspective. This paper will briefly touch on the concept of the hermeneutic circle, trace Cone’s progress through it.

The hermeneutic circle was first described by Friedrich Schleiermacher, and later expanded primarily by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Generally, the concept is

“a process of mediation and dialogue between what is familiar and what is alien in which neither remains unaffected. This process of horizontal engagement is an ongoing one that never achieves any final completion or complete elucidation – moreover, inasmuch as our own history and tradition is itself constitutive of our own hermeneutic situation as well as being itself constantly taken up in the process of understanding, so our

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1 This term was used as it is both the one Cone favors in *God of The Oppressed*, but also one that incorporates individuals from African descent from a variety of geographies.

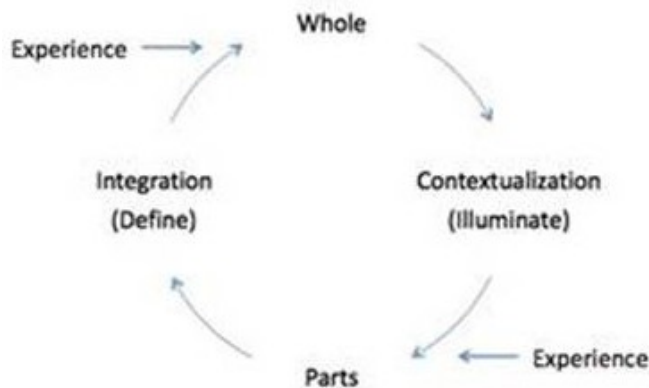
2 Cone, i

3 Ibid, 13

4 Ibid, iii

historical and hermeneutic situation can never be made completely transparent to us.”<sup>5</sup>

It is this constant dialogue between old and new that creates a circle, and “reflects the way in which the structure of human understanding is dictated by the temporal nature of our experience. It is *because* information becomes available to us only serially that it must be incorporated piecemeal into the synthetic vision which illuminates the meaning of the



object of comprehension.”<sup>6</sup>

Bontekoe provides a helpful diagram to illustrate the hermeneutic circle, illustrated in Figure 1. New information about a

particular form of understanding is continually mediated by experience. As

Figure 1: Basic Form of Hermeneutic Circle  
(Bontekoe, 4)

experience influences the whole

object of comprehension (e.g. God), or part of the object of comprehension (e.g. theology, revelation in Scripture), it continuously augments the other through new integration of meaning into the whole, or a deeper nuance through contextualization. Bontekoe stresses that without a continual influx of ideas, “the process of comprehension always terminates in something like a vicious circle for the simple reason that, once we are satisfied that we understand what is at issue, or have lost interest in pursuing the issue any

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5 Malpas

6 Bontekoe, 4

further, we rely upon and apply the measure of understanding that we have already reached... which may, of course, be a *misunderstanding*.”<sup>7</sup>

The experiences of Cone, and the experiences of black individuals in America shape his understanding of what God is. For example, in the first chapter of *God of the Oppressed*, Cone recalls his childhood in Bearden, Arkansas. He lived in a world that affirmed his identity through his time at the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church: “God made frequent visits to the black community in Bearden and reassured the people of God’s concern for their well-being and the divine will to bring them safely home... that ‘otherworldly’ reality beyond the reach of the dreadful limitations of this world.”<sup>8</sup> His understanding of God was imbued with “the beauty and joy of black life and an expression of [his] deep yearning for human definitions not bound by this earthly sphere.”<sup>9</sup> Yet there was a contradictory experience that was espoused by white individuals in Bearden, who

“tried to make [him] believe that God created black people to be white people’s servants. We blacks, therefore, were *expected* to enjoy plowing their fields, cleaning their houses, mowing their lawns, and working in their sawmills. And when we showed signs of displeasure with our so-called elected and inferior status, they called us ‘uppity niggers’ and quickly attempted to put us in our ‘place.’”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the incongruity of the experiences of Cone’s childhood affected his understanding of the Trinity, as he was confused by their

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7 Ibid, 6

8 Cone, 1

9 Ibid

10 Ibid

understanding of Jesus Christ, “because they excluded blacks not only socially but also from their church services... [Cone and his brother] often discussed the need to confront the white ‘Christians’ of Bearden with demands of the gospel by invading their Sunday worship service with our presence, making them declare publically that *all* are not welcome in ‘God’s’ house.”<sup>11</sup>

God, as the whole object of comprehension, was in conversation between the “familiar” of his A.M.E. experience and the “alien” of the white church. Indeed, the God of the white people of Bearden was an oppressive and exclusionary God, and specifically against Cone and the black people of Bearden. Gadamer reflected on the “negativity of experience” that “as the individual attempts to bring her preconceptions... to bear on her experience, she may notice for the first time that these preconceptions are inadequate to the task.”<sup>12</sup> This kind of cognitive dissonance requires a response. For Cone, it was a recognition that he could not separate his youth from his theology, declaring “I am a *black* theologian!”<sup>13</sup> This a critical move for Cone as he moves into the particularities of a black theologian who “must approach the subject of theology in the light of the black Church and that means in a society dominated by white people.”<sup>14</sup>

