

**Breaking Through the Black and White:  
Expanding James Cone's Theory of Reconciliation**

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## Index of Chapters

<b>Part I: Abstract</b> .....	2-3
<b>Part II: Introduction</b> .....	3-12
<b>Part III: James H. Cone's Theory of Reconciliation</b> .....	13-26
<b>Part IV: Supporting Cone</b> .....	26-36
a.) <i>Engaging God of the Oppressed</i> .....	26-31
b.) <b>Dwight Hopkins and Cone</b> .....	31-36
<b>Part V: Challenging Cone</b> .....	36-52
a.) <b>James Deotis Roberts vs. Cone</b> .....	36-45
b.) <b>Delores Williams vs. Cone</b> .....	45-50
c.) <b>Victor Anderson vs. Cone</b> .....	50-53
<b>Part VI: Conclusion</b> .....	53-55
<b>Part VII: Bibliography</b> .....	56-57

## Part I

### Abstract

Cone puts forward his notion of reconciliation in his text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, written during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the 1960s. In this text, he expresses his feeling that the black community has no voice or power in American society. He sees society as dominated by the white community. He addresses both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X's messages, combining them together into his own interpretation of how society should best deal with issues of race. The result is a passionate text that encourages reformation and change, performed in a way that encompasses both King's and Malcolm X's philosophies. He writes about working toward a peaceful society where black and white communities can live harmoniously and respectfully. Reconciliation, to Cone, is when American society reaches this harmonious state. In this state of reconciliation, the black community can have a voice, and a recognized, respected identity. Once the black community achieves this respected identity, its role as that of the oppressed group no longer exists. When the oppressed group finds its strength, and is no longer oppressed, the oppressor has no role. Thus, ideally, if Cone's theory works, oppression as a whole would no longer have a place in American society.

I discuss Cone's theory in full, and the way in which he views reconciliation. In the second section, I bring in another one of his texts, *God of the Oppressed*, along with the perspective of his student Dwight Hopkins, to provide further evidence and support for

his first text. In the third section, I use the perspectives of James Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, and Victor Anderson—other black liberation theologians—in order to expand his theory and make it applicable to current American society.

## **Part II**

### **Introduction**

I started this project as a way to explore race relations in America. As a white, Jewish, female, liberal I want to know how I can help destroy racism and oppression in American society.

My exploration of these topics began with my upbringing. My mom's liberal Quaker background motivates me to look at the world with an open mind. She encourages me to be an accepting, open-minded, productive member of society. My dad's traditional Jewish background also influences me. With his direction, I endured years of Hebrew school. I studied Jewish text. I attended Jewish services. I celebrated holidays with his extended family. Each of these particular aspects of my Jewish experience in America expands my understanding and awareness of the need to combat oppression. Judaism teaches us about the plight of our ancestors as they battle against oppression throughout history. I learned about the suffering of our people, and the importance of recognizing and appreciating the fact that our families are alive today. Through this awareness of the oppression in Jewish history, my dad encourages me to support others who are oppressed. He instructs me to never forget my Jewish roots. Through remembering the oppression of my people, I feel motivated to engage with issues of social justice. I see the necessity of battling the oppression that exists today.

Thus, after attending winter tri-co, a program aimed at activism against racism, I became further aware of issues of race in America. I also took a class on Black Liberation Theory last fall. Through these experiences, I felt particularly motivated to think about and engage with issues surrounding race in America, especially between the black and white communities. I learned about James Cone in the class on Black Liberation Theory, and connected with his words. I looked to him as a guide for understanding how Americans can best take action in fighting the racist structures of American society.

I respect James Cone as the father of Black Liberation Theology. His early text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, written in 1969, lays the foundation for Black Liberation Theology. This text rests at the heart of the Black Liberation Movement, and continues to retain strength as countless thinkers challenge and expand it in order to make it viable.

From a personal standpoint, Cone's ideas challenge me to come up with my own understanding of how to fight the oppression present in America. He helps me think about reconciliation, and how I can contribute to making this a reality in American society. Reconciliation, as Cone describes, is that which occurs when society achieves liberation from oppression and racism. I plan to examine Cone's viewpoint on reconciliation in this project, in order to come up with my own understanding of how America can best fight oppression. In order to understand the way Cone uses reconciliation, I want to explore the history of reconciliation in brief.

Reconciliation, as a term, has a rich and complex history. The term appears in two main ways. The term appears as part of political conflict-resolution, as well as within biblical text—in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

According to Seyoon Kim, a writer on the concept of reconciliation, the first findings of the term reconciliation referred to “peace-treaty processes in the politico-military context, but not for the relationship between God and human beings or in a religious context.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the oldest meaning of reconciliation is still active today. In societies around the world, reconciliation works as a major part of conflict-resolution between communities attempting to restore justice.

In Australia, for example, Aborigines and non-Aborigines endured conflict for centuries. Within the last decade, Australian officials continue to attempt to move this conflict to a state of reconciliation<sup>2</sup>, without success. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation attempted to instill goals of “understanding,” “recognition,” and “acknowledge[ment]” of the causes of the disadvantages to the indigenous people in the process of moving towards reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> However, this attempt towards reconciliation proved unsuccessful. The non-Aborigine population displaced the Aborigines throughout the last few centuries, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century between 1910 and 1970.<sup>4</sup> In 2000, however, the Prime Minister of Australia refused to acknowledge this event. This paused the movement towards reconciliation in Australia. Thus, the article referenced from “Reconciliation Australia” discusses a failed attempt at reconciliation. However, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Seyoon Kim, “2 Cor. 5:11-21 and the Origin of Paul’s Concept of ‘Reconciliation,’” *Novum Testamentum* 39 (1997): 361.

<sup>2</sup> This refers to the conflict that originated in 1788 in Australia, when Britain created a colony without asking permission from those who were there first. This led to the Aborigines losing control of their land. This led to the development of the Aborigines as a marginalized group in Australian society, Reconciliation Australia, “History of Reconciliation,” 2005-2007, <<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/i-cms.jsp?page=125>> (10 April 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Ian S. McIntosh, “When Will We Know We Are Reconciled?” *Anthropology Today* 16, no. 5 (2000): 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

helpful and enlightening to look at the tactics used in attempting to rectify this situation.<sup>5</sup> Through observing this situation, one can observe the way in which this nation deals with issues of conflict-resolution, using reconciliatory methods. One can also then use this particular example to better understand the ways that nations, in general, deal with conflict-resolution.

Australians in this article demonstrate a desire to “make amends”<sup>6</sup>, but many do not think that an apology or treaty would help this process. The article questions if it is necessary to acknowledge past sins in order to achieve reconciliation. Some believe in the need to acknowledge faults and address the past in order to move forward. Others disagree, however, and believe in improving life for the disadvantaged without dwelling on the past.<sup>7</sup>

The article acknowledges, in the end, the importance of incorporating both perspectives in order to achieve reconciliation. Thus, on the one hand, the nation must focus on healing from the conflict by moving forward, and focusing on creating a productive, healthy future for the nation. The text states, “Reconciliation is about Aborigines forging new bonds with the world outside of their communities and helping to create a pan-Australian identity which incorporates them as equals.”<sup>8</sup> As a way of moving forward and restructuring society for a productive future, Australia focuses on ensuring equality for all members of Australian society. In this way, the nation is able address the issues brought up in the conflict by creating a pan-Australian identity. Through this acknowledgment of this identity, Aborigines can be part of the Australian

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> McIntosh, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3-11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 11.

culture and included in a way in which they were not previously, when the Australians displaced them.

The text, however, also focuses on the importance of acknowledging the past, and allowing for opposing parties to work through the conflict completely. In this way, the nation allows for complete closure, ensuring a positive, productive move into the future. The text encourages Australians “to ‘remember’ and facilitate each other’s membership by whatever means it takes—apologies, special rights, compensation and so on.”<sup>9</sup> This passage acknowledges the necessity of forgiveness as a part of conflict-resolution.

In this way, the Australian-Aborigine conflict reflects the sense that when moving forward after a conflict, it is necessary to focus on restructuring a society, while acknowledging forgiveness, redemption, and addressing the sins of the past. In this way, the nation can deal with the issues of the conflict without dwelling on any issues, but being able to move on effectively and productively. In this way, reconciliation combines forgiveness and repentance reconciliation with political restructuring in order to create a society that allows individuals and communities to function in peace.

