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The Implications of James Cone's Critique of Barth and Barthians for the Practice of Academic Christian Theology

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ABSTRACT

Fifty years have passed since James Cone wrote *Black Theology and Black Power* – critiquing the unbarthian ways Barth was being appropriated in Europe and North America. This article identifies key weaknesses in a Barthian theological method that may explain the conspicuous silence of White Barthian theologians in response to Cone's critique. It suggests three lessons for ethical theological enquiry arising from attention to Cone's analysis: first, the need to recognise the ways in which the Christian theological tradition has been shaped in racist, White supremacist, and colonialist ways in order to avoid reproducing theologies Cone identified as racist; second, the responsibility of Christian theologians to give an account of the relationship of their projects to questions of ethics and practice, in order to avoid the vice of curiosity; and third, the responsibility of theologians to take particular care to avoid disadvantaging students and colleagues of colour in their professional practice.

KEYWORDS

Karl Barth; James Cone; Christian theology; Black Theology

James H. Cone wrote his major early work *Black Theology and Black Power* in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968. Karl Barth died in December of the same year. Cone had completed his doctoral work on Barth and in the fifty years until his own death in 2018 Cone engaged extensively with the work of Barth and Barth's interpreters. He was angry with White European and North American Barthians “who used him to justify doing nothing about the struggle for justice” and “confused white-talk with God-talk”.¹ Remarkably, with a few minor exceptions, White Barthians ignored Cone's critique. This article reflects on what may be learned from the failure of Barth's White interpreters to acknowledge or respond to Cone's critique. I present a brief survey of Cone's engagement with Karl Barth and his critique of White scholars of Barth's work. I then consider possible reasons for the lack of response to Cone's critique from White Barthians. Finally, I consider what lessons might be learned from Cone's critique of White Barthians for the practice of Christian theology.

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¹Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 45; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 88.

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Cone on Barth and Barthians

Racism is a key part of the origin story of Cone's engagement with Barth. Cone originally wanted to do his doctorate in Christian ethics, but the ethics professor at at Garrett Biblical Institute (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) was "one of the most blatantly racist professors".² Garrett had never admitted a Black Ph.D. student. The professor told Cone not to apply, deceitfully assuring him that they had their pick of straight-A White students from Yale and Harvard. Cone found the systematist, William Hordern, more supportive, but decided that he would not graduate if he wrote on theology and race. Cone's choice to focus on Barth for his dissertation was therefore a defensive move in the context of a racist academy. Later, he had to defend his use of Barth and other White European theologians against critics that included his brother. Cone acknowledged the concern and responded to by drawing increasingly on Black authors and church traditions.

Alongside the negative reasons pushing Cone towards Barth, he also saw common ground between Barth's approach to theology and the theology Cone wanted to develop arising from the experience of the Black church. Cone appreciated Barth's starting point in the life of Jesus and his emphasis on the Word of God in scripture and preaching.³ Cone felt a spiritual kinship with Barth, especially the way the Barth of *The Epistle to the Romans* was prepared to challenge received norms: "I purposely intended to be provocative in much the same way that Barth was when he rebelled against liberal theology."⁴

Cone's strongest criticisms were reserved for the theologians that made use of Barth's work to claim that social justice was not a theological concern:

I was angry not with Barth but only with European and North American Barthians who used him to justify doing nothing about the struggle for justice. I have always thought that Barth was closer to me than to them. But whether I was right or wrong about where Barth would stand on the matter, the truth was that I no longer was going to allow privileged white theologians tell me how to do theology.⁵

Reflecting in 2010, Cone noted that few White theologians took any notice of the challenge he presented to them in *Black Theology and Black Power*:

Not many white theologians accepted my challenge to them to speak. They just kept writing about their favorite academic themes as America's cities burned. They are still silent or only make marginal reference to the role of white supremacy in America and its theology.⁶

Cone's diagnosis of the reasons for this White silence was clear and direct:

Because white theologians live in a society that is racist, the oppression of black people does not occupy an important item on their theological agenda. Again, as Karl Marx put it: "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness". Because white theologians are well fed and speak for a people who control the means of production, the problem of hunger is not a theological issue for them. That is why they spend more time

²Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 37.

³Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 87; Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* 88–1, 87.

⁴Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xxii; Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 45.

⁵Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 45.