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11 Ibid, 2

12 Bontekoe, 113

13 Cone, 4

14 Ibid

Cone “boasts” of his educational experience, studying “philosophy and theology – from the pre-Socratics to modern existentialism and linguistic analysis, from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen to Karl Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich... I wrote papers in seminary on the Barth and Brunner debates, the knowledge of God in contemporary theology... and concluded my formal education with a Ph.D. dissertation on Barth’s anthropology.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, Cone found difficulties as he “attempted to inform black students about the significance of theological discourse. What could Karl Barth possibly do for black students who had come from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, seeking to chance the structure of their lives in a society that had defined black as nonbeing?”<sup>16</sup> Again, Cone’s experience had affected the particularities of the object of understanding: “Indeed the heart of the problem was the relations of the black religious experience to my knowledge of classical theology.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps most poignantly was when Cone discussed his feelings during the Detroit riots in 1967:

I remember the feeling of dread and absurdity as I asked myself, What has all this to do with Jesus Christ – his birth in Bethlehem, his baptism with and life among the poor, and his death and resurrection? I intuitively knew that the responses of white preachers and theologians were not correct. The most sensitive whites merely said: “We deplore the riots but sympathize with the reason for the riots.” This was tantamount to saying: “Of course we raped your women, lynched your men, and ghettoized the minds of your children and you have a right to be upset; but that is no reason for you to burn our buildings. If you people keep acting like that, we will never give you your freedom.” I

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15 Ibid

16 Ibid, 5

17 Ibid

knew that that response was not only humiliating and insulting but wrong. It revealed not only an insensitivity to black pain and suffering but also, and more importantly for my vocation as a theologian, a *theological bankruptcy*... What was needed was a new way of looking at theology that must emerge of the dialectic of black history and culture.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, Cone begins to redefine theology based on the particular experience of black life in America, overcoming the failures of predominant white theology for black individuals. Furthermore, Cone points to the “vicious circle” of white theology that had believed itself complete in its understanding: not only was there no meaningful entre for Cone to engage in the black experience in direct dialogue with traditional white theologians traditionally studied in the academy, but the white hermeneutic circle worked against black individuals, as Cone points to when he reflects on the experiences of black slaves and white slaveholders

Because blacks and whites do not share the same life. The lives of a black slave and white slaveholder were radically different. It follows that their thoughts about the things divine would also be different, even though they might sometimes use the same words about God. The life of the slaveholder and others of that culture was that of extending white inhumanity to excruciating limits, involving the enslavement of Africans and the annihilation of Indians. The life of the slave was the slave ship, the auction block, and the plantation regime. It involved the attempt to define oneself without the ordinary historical possibilities of self-affirmation. Therefore when the master and slave spoke of God, they could not possibly be referring to the same reality.<sup>19</sup>

Cone goes so far as to say that “since white theology has not transcended the axiological perspective of white culture, we must conclude that white theology is an ideological distortion of the gospel of Jesus... it is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 5-6

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 9

impossible to be white (culturally speaking) and also think biblically.”<sup>20</sup> This clearly indicates Cone’s need for a new hermeneutic of God in light of the failures of the white theological hermeneutic that had become, to Cone, a vicious circle closed in on itself.

As Cone moves back from the particularities of theology into a reintegration of God, he looks to both the God of the Exodus and to Jesus Christ. Of the Old Testament God, Cone claims a “unanimous testimony to Yahweh’s commitment to justice for the poor and the weak... if theology does not side with the poor, then it cannot speak for Yahweh who is the God of the poor.”<sup>21</sup> Cone then moves to Jesus Christ, a King who “is a Servant who suffers on behalf of the people. He takes their pain and affliction upon himself, thereby redeeming them from oppression and for freedom.”<sup>22</sup> Drawing on his reading Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue that is chronicled in Luke, Cone states Jesus sole identity is with the marginalized: “Jesus rejected such roles as wonder worker or political king, because they would separate him from the suffering of the poor, the very people he had come to liberate.”<sup>23</sup>

In primarily associating with the liberating God of both the Old and New Testaments, Cone finds a theology that speaks to his experience as well

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20 Ibid, 87

21 Ibid, 65

22 Ibid, 68

23 Ibid, 69

as other black individuals. He is able to make a collective pronouncement as he returns to the top of the hermeneutic circle:

Black Theology's answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated briefly: The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ... Any starting point that ignores God in Christ as Liberator of the oppressed or that makes salvation as liberation secondary is *ipso facto* invalid and thus heretical.<sup>24</sup>

With this statement, Cone completes a hermeneutic circle, redefining God in a way that honors his experience. However, he has continued to move through particularities, as he had found ways to engage queer, Native American, and womanist theologies to consider the effect that patriarchy and colonialism have used Scripture to further oppress and subjugate individuals.<sup>25</sup> By using the tool of the hermeneutic circle, one can see Cone's reshaping God, and the necessity of experience to do so, as well as the developing of a "vicious circle" that's devoid or resistant to new information – a hermeneutic plagued by a scotoma. The development of Cone's black liberation is important both in its message but also in its technique for theology both in and out of dominant discourse. Like a water source without continuous replenishment, critical discourse without new voices in conversation risks becoming stagnant, atrophied in its ecosystem, and in a death knell. In the case of theology, it can become wholly anthropocentric, reflecting more the fall than redemption. Not only, then, does *God of the*

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24 Cone, 74

25 Ibid, iv-v



*Oppressed* provide salvation for individuals who have lived the black experience in America, but also all Christians who desire a God who is continuously alive and at work in the world.

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