Reconciliation is also an important part of Biblical text, and has strong Judeo Christian roots. The Hebrew Bible coined the term, and the New Testament adapted it later to apply to Christian teachings. In the Hebrew Bible, the term appears in interactions between God and individuals. One of the first times this text mentions a term “used for God being reconciled to his people,”<sup>10</sup> is in 2 Maccabees, 5.20: “and what was forsaken in the wrath of the Almighty was restored again in all its glory when the great Lord

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<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Kim, 361.

became reconciled.”<sup>11</sup> In this passage, reconciliation functions as the Lord’s forgiveness. Before this passage, the Lord felt “wrath.” However, in this moment of reconciliation, the Lord moves beyond his wrath. That which the Lord lost in his moment of anger is “restored in all is glory,” during the moment He becomes “reconciled.” Thus, this signifies reconciliation as an after effect of anger. Reconciliation is the Lord being able to restore Himself to his pre-wrath condition. Reconciliation, then, signifies the end of a period of anger—a determined moment when God has dealt with His anger and can move forward. In this moment of reconciliation, God can forgive that which made Him angry. The term reconciliation, at this point in history, seems to refer solely to the Creator and His relationship to His people.

The New Testament, however, expands the notion of reconciliation with Paul, in 2 Corinthians. Paul states, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”<sup>12</sup> By bringing in the concept of Jesus, reconciliation takes on new meaning. Due to Jesus, there is now a “ministry of reconciliation” which delineates the appropriate way to live and act. It is now incumbent upon members of society to follow Jesus’s example, and continue passing on the “message of reconciliation” for future generations. The community must uphold particular Christian standards, and support each other in living out these principles. Thus, reconciliation is not only used in reference to a detached, “wrathful” God, as in the Hebrew Bible. Reconciliation is also used in the New Testament to relate to the notion of community—

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Macc. 5.20 HarperCollins New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 5.18-5.19 HarperCollins New Revised Standard Version.

to upholding values that Jesus demonstrates as important and valuable. The notion of reconciliation, then, becomes less of about the relationship between God and His people, and more about responsibility. There is a sense of responsibility in the Christian community to live by God and Jesus's standards in order to be good Christians. Within this ideal community, members of the community recognize if they do not follow Jesus's example, and help each other follow His ways.

Thus, this explains why, in Catholicism, reconciliation is a part of ritual, referring to confession of one's sins.<sup>13</sup> In this ritual, one must confess one's sins to a priest. Doing so demonstrates recognition that one has acted against the values of the Christian community, and shows a desire to remedy this action. Overall, there is strong communication and understanding between members of the community, as people work together to create a safe Christian space.

In these past few sections, I laid out a loose genealogy of reconciliation. I looked at the ways in which reconciliation first appeared both in history and within biblical texts. I demonstrated the ways in which reconciliation developed as a term. This I looked at through the context of conflict-resolution, focusing on the Aborigine conflict in Australia, as well as the role reconciliation plays in the Bible. I acknowledge these various forms of reconciliation to show how reconciliation can potentially function as a term, in order to differentiate these kinds of reconciliation from the way I plan to address reconciliation in

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<sup>13</sup> Based on the Bible, the "Sacrament of Penance" is an important part of Catholicism involving a confession of one's sins. During confession, one recognizes one's sins, vocalizing them for the priest. Then the priest has the authority to give instructions for how to repent for these sins, Father Pat McCloskey, O.F.M., "Face Religious Differences Now," *St. Anthony Messenger: Ask a Franciscan*, 1996-2008, <<http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Feb2001/Wiseman.asp#F3>> (10 April 2008).

this project. In this project, I focus on reconciliation as James Cone views it, within the context of Black Liberation Theology.

Cone puts forward his notion of reconciliation in his text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, written during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the 1960s. In this text, he expresses his feeling that the black community has no voice or power in American society. He sees society as dominated by the white community. He addresses both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X's messages, combining them together into his own interpretation of how society should best deal with issues of race. The result is a passionate text that encourages reformation and change, performed in a way that encompasses both King's and Malcolm X's philosophies. He writes about working toward a peaceful society where black and white communities can live harmoniously and respectfully. Reconciliation, to Cone, is when American society reaches this harmonious state. In this state of reconciliation, the black community can have a voice, and a recognized, respected identity. Once the black community achieves this respected identity, its role as that of the oppressed group no longer exists. When the oppressed group finds its strength, and is no longer oppressed, the oppressor has no role. Thus, ideally, if Cone's theory were successful, oppression as a whole no longer would have a place in American society.

I discuss Cone's theory in full, and the way in which he views reconciliation. In the second section, I bring in another one of his texts, *God of the Oppressed*, along with the perspective of his student, Dwight Hopkins, in order to provide further evidence and support for his first text. This will demonstrate his theory as fully as possible. In the third section, I use the perspectives of James Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, and Victor

Anderson—other black liberation theologians—in order to expand his theory and make it applicable to current American society.

Unlike Cone, I see reconciliation as a constant process.<sup>14</sup> Cone lays out reconciliation as the ultimate goal for which society should strive. After undergoing particular structural changes, in his eyes, society should eventually arrive at reconciliation. It might be ideal to think of reconciliation as an ending point—that one day, society will land in a state where everyone will live in harmony, and all issues of race and racism will no longer be an issue. I find it most important, however, to address issues currently and attempt to move forward to a better future. Cone thinks methodically about the concrete steps society can take to move forward, but he does not acknowledge the small triumphs that occur in the process of taking these steps that lead us towards reconciliation. I see reconciliation as a fluid process.

Reconciliation as Cone sees it may not occur for numerous lifetimes. As a result, I see it as important to recognize reconciliation as a series of many small triumphs. These triumphs—the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s, and the increase in black officials in government in America, are all important. Because of each of these steps, and other steps that take place each year, American society gradually moves toward liberation from racism. If we focus too much on complete Cone's reconciliation, we lose track of the progress society does make. I want to be able to focus on achievable goals. I want to acknowledge the process, rather than only focusing on Cone's extreme end result. As a result, I see it as important to acknowledge Cone's goal without making it the primary goal. For right now, for example, we need to focus on the

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<sup>14</sup> Inspired by conversation with Emily Higgs, fellow Haverford senior, March, 2008.

smaller goals—continuing to improve education for lower income blacks in America, and supporting poor black communities in New Orleans, LA.

Also, beyond this, I want to expand Cone's theory to understand what I can do as a white person. Cone seems to think that there is nothing I can do, unless I become a radical.<sup>15</sup> He indicates that as long as the white liberal still takes advantage of his privilege of being white, his support of the black community is not support at all. The liberal person prevents himself from getting involved. Cone explains that the only way for the liberal to be on the side of the oppressed is for the liberal to risk his life, and fully give up his rights and privileges. The liberal must jump into the heart of the battle in order to actually support the black community.

I want to understand how I can take action productively without necessarily risking my life, though. Cone seems to think that someone is either radically involved, or not at all. This seems unrealistic. He leaves the responsibility to the black community—to create the terms to determine the form of American societal structure and to convince the white community how to follow those terms. I can understand the need and desire to instill faith and strength in the black community and to encourage a sense of action within this community. However, it is also important that the black community and white communities work together so that they can communicate throughout the reconciliatory process. If they communicate throughout the process, they can continue to communicate effectively into the future. In my paper I intend to explore this issue, thinking about how

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<sup>15</sup> Cone states, "The liberal wants to be a friend, that is, enjoy the rights and privileges pertaining to whiteness and also work for the 'Negro.' He wants change without risk, victory without blood. [...] What he fails to realize is that there is no place for him in this war of survival. [...] There are places in the Black Power picture for radicals, that is, for men, white or black, who are prepared to risk life for freedom." James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 27-28.

Cone's Theory can expand to allow for white action, as well as collaboration and communication between the black and white communities.

### **Part III**

#### **Cone's Theory of Reconciliation**

In *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone posits the oppressive structure<sup>16</sup> of American society. He sees America as a white-dominated power structure aimed at accommodating the needs of the white community. He explains the way in which the American societal structure denies the black community humanity, treated this community as “subhuman.”<sup>17</sup> In this text, Cone builds a theology of liberation to aid the black community in claiming the sense of being that American society currently denies it. He hypothesizes that if the black community can claim this sense of being, then the black community can follow a specific series of steps in order to set the terms upon which society will function. These terms, as Cone sees it, will allow the black community a respectful place in society. In this restructured state, society can liberate itself from its oppressive structure; the black community will no longer be oppressed, so the white community will no longer be able to play the role of oppressor. Ideally, in this state, both the white and black communities will coexist harmoniously and respectfully.