⁶Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 154.

debating the relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith than probing the depths of Jesus' command to feed the poor.⁷

Cone observes that being descendants of slave masters rather than slaves – or we might add in a British context, the heirs of those who accumulated wealth through the trade in slaves – affects the mental grid of theologians: “not only what books they read when doing their research, but also which aspects of personal experience will shape theological style and methodology”.⁸ This problem is amplified when White theologians “claim objectivity for their theological discourse”, with the implicit assertion that theology they do from their particular social location is the only kind that is valid.⁹ In *A Black Theology of Liberation* in 1970, Cone stated that “American theology is racist” in that “it identifies theology as dispassionate analysis of “the tradition”, unrelated to the sufferings of the oppressed”.¹⁰ Twenty years later, in *Risks of Faith*, he asked “Is racism so deeply embedded in Euro-American history and culture that it is impossible to do theology without being antiblack?”¹¹ He observed that despite the blatant use of Christianity “to justify slavery, colonialism, and segregation for nearly five hundred years”,

white theologians in the seminaries, university departments of religion and divinity schools, and professional societies refused to acknowledge white supremacy as a theological problem and continued their business as usual, as if the lived experience of blacks was theologically vacuous.¹²

Cone commented “Their silence on race is so conspicuous that I sometimes wonder why they are not greatly embarrassed by it.”¹³

Finally, Cone criticised the hypocrisy of White North American theologians expressing solidarity with the poor of Latin America while ignoring their Black near neighbours:

It was not until Orbis Books published the translated works of Latin American liberation theologians that white North American male theologians cautiously began to talk and write about liberation theology and God's solidarity with the poor. But they still ignored the black poor in the United States, Africa, and Latin America. Our struggle to make sense out of the fight for racial justice was dismissed as too narrow and divisive. White U.S. theologians used the Latin American focus on class to minimize and even dismiss the black focus on race. African-Americans wondered how U.S. whites could take sides with the poor out there in Latin America without first siding with the poor here in North America. It was as if they had forgotten about their own complicity in the suffering of the black poor, who often were only a stone's throw from the seminaries and universities where they taught theology.¹⁴

Responding to Cone's Critique

The problem Cone identifies is not confined to the past. His concern that White American theologians prioritise European theologians like Barth over theologies attentive to

⁷Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 47–8.

⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

⁹Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xv.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 131.

¹²*Ibid.*, 131, 134.

¹³*Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 133.

those disadvantaged in the US context, such as Black and Womanist theologies, is still relevant 50 years on. And remarkably, Cone's critique of White Barthians has gone unanswered. It is not hard to locate thoughtful engagements with Cone's critique of Barth and its legacy from Black theologians: from Josiah Young, Raymond Carr, Vincent Lloyd, J. Kameron Carter, Willie Jennings, and Beverly Eileen Mitchell, among others.¹⁵ These accounts are in interesting disagreement about the implications of Barth and Cone for theological accounts of race today. But when I reviewed the literature for a lecture at the 2018 conference of the Barth Center at Princeton, I found only two White theologians who discuss Cone's critique of Barth even briefly.¹⁶

There are a range of potential reasons that Cone's critique of White Barthians has been almost completely ignored by them. We should not exclude the direct operation of racial prejudice. But I think Cone is right to consider deeper structural factors to be more significant. He and the White Barthians he criticised occupied different theological worlds with different concerns and different theological methodologies. This is surprising, since Cone's theological concern with the social context in which he found himself was also a strong concern of Barth. In his commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans, Barth observed that "it is our pondering over the question 'What shall we do?' which compels us to undertake so much seemingly idle conversation about God". Barth says it is the pressing practical duties with which the world is filled and the wickedness in the streets and the daily papers that drive us to the Bible and to theology, and the ethical question is nowhere left out of account in Paul's letter to the Romans.¹⁷ Thirty years later, when Barth began the special ethics of creation in Volume III/4 of the *Dogmatics*, he stated that dogmatics "has the problem of ethics in view from the very first, and it cannot legitimately lose sight of it" (CD III/4, 3). Barth was himself engaged in the most urgent political issues of his day, such as his early involvement in Christian Socialism, his criticism of Kaiser Wilhelm II's war policy, his advocacy for the rights of workers during his pastorate in Safenwil, his key role in Christian resistance to Nazism in Germany through drafting the Barmen Declaration and helping to found the Confessing Church, the case he made even before the end of the Second World War for the need to build good relations with Germany and Russia, his campaigning for nuclear disarmament, his criticism of anti-Communist movements in the United States, and so on. This suggests that Cone was right in his statement that Barth was more on his side than on the side of the European and North American Barthians he characterised as using Barth to justify doing nothing in relation the struggle for racial justice.¹⁸ So given that Barth and Cone shared a commitment to engaging with the political contexts of their day, why did Barth's work not inspire White Barthians to do the same?