There are several key steps that are essential to this process of restructuring society. If achieved, these steps will lead to what Cone sees as the end goal:

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<sup>16</sup> Cone describes the racism that has continually existed throughout American history, and that continues to thrive presently (during the time in which he writes.) In American society as Cone sees it, the white community acts as oppressor against the black community, preventing the black community from having a sense of being and identity. In this way, American society in Cone's eyes is oppressive. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

reconciliation. Reconciliation, to Cone, is when society has achieved its restructured state, at which point liberation from oppression can occur. In this state, the cycle of oppression currently dominating society, according to Cone, breaks.

I see Cone's process as breaking down into three main chunks. These chunks illustrate the necessary steps that the black community must take in order to eventually achieve its liberation from its oppressed state. "Being,"<sup>18</sup> "love,"<sup>19</sup> and "action"<sup>20</sup> are the three terms that best describe the most essential parts of the process of moving society toward a state of reconciliation. Cone argues throughout his text that the black community must find and instill within itself a sense of being and love so that it can find its identity in a society that denies it one. In finding this identity, he theorizes that the black community must engage with action in order to transform society into a place that can recognize and respect this identity.

He reflects this in the text, when he talks about the fact that the black community must embrace the values of Black Power<sup>21</sup> in order to reach a sense of "affirmation,"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cone explains that "the structure of the white society attempts to make 'black being' into 'nonbeing' or 'nothingness,'" Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 7, so when he discusses this sense of "being," he speaks of humanity. He wants the black community to be able to counteract the perspective of white society so as to be able to see itself as being more than nothingness—but to actually have an identity within American society.

<sup>19</sup> In talking about love, Cone means that the black community must learn to love itself and find pride in its identity, as with the notion of "being." However, Cone also means that one must move beyond "sentimental love, love without risk or cost," and that "love demands all, the whole of one's being," Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Cone means here that in order for this theology of liberation to be successful, the black community must be willing to engage in more than talk, but also "through action," Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Black Power is Cone's terminology for the movement that aims at "complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary [...] [and doing this] not on the terms of the oppressor, but on those of the oppressed," Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

taking whatever risks necessary in order to be free.<sup>23</sup> This sense of affirmation speaks to the notions of being and love, demonstrating the importance of the black community finding positive value within itself. Once the black community achieves this sense of value, it must “take whatever risks necessary.” This implies the importance of taking action in order for the black community to implement its newfound sense of value into the structure of American society. Once this can occur, the black community will have a respected place in a restructured society. Thus the cycle of oppression will no longer exist, since the black community will no longer feel oppressed. As a result, the white community will no longer be able to play the role of oppressor. Reconciliation will replace the oppression. In this way, if the black community works with the notions of “love,” “being,” and “action,” and successfully engages with each of these steps, society will restructure itself and everyone will achieve liberation, regardless of race.

Cone explains that reconciliation breaks down into three different kinds of reconciliation: that which occurs within the black community, that which occurs between the black and white communities and that which occurs between both the black and white communities and God. In each of these cases, reconciliation involves society recognizing the black community’s identity, whether in the eyes of fellow black individuals, white communities, or God. Once all these entities can acknowledge the black community and its identity as a community, society will no longer oppress anyone, in Cone’s eyes. At that point, reconciliation will have occurred.

As American society stands currently, according to Cone, the only way to achieve reconciliation is for America to become “black” and live with the mentality of

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<sup>23</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 16.

“blackness.”<sup>24</sup> He talks about the fact that black is not about the color of one’s skin, but rather about one’s consciousness and respect for the “dispossessed.”<sup>25</sup> As Cone sees it, society denies the dispossessed identity and respect. Society does not give any place to the dispossessed, and does not acknowledge the dispossessed as respected beings. Since the black community is in the dispossessed state in America, that is why he talks about living with “blackness.”

He explains that as long as white values determine and dictate American life, black values remain dominated by these white values. Thus, by living as the dispossessed, the white values can no longer control the black values. Black values become societal values. In order to make this a reality, since the white community is privileged, the white community must agree to revoke all benefits of being white, as much as possible. The white community must also live with full awareness of those who are oppressed.

Society must commit itself to living from a “black” perspective, meaning that everyone must take on this sense of awareness of the struggle of the dispossessed. Everyone must respect the rights of the dispossessed. Everyone must step away from one’s privilege and live as much as possible like those who are oppressed.

Attempting to raise the social status of the dispossessed and eliminate that status would entail the black community feeling a need to succumb to white values in order to integrate. Integration is not the answer according to Cone. Instead, everyone must submit to the black value system so that the white people at the top of the ladder can begin to understand the struggle of the dispossessed and begin to treat the black community as

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<sup>24</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 150.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

people who deserve respect. In doing this, eventually the dispossessed will no longer be dispossessed, as all of society will live as the dispossessed.

If everyone can be on the same oppressed level, privilege will no longer divide American society. Everyone can work together to make society a safe, respectful for place for all, regardless of race. Cone explains, “Reconciliation makes us all black. Through this radical change, we become identified totally with the suffering of the black masses. [...] To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are.”<sup>26</sup> Cone continues to illustrate that by taking on “black” values, the white community agrees to recognize the black community as “being,” and to respect and stand with this community as all part of the same society.

Thus, once the white community follows these steps—living as the dispossessed, and living with full awareness of the dispossessed, reconciliation can occur between the black and white communities. This supports Cone’s theory of reconciliation, as if the white community goes through with this action, the white community shows respect for the values of the black community. Treating the black community as respected human beings, and not subhuman, illustrates the sense that the white community recognizes and respects the black community as important members of American society. Reconciliation has thus occurred at this point, since the black community has claimed its identity and is recognized and respected in society. When the black community has this sense of identity, the cycle of oppression must break, because the black community is no longer in an oppressed state. Without the black community in an oppressed state, the white community has no role as oppressor anymore. Furthermore, this action by the white

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<sup>26</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151.

community demonstrates its determination to destroy the oppressive system in place, which allows it the privilege to differentiate itself as above that of the black community. By showing that it does not want its privilege, the white community shows determination to not be part of a system that contributes to the oppression that keeps blacks in an oppressed state.

Furthermore, through taking on this mentality of “blackness,” as Cone sees it, the white community can recognize and appreciate the dispossessed and thus achieve reconciliation with the black community, while also reaching reconciliation with God. Cone discusses the fact that as society stands currently, “reconciliation would mean admitting that white values are the values of God.”<sup>27</sup> Cone sees white values as dictating American culture. However, if the white community can take on the perspective of the dispossessed, the white community will be able to recognize and respect the black community. Through this process, the white community can see that white values are not the values of God. Instead, the white community can see that we are all chosen by God.<sup>28</sup> Thus because of the white community’s awareness and respect of the black community and the reconciliation between these two communities as a result, reconciliation between the white community and God can occur as well. In this state, all of society will be “black”—able to understand where the “dispossessed are,” ensuring that society never loses track of the humanity of the black community, but instead affirms its beauty and recognizes its strength and power.

Cone puts forward the notion, however, that reconciliation is more than merely the white community recognizing the black community as human and important. He

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<sup>27</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

thinks that reconciliation can only fully occur when the black community continues to remain strong—to enforce the values by which it intends and hopes to live. According to Cone, reconciliation is when the black community “demand[s]” recognition as “black people,” and emphasizes its strength and beauty as a community. He explains this when he states:

“Reconciliation not only means that black people are reconciled to themselves and thus to God, but also to other men. [...] They will remain black in their confrontation with others and will demand that others address them as *black* people. They will not let Whiteness make an *It* of them, but will insist, with every ounce of strength, they are people.”<sup>29</sup>

Cone, through investigating the ways in which reconciliation can become a reality, demonstrates the way in which these various methods of reconciliation rely on each other. The reconciliation that occurs between the white and black communities can only fully occur when each of these communities has reconciled with God, and when the black community has reconciled within itself, as well. Thus, while the white community can achieve reconciliation by reconciling with God and agreeing to take on a mentality of “blackness,” this can only occur once the black community has proven itself as a strong, proud community to the white community. As a result, at the heart of this whole notion of reconciliation, is the black community’s strength. If the black community can work as a unit and instill strength and hope and love in itself, then this will allow for the white community to adjust its values to the black community, so that eventually society can reshape itself, if Cone’s theory is effective. All the various notions of reconciliation can work together to ensure a full societal reconciliation. By continuing to affirm its sense of “being,” the black community can achieve love for itself and force society to become a

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<sup>29</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 150.

place of love and justice, which then allows action to take place, which leads to a complete restructuring of the oppressive societal structure.

Thus now that we have investigated the ways in which the white and black communities can achieve reconciliation both with each other and God, and create a reconciled society, we can look more specifically at the process of reconciliation. As explored previously, at the heart of this process is the strength of the black community. Once the black community finds its identity and sense of being, then the other reconciliatory processes can take place. However, this part of the process is most important. As also touched on a bit earlier, according to Cone, “being,” “love,” and “action” are all essential elements with which the black community must engage in order to bring society to a state of reconciliation. As Cone sees it, each of these parts of the process of reconciliation works together to build the black community’s sense of identity. In this way, the black community cannot only recognize itself and find its “being,” but it can move to a place of “love,” and find love within itself, which will allow it to initiate “action.” “Being” may be at the heart of the journey, but love and action are essential to effecting change and forcing the white community to realize this notion of “being,” which otherwise may remain silenced.

Primarily in this process, Cone illustrates the importance of the black community claiming a sense of humanity for itself in a society that denies blacks any recognition as individuals. Cone uses the term “Black Power” to signify the “affirmation of the humanity of blacks in spite of white racism,”<sup>30</sup> and explains that the black community

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<sup>30</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 16.

must work with this notion in order to gain a sense of “being” and identity. Cone further explains:

“Black Power, then, is a humanizing force because it is the black man’s attempt to affirm his being, his attempt to be recognized as ‘Thou,’ in spite of the ‘other,’ the white power which dehumanizes him. The structure of white society attempts to make ‘black being’ into ‘nonbeing’ or ‘nothingness.’”<sup>31</sup>

Cone demonstrates that as long as the white power in society attempts to dehumanize the black, the black man must fight to retain his sense of humanity. He must ensure a sense of pride in himself so as to not let the corruptive power of white America to destroy his sense of worth. Cone affirms this, when he posits that “in order for the oppressed blacks to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressor ridicules—*blackness*. As he sees it, until white America is able to accept the beauty of blackness, there can be no peace, no integration in the higher sense.”<sup>32</sup> Cone wants to inspire determination and perseverance in the black community, demonstrating his view that not only can the black community achieve a sense of recognition as a people, but also if the black community can feel strong in its own identity, then white America will no longer be able to ignore the black community. Eventually, he thinks that America will be forced to “affirm” “blackness,” which will mean breaking the bonds of the oppressive structure in place, as the oppressive way in which society functions currently denies this “blackness.” Cone sees affirmation of one’s identity as a core element of reaching a state of liberation. He thinks that through creating a structure which recognizes and appreciates blacks, the destructive, corruptive state of society currently will no longer be able to function. The oppressive system will no longer be able to exist.

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<sup>31</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Cone believes, however, that attaining a sense of being, and claiming identity is not enough. Once the black community has gotten in touch with its sense of being, then it can begin to engage with love. This love is both love within the black community, and love between the black community and the rest of society. Both these types of love are important to the process of achieving reconciliation.

The love that takes place within the black community is that which can work with the notion of “being” in order to instill in the black community a strong sense of identity and strength. Again, as with the sense of being, if the black community can see itself as respected and find that strength within, then it can begin to restructure society to affirm the black community. Cone states, “Love, like charity, must begin at home; [...] it must begin with ourselves, our beautiful black selves.”<sup>33</sup> Cone advocates here the importance of finding love within the black community—at “home.” This kind of love can function as a partner to being, in adding strength to that sense of being, while the sense of being can allow the black community to get in touch with its sense of love. Love and being can support each other. Then, once love and being can help the black community feel strong, the black community can incorporate a different sort of love in taking action towards achieving reconciliation in society.

This sort of love is the black community’s love for its neighbors. This love is central to the black community’s action in society. When the black community faces society, the black community must continue to assert its identity and sense of being. However, in a white-dominated, oppressive society, the black community may take action in violent ways that seem to contradict love completely. Cone states, “The

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<sup>33</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53.

violence in the cities, which appears to contradict Christian love, is nothing but the black man's attempt to say Yes to his being as defined by God in a world that would make his being into a nonbeing."<sup>34</sup> Cone implies here that when working towards reconciliation, affirmation of one's being may require violence. This may seem to work against the traditional concept of love. However, Cone looks at the end goal of one's actions. If affirming one's being requires violence, then this may be necessary. To Cone, ensuring that blacks stand up for their identity is essential to the process of working towards reconciliation. By standing up for one's identity, one helps move society move toward a place where society will recognize one as a person without one needing to resort to violence. Thus, if one aids society in working towards a better future where people are treated fairly—where reconciliation can occur—Cone sees this as the most important objective. One's violent act may be for the good of America, and thus demonstrates one's love not only for oneself, but for American society.

Cone adds, "Authentic love is not 'help,' not giving Christmas baskets but working for political, social, and economic justice, which always means a redistribution of power. It is a kind of power which enables the blacks to fight their own battles and thus keep their dignity."<sup>35</sup> In this way, Cone demonstrates that this kind of love, essential for liberation, is active—allowing the black community to put into action the strength and power it has found within itself.

Thus, due to the sense of internal love and being found earlier in this process, the black community can engage with this sense of external love—that which allows the black community to begin to seek this sense of being and identity outside of the walls of

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<sup>34</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

its community. In this way, since the black community has found a sense of identity, it can begin to work toward finding a place for this identity within an American society which accepts this identity. This all contributes toward creating a society that will recognize the black community's being truly and authentically, at which point reconciliation will be a reality.

Cone then sees the love with which the black community engages as that which both motivates the black community to affirm its sense of being within the black community, and that which aids the black community in promoting this sense of being within society. This all works to move towards a society that recognizes and respects the black community. Implied within this statement, then, is Cone's notion: "Love is the motive or the rationale for action."<sup>36</sup> Love, through both strengthening the identity of the black community, and motivating the black community to assert its identity to American society, leads to a state of action.

Then the black community can use its already-established sense of being and love in order to engage in productive action. While the section on love also explored action, this section will explore the notion of action as its own entity. This goes to show that the process of achieving reconciliation is made up of overlapping steps—love and being working together to provide a strengthened sense of identity within the black community, and love and being also resulting in a desire to promote a sense of love and being in American society. These all work with the notion of action—each part of this process working to move towards action, but also being necessary parts of action. The other parts of the process are necessary in motivating the black community to want to assert its

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<sup>36</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

power and love for itself—to create a strong identity in a society that denies it one.

However, these elements of the process also ensure productive action. Productive action keeps in mind the importance of being and love, and employs the notion of love that works with justice. Thus, this is why being and love are foundational concepts that the black community needs to access before being able to engage with action.

This all contributes toward restructuring society in a way that supports the black community. Cone supports, “Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through *action*.”<sup>37</sup> More than the fact that action is a necessary part of the process of reaching reconciliation, one can posit, from Cone’s point of view, that the black community will not be able to truly achieve a sense of being completely until the black community has engaged with action. Only through action can the black community’s love and sense of being become a reality in society. The black community needs to assert its values, so that society can recognize the black community’s internal strength.

Essential to the process, too, is the notion of revolution. This is a specific part of the notion of action. Revolution is one’s determination to stand up for one’s being and push to fully engage with making one’s voice heard. This also shows why love and being become the foundation of action, as one can use one’s internal strength to combat any resistant forces. Cone explains:

“Revolution is not merely a ‘change of heart’ but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism, with the full intention of destroying its menacing power. I mean confronting white racists and saying: ‘If it’s a fight you want, I am prepared to oblige you.’”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

In order for action to be productive, according to Cone, one must be ready to take on society by whatever means necessary. One must strongly keep in mind the notion of love, and the fact that one must work towards creating a loving, fair society. If this means that one must engage violently, then that may be necessary. Most importantly, one must work towards destroying the racist structures of America.