Perhaps one reason Barth did not inspire Barthians to be attentive to their social context is the nature of his theological remedy for the disastrous association Nazi theologians made between Christianity and the valorisation of the Aryan race, the German language, and German soil. Barth's response was to propose a doctrine of revelation

¹⁵Carr, "Barth and Cone in Dialogue on Revelation and Freedom"; Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*; Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Lloyd, "Black Secularism and Black Theology"; Mitchell, "Karl Barth and James Cone"; Young, "Betwixt and Between Afrocentrism and Neorthodoxy".

¹⁶Long, *Divine Economy*; Jones, "Liberation Theology and 'Democratic Futures'".

¹⁷Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 426–7, 438.

¹⁸Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xxii.

that made a decisive break with liberal theology in rejecting Schleiermacher's starting point in human experience. Since Schleiermacher's influence on German liberal theology had led to the theology of the Nazis, Barth proposed starting instead with the Word of God unconditioned by appeals to human experience. This approach had the merit of providing the basis for a radical theological critique of Nazism and for Barth's taking up of other politically unpopular causes. Barth's theological remedy had the disadvantage, however, of failing to provide a clear motivation for disciplined theological attention to contemporary social and political contexts. So while Barth advised young American theologians to read the newspapers alongside the Bible in a 1963 article in *Time Magazine*, his academic theological writings did not make engaging one's social context a key part of his theological methodology.¹⁹

Barth did have political questions in mind during the thirty-five year period of working with Charlotte von Kirschbaum on the *Church Dogmatics* (1932–1967). Readers alert to contemporary political events can see evidence of this, such as the discussion of Christian obligations in relation to the state in *Church Dogmatics II/2*, published in 1942.²⁰ But the extent of his own engagement with contemporary social and political questions is not evident in the text of the *Dogmatics*. He does not show his working in connecting theology and his social and political context, unlike contemporaries, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Together with the sheer size of the *Dogmatics*, this means that scholars of Barth can devote careers to the interpretation of his thought without being forced to consider the questions Barth did of what their own social and political context demands of them in relation to the task of theology.

This structural weakness in Barth's theological method increases its vulnerability to the theological racism Cone diagnosed, in which the methodology of theology is presented as a "dispassionate analysis of 'the tradition', unrelated to the sufferings of the oppressed" and the lived experience of Black people, and uninterested in recognising the ways the discipline has been formed by White supremacy and colonialism.²¹ The absence of methodological reasons for disciplined attention to the social and political context of theology means that White Barthians have few resources to overcome this structural racism. Still worse, they may believe they have Barthian reasons for ignoring the contributions of Cone and other theologians with different methodological starting points, using readings of Barth to justify not addressing social and political questions. This seems to me the best explanation of the different theological worlds that Cone and the White Barthians he criticises seem to occupy, leading to the remarkable lack of engagement with Cone's critique.

To explain is not to excuse. The White Barthian theologians Cone criticises, and the Barth scholars who succeeded them, including me, are responsible for their failure to recognise the deficiencies in Barth's methodology and the theological implications of their social and political context. My object in exploring the reasons for their failure to respond to Cone is not to diminish that responsibility, but to help identify the kind of rethinking that remains necessary to address that failure.

¹⁹"Barth in Retirement", *Time Magazine*.

²⁰Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 708–30.

²¹Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 19.

Given the wide influence of Barth on Christian theology in the UK and the US in recent decades, this problem is bad enough, but hopefully you will already have recognised that it is not only White Barthian theologians that are susceptible to Cone's critique.