Cone speaks to the notion of violence further:

“He must make a choice. If he decides to take the ‘nonviolent’ way, then he is saying that revolutionary violence is more detrimental to man in the long run than systemic violence. But if the system is evil, then revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary.”<sup>39</sup>

Cone emphasizes that if violence is necessary to move society to a healthier place in the long run, then in this way, violence can actually serve society in a loving way, even if it does not seem loving objectively. The black community, as Cone sees it, needs to take action to effect change. The black community must take whatever action is necessary that will allow the black community to have its sense of being affirmed by American society

## **Part IV**

### **Supporting Cone**

#### **Section A: *God of the Oppressed***

This section of the thesis serves as support for Cone’s Theory of Reconciliation, using both Cone’s later text, *God of the Oppressed*, and his student, Dwight Hopkins’s text, *Heart and Head: Black Theology and Past Present and Future* in order to demonstrate the ways in which Cone’s Theory of Reconciliation as laid out in *Black Theology and Black Power*, is effective.

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<sup>39</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 143.

Cone wrote *God of the Oppressed* in order to combat criticism he received on his first text, *Black Theology and Black Power*. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone explains more fully his reasoning for his thoughts from his first book, incorporating biblical references to support his thoughts. Hopkins provides a valuable perspective, being Cone's student. He supports Cone as a thinker and values the contributions Cone makes as the father of black liberation theology. Hopkins also expands Cone's theory in order to better apply it to today's standards, illustrating further the strengths of Cone's theory.

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone supports his Theory of Reconciliation by using text from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, in order to provide concrete evidence for the claims he makes in *Black Theology and Black Power*. By rooting his thoughts in biblical text, he can articulate the way in which the Gospel supports his theory. Furthermore, Cone looks at the role of God in both the Hebrew bible and New Testament. He emphasizes God's support of the oppressed. He demonstrates through this, the fact that biblical text values and supports the black community. He thus affirms the importance of respecting the black community in American society. This gives credence to his theory, by showing that these biblical documents also recognize, just as he does, the necessity of acknowledging and respecting the black community and any oppressed people in society. This exploration also gives the black community further motivation to seek its rightful place in society.

Cone uses the notion of God from the Hebrew Bible as a figure of support for the oppressed, demonstrating the way in which God helps the Hebrews as they journey through the challenging years of bondage. Cone explores the way that God gives the Hebrews constant support, keeping them alive through their struggle even as countless

communities attempt to destroy them. This refers mainly to the classic story of Exodus, during which the Hebrews escape from Egypt, and travel through the desert for forty years. For example, in Exodus, the Bible reads:

“the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”<sup>40</sup>

God supports the oppressed Hebrews here, making a strong effort to rescue the Hebrews from the hardships of Egyptian slavery. He shows concern for their well being and a desire to protect and nurture them. Cone employs references to the Hebrew Bible to show how the God in this text cares about the oppressed and will support the oppressed against the evil oppressors. Cone then applies this notion of God to modern day America, demonstrating that, like the Hebrews in the Hebrew Bible, the black community is the oppressed community today. As a result, since God supports the oppressed in the Hebrew Bible, God also supports the black community of today.

Since Cone looks at the black community as the oppressed of today, Cone attempts to create a sense of hope and support for the black community, by showing the way in which God supports the oppressed. Cone further comments on the fact that, the Hebrew Bible states, “He who is generous to the poor lends to the Lord,”<sup>41</sup> and “He who oppresses the poor insults his Maker; he who is generous to the needy honours him.”<sup>42</sup> In these statements taken from Proverbs, the Hebrew Bible clearly recognizes the connection between the oppressed and God, and the fact that when one aids the

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<sup>40</sup> Exodus 3.7-8 HarperCollins New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>41</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

oppressed, one “lends to the Lord,” and acts in a way that pleases God. God, then, proves Himself again as supportive of the oppressed and wants to encourage everyone to help the oppressed as much as possible. Thus, these passages can serve to reflect the sense of obligation and responsibility society should feel towards the oppressed. Society should reach out to those who are less advantaged. In the case of America, then, the white community should make the effort to support the black community, as the community that is oppressed.

This provides further support for his Theory of Reconciliation. God proves through his role in Exodus and through these sections from Proverbs, the importance of supporting the oppressed. Thus, the oppressed—the black community in America—has every right to make clear what it needs to feel respected in society. As long as society does not respect the black community, society works against the God of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the white community must do its duty to the oppressed and give it voice and power as a way of showing respect for the black community. Also, this allows the white community and society as a whole to work towards living with a sense of “blackness,” where the white community takes away its privilege to act with an awareness and respect for those who are dispossessed. This should also give more motivation to the black community to fight for its deserved respect. If God supports this community, then even if America does not, at least the black community can have hope in a Greater Being that supports its worth.

Cone uses the New Testament to continue to demonstrate God’s support of the oppressed, while also showing the way in which the New Testament expands the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. He does this by introducing the figure of Jesus Christ.

Jesus expands the Hebrew Bible's message by not only further demonstrating God's support of the oppressed, but also expanding the notion of freedom indicated in the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus, as an oppressed individual, plays the role of a promising model for oppressed people. His salvation shows that God cares about the oppressed. His being a specific person, too, rather than a group of people as in the Hebrew Bible, accentuates this. By being an individual, his salvation demonstrates that God is concerned about specific individuals—not just groups of people. Cone states, “Jesus’ life was a historical demonstration that the God of Israel wills salvation for the weak and helpless. God hates injustice and will not tolerate the humiliation of the outcasts.”<sup>43</sup> As a poor individual, Jesus’s salvation reflects the hope that the weak and poor can receive support from God. More than this, though, Jesus’s life further emphasizes God’s determination to take care of the outcasts—or dispossessed—in society. Jesus helps Cone to continue to articulate his thoughts from the Hebrew Bible—that God cares about and supports the oppressed.

Jesus, however, also functions as a liberator. In contrast to the Hebrew Bible, which is laid in history, Cone argues that the New Testament “transcends history and affirms a freedom not dependent on sociopolitical limitations.”<sup>44</sup> Jesus is the reason for this transcendence, as Cone states that “that freedom is disclosed in the cross and resurrection.”<sup>45</sup> Cone sees freedom as being a part of the resurrection, as the resurrection speaks to Jesus’s state as a timeless figure. He is a part of history, but also a “risen”<sup>46</sup> figure. Jesus is important as a figure in the Bible, providing hope and support for those

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<sup>43</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

who are poor and oppressed as he was. More than this, though, his resurrection shows that he is not dead. He also has a powerful presence in churches today, which demonstrates his continual presence currently. Cone argues that “[Jesus] transcends the limitations of history by making himself present in our contemporary existence.”<sup>47</sup> Being a consistent part of current lives demonstrates the way in which he has moved the Hebrew Bible’s message to a new level. Jesus is a constant presence of hope that is alive, and not ingrained in history in the way that the Hebrew Bible’s message is.

Through his exploration of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Cone shows the way in which God supports the oppressed. Cone shows support for validating the identity of the black community, demonstrating the importance of acknowledging and supporting the oppressed. He also gives hope to the oppressed in America, showing the way in which God is on the side of the oppressed. Through both of these messages he validates his theory. He is able to justify and ground the reasoning behind the importance of the black community achieving freedom from oppression. He also motivates the black community to retain hope that God cares, so as to encourage the black community to take action.

### **Section B: Dwight Hopkins and Cone**

Dwight Hopkins’s text also provides further support of The Theory of Reconciliation, giving even more credence to the legitimacy of Cone’s claims in *Black Theology and Black Power*. Hopkins, in his appreciation of Cone, expands Cone’s original theories and applies them to a wider, more diversified audience. He brings in the notions of gender, sexual orientation, and class as important factors to consider when

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<sup>47</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 115.

discussing the black community in America. Though he widens Cone's theories, this still further legitimizes Cone because he has chosen to use Cone as a model from which he will create his theories.

Hopkins states his interpretation of black theology of liberation, "Black theology of liberation means thinking about how the spirit of liberation works with poor black folks spiritually and materially, individually and collectively, and privately and publicly."<sup>48</sup> This relates directly to James Cone's way of approaching Black Theology. Cone looks at how those who are most oppressed and dispossessed in society—the poor black community—can access a sense of being, and begin to move towards reconciliation and liberation. Cone also addresses the importance of finding spiritual freedom, as well as physical freedom in society. He talks about the significance of individual action, but how this action must also take place in a community in order for it to be effective. The notion of public and private space speaks directly to Cone's emphasis on the significance of being and love. Cone talks about how the black community must find its sense of being and love privately, within its community walls, in order to begin to access that sense of being and love publicly. Thus, the spaces of which Hopkins speaks are all essential to Cone's theory. However, while they each address the same spaces, Hopkins does so differently than Cone.