A few years ago I participated as an external representative on a Ph.D. review of a young White male North American student. He wanted to write a project at the interface of theology and politics. He presented to me and the White male internal reviewer a project outline in which he would look at the work of two White male theologians on a number of ethical topics. "Why those ethical topics", I asked, "when there are others so pressing, such as structural racism, immigration, wealth inequality, famine, gender relations, or ecological crisis?". He replied that he had picked the topics because they were important in the work of both of the authors he had identified. And why those authors? The answer was that they seemed to be recognised as important in the discipline. I had a dizzying sense of the conservative mechanics of reproduction of the theological academy: the inevitably blinkered preoccupations of one generation setting the agenda for the next, valorising and perpetuating a strange subset of interest with very little relation to what issues in our world require theological attention. This is an example in miniature of Cone's diagnosis that the theological academy has been shaped in the main by the issues that have been of concern to White male European and North American theologians and has been inattentive to oppressions on grounds such as race that impact on White males least.

At this point, perhaps we are tempted to accept some of Cone's analysis, but reject his conclusion that theologians should necessarily be professionally attentive to their social and political context. We could do so on the grounds that the abstraction of theology from social issues is not necessarily a weakness: that there are very many abstract theological issues that merit academic attention. As theologians most of us would recognise the interest of such enquiries, and would defend the value of such academic work. We appreciate Barth's deliberations about many such abstract questions. Cone's critique seems to me to point nonetheless to three lessons concerning the ethics of theological enquiry that should inform the practice of Christian theology today.

First, Christian theology should be done with alertness to the ways in which it has embraced and been shaped by racist theological and philosophical traditions that have promoted and enabled White supremacy, colonialism and the oppression of people of colour. The failure to be aware of this context is both an academic and a moral failure. It is an academic failure because it neglects a key factor necessary to any well-informed interpretation of theological texts. It is a moral failure because theologians who choose not to attend to this context are instead choosing to perpetuate the racist theologies Cone diagnosed. Not every theologian needs to make this aspect of theology as their prime object of study, but it is a necessary condition of academic theological competency to be alert to this dimension of the Christian theological tradition. Alertness in a British context means going beyond Cone and the US Black and Womanist theologies inspired by his work. The contexts of race and colonialism in Britain and the US are very different, so theological analyses from North America can only take us so far. British theology needs to be informed by the contextualising of Black theology in a British context, which has been taken up by theologians such as Anthony Reddie, Robert Beckford, Dulcie Dixon McKenzie, Chine McDonald, Gifford Rhamie, Carlton Turner, Israel

Oluwole Olofinjana, Selina Stone, and Jarel Robinson Brown, among others. An awareness of this literature will not only help inoculate theology against the reproduction of racism, but will also help to make clear where considerations of White supremacy and colonialism bears on particular topics of theological enquiry.

Second, Cone's critique points beyond the question of race to even broader questions about the responsibility of Christian theologians. I suggest that a second lesson Christian theology should take from Cone and Barth is to insist that "dogmatics always has the problem of ethics in view from the very first, and ... cannot legitimately lose sight of it". Cone was not critical about the balance Barth struck between addressing abstract theological themes and the social issues that confronted him; instead, he was critical of the European and North American Barthians who took up abstract themes from Barth's work without attending to pressing social questions such as the oppression of black people. White theologians in Barth studies must acknowledge the validity of Cone's critique that to do theology without paying attention to our pressing practical duties and the wickedness in the streets, as Barth put it, is both irresponsible and unbarthian. Theological enquiry often involves abstract and speculative thought, but if theologians are unable to narrate any kind of relationship between this theorising and questions of practice, they are vulnerable to Cone's charge that well-fed White theologians who do not belong to communities in which people are going hungry prefer to debate the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith rather than Jesus' command to feed the poor.

Perhaps we need to distinguish at this point between theology as merely an academic discipline and theology as part of the vocation of a Christian. I do not mean to suggest that those who choose theological topics of academic enquiry are under more obligation to defend the point of what they do than colleagues in history, or literature, or mathematics. But those theologians who share Cone's faith in Jesus Christ, seem to me to owe him an answer about what they have chosen to attend to in their theological work and what they have chosen to ignore.