For example, in addressing the issue of the individual and the community, he emphasizes that it is not enough for liberation to affect one or the other, but must work with both experiences. While Cone implies this, Cone does not speak directly about the way in which one's individual experience may differ from the collective experience.

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<sup>48</sup> Hopkins, 29.

Cone merely encourages each person in the black community to engage with his sense of being in order to be an active member of the black community. While one may act as an individual, one is still a member of the black community. Most times when Cone makes statements, he addresses the black community. Thus, if one achieves liberation, Cone implies that this can only occur if the whole black community achieves this liberation—that an individual could never act separately from his community.

Hopkins, however, looks at the experience of an individual as quite unique from the community. He indicates that one can be liberated as an individual, but still remain entrapped in one's community, meaning that the individual liberation becomes insignificant. If one still must struggle against oppressive structures as a community, it seems invalid that one can call oneself liberated. The same goes for the opposing situation, as well. If one's community is liberated, one can remain entrapped and struggling against oppressive structures either spiritually or physically. In this situation, one cannot be completely liberated. The last section of his passage—that which refers to the public and private spheres further emphasizes the notion of the individual and collective, demonstrating that one's private life and public life must both be liberated in order for liberation to have truly occurred. All of the aspects of liberation that he mentions here, in fact, must work together to allow one to be free both in one's mind and in one's physical reality, as an individual, as well as a part of a greater unit. Essentially, he states that liberation is only really liberation if it achieves liberation in all the varying aspects of one's existence, and the various realities that one experiences both in the physical and mental plane of one's life.

Thus, though he works with the same spaces as Cone, he addresses them differently, looking more specifically at the tensions between the individual experience versus the community experience.

Hopkins's overall goal is similar to Cone's. Like Cone, he acknowledges what he considers the unequal power of the white community in America, and looks toward a justified America that moves beyond its current state. He explains, "There exists a hope among justice-minded people that the disproportionate amount of white power on earth and the suffering of oppressed people represent finite phases on the journey toward a healthy and healed human community."<sup>49</sup> Like Cone, Hopkins sees American society as dominated by white power. More than this, however, he has the same hope and determination as Cone in moving past this white domination in order to achieve a "healthy and healed human community." This healthy and healed human community sounds like Cone's notion of reconciliation—a community that has moved beyond the oppressive structures of society currently in order to create a liberated societal state. Hopkins seems more idealistic than Cone, looking at the oppression in America as "finite phases." Through this terminology, he seems to say that oppression is not a constant in America—that it is temporary. Cone, on the other hand, while determined to destroy oppression, sees it as much more ingrained in American society, it seems.

In general, Hopkins looks to Cone as a mentor and holds immense respect for his initiation of the black power movement. As a result of Cone's text *Black Theology and Black Power*, Hopkins states, "Cone has been called the father of black theology in the

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<sup>49</sup> Hopkins, 29.

United States as well as in the world.”<sup>50</sup> Hopkins reveres Cone, and looks to him as an essential thinker in the movement of black power. Hopkins also acknowledges the presence of two different generations of black theologians, placing Cone as leader of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of black theologians. Thus, Hopkins illustrates that while Cone led the Black Liberation Movement, his words are not as applicable today as they once were in the time in which he wrote. The first generation paved the way for the second, however, providing foundational theory and thought that allowed the second generation more freedom. Hopkins states, “Due to successful work of the first generation, younger scholars have been able to move closer to the mainstream and are more accepted.”<sup>51</sup> Having the opportunity to move into the mainstream allows for an expansion of thought, being able to encompass “multiple differences within the African American community,”<sup>52</sup> for example, in order to truly address that sense of universalized spirituality within the poor black community. However, Hopkins emphasizes the while it is a big step to acknowledge the differences within the African American community, one must not lose track of the “vital unifying fact”<sup>53</sup>—that racism still exists, and as a result, one must focus on the poor and working-class communities.

In this way, he demonstrates that Cone’s foundational work is still at the heart of the Black Liberation Movement. Cone’s movement focuses on the black community as a community, emphasizing race as the key factor uniting everyone in that community. As much as there are differences in every community based on gender and religion and other such issues, Hopkins acknowledges the importance of recognizing the undeniable

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<sup>50</sup> Hopkins, 156.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

unifying factor of race. As long as racism exists, it is still important to look at the ways in which race affect one's experience, and the way in which the black community can work together to address issues of race in America.

Hopkins works with Cone's ideas in order to create an applicable model of liberation theory for today. He does not forget or reject Cone's work, but instead uses it as a foundation for future models of liberation thought, so that eventually society can overcome its struggle and achieve liberation.

## **PART V**

### **Challenging Cone**

#### **Section A: Roberts vs. Cone**

Since Cone wrote *Black Theology and Black Power* during the Civil Rights era, his words needed to be strong and motivating in order to incite change. His work, as a result, created a solid foundation for Black Liberation Theology, allowing black liberation theologians since his first text to expand and work with his theories to adapt to them to the changing American society. Specifically, the black theologians James Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, and Victor Anderson each present individual views on how America can address race relations in order liberate America from its oppressive societal structures. They all aim to create a societal climate in America in which white and black communities can coexist peacefully, in a state of reconciliation with themselves and God. These theologians' words and perspectives demonstrate the holes in Cone's argument, proving that while his work is a strong foundation for Black Liberation Theology, there are severe holes in his argument that prevent his Theory of Reconciliation from being completely effective.

James Deotis Roberts explores the notion of reconciliation within his text, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, taking into account the notion of reconciliation as an essential goal for which society should aim. However, there are two major points of difference between Roberts and Cone.

First of all, Roberts emphasizes the importance of collaboration between the black and white communities. He talks about what he calls intercommunication and how black and white communities must work together in order to achieve a reconciliatory state in society. Secondly, he vetoes violence, articulating the importance of reaching a state of reconciliation without the necessity of violence. Instead, he advocates working within his framework of Christian values.

Beyond these two issues, Roberts also addresses the issue of the collective and the individual. He looks at how racism in America affects both of these bodies, and the responsibility of each of these entities in dealing with racism. Cone, however, in his texts addressed in this paper, looks at the black and white communities as bodies, but does not speak much about the individual, as discussed in the previous section. Roberts believes that both the individuals within the black and white communities, and the collective bodies of the white and black communities in America, are affected by racism. Thus, in his eyes, both bodies need to take an active stance in working towards reconciliation. Roberts demonstrates, therefore, that in not addressing the individual, Cone leaves out an important element of working towards reconciliation.

Roberts explains the collaborative nature of reconciliation from his point of view: “Reconciliation, between blacks and whites, is a two-way street. It depends as much upon what whites *will do* to make conditions in race relations better as it does upon what

blacks *will not do*. [...] Reconciliation must be based upon a oneness in nature and grace between all people upon the principle of equity.”<sup>54</sup> In Roberts’ eyes, reconciliation is based on the notion of this “two-way street,” where the white and black communities both take responsibility for their actions or lack of actions in order to contribute towards the reformation of society. In taking responsibility for its actions, and thinking about how its actions will affect the other community’s actions, both the white and black communities take into account the goal of achieving a society of “oneness” and “grace.” Thus, though each community acts on its own, each community also acts in conjunction with the other. This demonstrates the need for individual action within the context of the greater collective community of society in order to achieve reconciliation.

Also, Roberts allows the white community more space and responsibility than Cone. Cone’s theory is based on what the black community can do to reform America. The black community finds the strength in itself and then takes action in society. The white community is not part of this process until after the black community begins to make its identity known to society. Roberts gives the white community a chance to collaborate with the black community, so that the process can involve both bodies.

Furthermore, more than the collaborative nature of achieving reconciliation, Roberts believes that society can only achieve reconciliation if everyone acts in accordance with good, Christian morals in the way in which he defines these morals. Thus, though Roberts recognizes and respects the Black Power movement, and sees it as an important perspective, he adjusts Cone’s notion of revolution to fit within his own moral framework. He discusses his opinion that while violence does and has occurred

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<sup>54</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 10.

within Black Power, it does not fit within Christian principles. As a result, people should not use violence in attempting to reach a state of reconciliation. He strongly emphasizes the importance of working with traditional Christian principles as one fights for black liberation, which he believes do not include violence.<sup>55</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Cone also acknowledges the importance of working with traditional Christian principles, but adjusts the notion of Christian love. Cone explains that sometimes in attempting to reach a greater good for society, violence may be necessary. Thus, in Cone's eyes, violence can fit within a framework of Christian morals, when performed in order to achieve a greater good in society. Roberts, however, questions that, "Can one who has been convinced by the Christian faith as a way of life suddenly abandon this life-style and embrace, without question, a 'revenge and revolt' approach to race relations?"<sup>56</sup> Through this question, Roberts challenges Cone's notion of Christian theology and Cone's acceptance of violence, indicating his belief that taking "a revenge and revolt" mentality in dealing with race issues, does not fit within the "Christian faith"—that one cannot act in rash, violent ways and still act in accordance with Christian morals. To him, the two are mutually exclusive. Roberts also implies that by acting out of "revenge" or "revolt," one "abandons" one's "lifestyle" of "Christian faith." Thus, more than violence not fitting within Christian morals, Roberts thinks that when one chooses to act in violent ways, one chooses to leave a "Christian" "lifestyle" completely. In this way, he makes it seem that once one chooses to partake in violence, one has abandoned Christianity completely. Thus, once this mars one's path in life, one cannot return to one's untainted Christian past.

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<sup>55</sup> Roberts, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 17.

Roberts continues to critique Cone, explaining that Cone's approach is too narrow<sup>57</sup> and unproductive. More than violence merely not fitting within traditional Christian morals, engaging in violence prevents the black and white communities from being able to engage in intercommunication. Intercommunication is a core part of Roberts's approach to reconciliation. Cone, however, as discussed throughout this paper, emphasizes the responsibility of the black community—that in order for reconciliation to occur, the black community must take action and make its voice heard. It is only when the black community makes its voice heard that the white community can act in accordance with what the black community wants. As a result, in the process of attempting to make its voice heard and force society to listen to its wishes, Cone thinks that the black community may need to engage in violence.

However, in Roberts's eyes, the process of reaching reconciliation is collaborative, with the black and white communities acting together and respecting each other. Thus, engaging in any sort of violence creates barriers between the communities and prevents communication and collaboration. Roberts adds:

“While Cone confesses an indifference toward whites, *I care*. [...] It is my desire to speak to blacks and whites *separately*, but in the long run it is hoped that real intercommunication between blacks and whites may result from this hermeneutical program.”<sup>58</sup>

Roberts interprets Cone's perspective as not caring about the white community. This is understandable since Cone talks about what the black community can do to move towards reconciliation without giving the white community any role in this process. He seems to assume that the white community, due to its ignorance and privilege, would

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<sup>57</sup> Roberts, 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

corrupt the process of moving towards reconciliation. He seems to indicate that merely by being white and influencing the process in any way, the process becomes white-dominated. Thus, any process that is white-dominated cannot move towards a restructured society, but instead perpetuates systems of racism already in place.

Roberts, on the other hand, sees the process of restructuring society as more mutual between the white and black communities. He believes that the white and black communities should work to connect and communicate between the two communities, rather than looking at them as completely separate. Yes, Roberts speaks of talking to the communities separately, but it is through this separate action that the “oneness” and “grace” of which he speaks earlier on, can eventually become a reality.

Furthermore, Roberts adds, “It is the goal of a worthy Black Theology to lead both blacks and whites to an authentic Christian existence.”<sup>59</sup> Roberts defines his notion of reconciliation here. He demonstrates that in its ideal state, American society is an “authentic Christian” environment where both whites and blacks can live with respect and love for each other. Interestingly, this is similar to Cone’s idea of a society in a state of reconciliation, where whites and blacks can live in peace with each other. However, a key part of Cone’s argument is that within this respectful environment is the sense that society live a “black”<sup>60</sup> existence—that the focus of society is still in understanding “where the dispossessed are”<sup>61</sup> in a way in which seems to hold society back from moving forward.

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<sup>59</sup> Roberts, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Roberts's perspective, on the other hand, allows society to move forward as a collaborative unit to create a space that is supportive of all communities. Roberts's acknowledgement of communication between blacks and whites demonstrates his desire that the two groups share honestly about their experiences and opinions. Thus he sees this as allowing both groups to create a society that benefits both of them. Cone would say that this collaboration would create white domination and prevent the black community from truly getting its needs met. However, in truth, by only acknowledging the "dispossessed" and attempting to base a society's foundation on the "dispossessed," society drowns itself further in the faults of its history. It seems most important to acknowledge the faults of society and allow for communication between the black and white communities. In this way a new society can form that takes into account the past, but also creates a space for the future for a shared safe environment for both blacks and whites.

Roberts further explains, "reconciliation [...] must be through humaneness and liberation and it must be between equals."<sup>62</sup> Roberts re-emphasizes the sense of "humaneness" present in his interpretation of reconciliation. He indicates again the sense of respect that must be present between the two communities as society moves towards reconciliation. Roberts acknowledges that if acting outside of a Christian-minded structure—one of humaneness and respect—revolution can occur without reconciliation. This is how he would probably identify Cone's Theory of Reconciliation—as pointing to a revolutionary approach to restructuring society, that might allow the black community to articulate its needs, but that does not allow for true reconciliation to occur. Roberts

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<sup>62</sup> Roberts, 24.

believes that the only way to achieve revolution with reconciliation is to act within his Christian principles.

He does agree with Cone in discussing the necessity of action, defining action as an essential element of change.<sup>63</sup> However, he expands Cone's perspective by illustrating that action is only effective when performed within a socially-conscious mindset, in which violence does not play a part. Both Cone and Roberts do agree, however, that the change necessary to restructure society is huge. He states, "The entire social pattern of racism must be changed. It must be attacked on the individual and social fronts at the same time."<sup>64</sup>, and later, "Massive and radical changes are urgently indicated in the area of race."<sup>65</sup> Roberts articulates here that even though he promotes good, Christian values, he is still supportive and encouraging of the drastic change to begin that America needs to transform itself and move towards reconciliation.

Roberts also points out that while the process of moving towards reconciliation requires Christian values, the Church itself is imperfect. Through acknowledging the imperfections of the Christian Church, he also makes known the fact that racism in America affects both the individuals and the collective bodies within both the black and white communities. He states, "Not only individual Christians but the church as an institution is condemned by racism."<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, he says, "The churches as collective bodies, as structures of social, political, and financial power are called forth to attack racism."<sup>67</sup> He acknowledges in these statements that both individuals and the collective

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<sup>63</sup> Roberts, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

identity of the Church are tainted with racism, and thus, the church must work against these racist forces. By addressing the issue that individuals within the Church and the Church itself is institutionally racist reflects the fact that racism has permeated varying levels of society, even beyond the Church, on an individual and collective level.

While the collective identity of each community in America is made up of individuals, however, the only way true change can occur is if each of these communities is prepared to begin facing the institutional racism that has corrupted America. Cone speaks to this through his texts, as he discusses the agency of the black community in working towards reconciliation. Ingrained in this recognition is the opportunity to pull America out of its racist hole, and bring it to a place of liberation and reconciliation—where people can live freely and equally.

Roberts explains, like Cone does earlier in this paper, that liberation is the core element in the whole process. Roberts says, “There can be no real reconciliation between blacks and whites henceforth without liberation.”<sup>68</sup> He acknowledges that liberation leads to reconciliation. Once America has liberated itself from its currently oppressive structure, then it can move forward and reach a state of reconciliation. However, as mentioned before, Roberts acknowledges that while the community as a whole is essential in effecting change, the individuals within these communities need to also take responsibility for addressing issues of racism. He emphasizes that levels of action at various levels will create more effectiveness all around. In the end, however, Roberts and Cone both aim for the same ideal America—one in which blacks and whites can live in a

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<sup>68</sup> Roberts, 47.

state of reconciliation, in a restructured America that releases blacks and whites from the current state of oppression.