One location in the theological tradition for considerations of this kind is the vice that used to be called curiosity. In a post-Enlightenment context, curiosity was reinvented as a virtue, but Peter Harrison notes Patristic and early modern accounts of curiosity that condemn intellectual enquiries considered illicit, dispute engendering, unknowable, or useless.²² It is instructive to consider how much of current academic theology would be left after winnowing on the basis of these criteria. I would not myself have many candidates for illicit topics of theological enquiry, and would want to be open to a good number of theological projects that have the potential to engender disputes. I would be cautious about advance determination of what should be considered unknowable. But I am sympathetic to the possibility that some potential topics of theological enquiry should be avoided by Christian theologians on the grounds that they are useless and therefore examples of the vice of curiosity. In the context of the continuing operation of the structural racism that Cone identified; alongside the climate catastrophe; food inequality globally and nationally leaving many people hungry; the cost of living crisis; growing numbers of refugees fleeing homes because of war, famine, or oppression; I am not convinced we should offer a defence of useless theologising. That does not mean

²²Harrison, "Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge".

that every theological project needs to be a candidate for an impact case study, such as those required by the UK governmental Research Excellence Framework. But those theologians who, like Cone, see their work as part of a Christian vocation, should be alert to the question of how their social location shapes their theological interests, and should seek to avoid the vice of curiosity. Of course, curiosity is not the only mode in which Christian theology may be vicious. There are some theologians and Christian ethicists who one wishes would restrict their theological interests to topics that are merely curious, including those making political arguments in direct opposition to taking Cone's concerns about structural racism seriously.

The third necessary condition for ethical theological enquiry relates more to the participation of theologians in their professional contexts. As I have noted, the racist character of the theological academy Cone encountered forced his choice of dissertation topic and created obstacles to his advancement that his White peers did not experience. It is sobering that half a century on, many of these obstacles to the participation of people of colour in the academy persist. A 2018 Royal Historical Society report found that despite the transformation of understanding resulting from research into Black history and histories of race, imperialism, and colonisation, the racial profile of students and staff in UK History departments remains overwhelmingly White; Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and staff have disproportionately negative experiences; attainment of BME students lags their peers; and school and university curriculums fail fully to incorporate the new diverse histories academics are producing. 30% of Black and Minority Ethnic respondents to their survey had directly experienced discrimination or abuse in relation to race or ethnicity.²³ Similar research has not been done in relation to UK Theology and Religious Studies, but informal reporting suggests the problems are at least as prevalent as in history. In advance of further research, academic theologians attending to Cone's critique have reason to be attentive to ways in which their practice disadvantages UK Minority Ethnic and Global Majority Heritage students and staff, in student recruitment, the theological curriculum, classroom practice, assessment, progression, the award of scholarships and grants, recruitment to academic positions, and promotion decisions.

Conclusion

Most White scholars of Barth have reason to be red-faced when confronting the uncomfortable truth that fifty years have passed since James Cone wrote *Black Theology and Black Power* critiquing the unbarthian ways Barth was being appropriated in Europe and North America. In that half-century, during which Cone developed and refined his critique, White Barth scholars have almost completely ignored it, and as a result we find that Cone's strong and persuasive critique of Barthian theological studies remains valid fifty years on.

I have suggested that White Barthians, and other White theologians too, have reason to be particularly attentive to Cone's critique. I identified key weaknesses in a Barthian theological method that may go some way to explain, though not excuse, the conspicuous silence of White Barthians in response to Cone. I proposed three lessons for ethical

²³Atkinson et al., *Race, Ethnicity and Equality*.

theological enquiry arising from attention to Cone's analysis: first, the need to recognise the ways in which the Christian theological tradition has been shaped in racist, White supremacist, and colonialist ways in order to avoid reproducing theologies Cone identified as racist; second, the responsibility of Christian theologians to give an account of the relationship of their projects to questions of ethics and practice, in order to avoid the vice of curiosity; and third, the responsibility of theologians to take particular care to avoid disadvantaging students and colleagues of colour in their professional practice.

Bringing Karl Barth and James Cone into dialogue is instructive for reflecting on the practice of Christian theology in Britain today. Cone criticised White theologians for being inattentive to the signs of the times and for failing to recognise the suffering of their Black and Brown neighbours as a topic relevant to Christian theology. It seems to me that we are at a moment in Britain where Christian theologians have important choices before us in relation to our engagement with the social and political contexts in which we work. I hope fellow Christian theologians can learn from the inadequacies Cone identified in his White theological contemporaries, consider our responsibilities in relation to the ethics of our theological enquiry, and act accordingly.

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Notes on contributor

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