Both Roberts and Cone make important points about how America can move forward and create a safe space for the black and white communities, in which both communities can get their needs met. However, Roberts's interpretation of Cone's foundational work expands the field greatly. Roberts, in his examination of love and Christian values, as well as communication and collaboration between the black and white communities, progresses Cone's perspective. Roberts also trusts the white community and is open to allowing the white community to work with the black community. Instead of putting the pressure on the black community to make choices and attempt to mold the white community to those choices, he encourages intercommunication. Roberts's theology makes for a productive, effective way of moving society forward. While both writers provide valuable perspectives, Roberts's more open perspective creates a more workable, realistic way of approaching Black liberation Theology. However, Roberts still does not do enough.

### **Section B: Delores Williams vs. Cone and Roberts**

Delores Williams, a female black liberation theologian demonstrates one of the major issues that Roberts and Cone both fail to address: gender. She looks deeply at the foundation of Christianity, addressing the role that Jesus plays in Black Liberation Theology and the significance that this has in the lives of black women. She therefore looks more closely at the particular foundation of teachings that affect the way that Black Liberation Theology addresses spirituality and Christianity. She looks at the issues that lie at the heart of the belief system that affects the notions of Christian morals. It is these

Christian morals which affect both Cone and Roberts's theologies. These morals also affect the ways in which each of them interpret these foundational beliefs. This allows them to mold these beliefs to a particular theology that fulfills their goals for the way in which America can best restructure itself. Specifically, Williams talks about the tendency of American Protestant Churches to focus on Jesus and his death on the cross, and his position as that of a sacred surrogate figure. She states:

Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred. It is therefore fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy.<sup>69</sup>

In Cone and Roberts's texts, Christianity is a mere foundation in their theologies which guides their thinking and from which they have been able to expand their perspectives to apply them to theories on how to best address issues of race in America. Williams, however, challenges the core of Christianity—the image of Jesus. She digs deeply into the heart of Christianity, and challenges everyone to question Jesus as a figure. He is so widely accepted that it is uncommon to hear people questioning the image that he presents. Cone and Roberts, in using Christianity as a foundation to their theories make the assumption that Jesus's teachings are good and positive, without questioning the way in which Jesus might actually work negatively in the lives of black women. More than this, this lack of awareness about the possible negative way in which Jesus as an image might affect black women demonstrates a lack of awareness about the way in which

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<sup>69</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 162.

black women might be affected negatively by multiple aspects of Black Liberation Theology that are highly focused on the male.

In this specific section, Williams looks at the role of Jesus as a surrogate figure. Traditionally this image is taken for granted—there is no question that Jesus put his life on the line so that he could die for everyone’s sins. That seems like a known fact in Christianity. However, she creates a new perspective in looking at Jesus by acknowledging his image as a bearer of everyone’s sins as burdensome and symbolic of the “exploitation” that black women might feel about their own surrogacy. Jesus is a core role model for all of Christianity. However, Williams point out his role as a surrogate. This role perpetuates the cycle of hardship that black women face in being “surrogate[s]” in their own lives. This illustrates Christianity as male-centric and unaware of the effect it has on its female followers.

Williams goes on to say, “If black women accept this idea of redemption, can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?”<sup>70</sup> Williams implies that if black women accept Jesus as a role model and spiritual figure, then they also accept this “exploitation.” However, it is possible, perhaps that black women could look at Jesus as a role model and accept him in their lives without thinking about the exploitation that he represents. If they do not recognize this exploitation, are they still victims of it? Do they need to be aware of this exploitation, then? Regardless, however, Williams demonstrates that any theology based on the cross and redemption in such a strong way inevitably speaks without concern for the women who might be victims of the same surrogacy which the theology places on its main figure.

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<sup>70</sup> Williams, 162.

In speaking directly about Roberts's perspective, Williams discusses the centrality of Christ and the cross in Roberts's theology, which she describes as "unsettling."<sup>71</sup> She quotes Roberts directly, "When we discover Christ as the black Messiah, as the one who enters into our black experience, the meaning of his cross and our suffering are reconciliation. The reconciliation of man to man, through the reconciliation of man to God, releases the healing power of the cross of Christ into this anxious, broken, and bitter world. Only redeemed men can serve as agents of reconciliation."<sup>72</sup> According to Roberts in this section, when the black community claims Christ as the "black Messiah," he becomes a model for reconciliation. Reconciliation to God paves the pathway for reconciliation between men, and Christ is at the heart of this sense of reconciliation, providing the model by which all in the black community should aim their actions.

Christ plays a strong role in Christian theology, and his redemption symbolizes suffering that black women experience every day. As a result, his image on the cross might also serve to oppress black women by ingraining in them a deeper sense of the surrogacy they must support in their lives. Williams adds, "Black women should never be encouraged to believe that they can be united with God through this kind of suffering."<sup>73</sup> Williams sees the image that Jesus portrays as an image of suffering for black women. This does not seem to even occur to Roberts when he uses Christianity as such a foundation of his work. Cone, too, seems oblivious to women's needs. In attempting to come up with a liberation theology for the black community and restructure society, both

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<sup>71</sup> Williams, 162.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 169.

Cone and Roberts overlook some smaller, specific details of their work that might contribute to greater oppression in their own community.

Furthermore, both of them tend to think of their theologies as aimed at the black community, but speak only of black men, without acknowledging black women. This demonstrates a lack of awareness. Women's and men's needs vary. Both genders deserve representation when discussing the black community as a whole. Williams helps us remember that. However, in the end, Williams states, "While the ethical principles in Roberts's and Cone's works were shaped by male identity and by the historical realities associated with black/white race relations, the ethical principle for revaluing that came to life in this book depended upon female identity and the historical realities associated with black women's re/productive history."<sup>74</sup> Williams attempts to demonstrate that even in a line of theology that is based on male perspective and history, women have a voice. Roberts and Cone might not recognize the need for a female voice in attempting to get across their overall agenda and work at a national level.

However, Williams recognizes the need for always addressing gender issues. She acknowledges that these issues lie at the heart of Christian theology. In ignoring them, a theology such as black liberation, which is intended to liberate, can actually become stifling and oppressive. She also demonstrates that there is always room for a female voice, and that women should take pride in their own history that is separate from male history. She shows that there is always room for women to write their own books to articulate their own take on issues, like black liberation theology, so that even when the big male theologians do not address them, passionate women like herself, will. In

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<sup>74</sup> Williams, 175.

general, she validates women and gives credit and value to the female perspective and work in black liberation theology.

### **Cone vs. Anderson**

Lastly, at the core of Cone's argument is the notion of "blackness." In *Ontological Blackness in Theology*, Victor Anderson engages this issue, challenging Cone's perspective in order to come to a greater understanding of how to move away from the limitations of blackness that Cone's argument entails. Anderson argues that within Cone's theology:

blackness is reified into a totality or unity of black experience. At the same time, blackness is regarded as symbolic, so that anyone who can participate in its meaning can also be said to be black. However, black theology exceptionally circumscribes the meaning of symbolic blackness in terms of black oppression and suffering.<sup>75</sup>

Cone's argument implies that if someone identifies as black, then that person can relate to a particular identity. Cone acknowledges the unifying factor between people based on race. More than this, he sees black liberation theology as effective only if everyone can take on this notion of blackness, regardless of race. While Anderson recognizes the unifying factor between people based on race, he also expands this theory and takes issue with Cone's perspective. He explains that:

Postmodern blackness recognizes the permanency of race as an effective category in identity formation. However, it also recognizes that black identities are continually being reconstituted as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 91.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Anderson thus acknowledges that there is a “permanency” to the notion of race—that race is a part of “identity formation” and there is something significant about one’s race that unifies people of a racial group together, regardless of background and experience. However, Anderson also acknowledges the difference in “social spaces and communities of moral discourse” which are essential in looking at race. He recognizes that even though people may share the same racial background, the difference of experience between people based on one’s social structure and other experiences not based on race will affect the way that one is molded as well. This will create people with extremely varying experiences within the same racial group.

Anderson posits that by focusing on the black community as a whole and attempting to access a sense of blackness in the way that Cone addresses, “black theology remains an alienated being whose mode of existence is determined by crisis, struggle, resistance, and survival—not thriving, flourishing, or fulfillment. Its self-identity is always bound by white racism and the culture of survival.”<sup>77</sup> According to Anderson, Cone’s theology of liberation entraps the black community in an existence based on struggle. Anderson implies that he thinks that Cone’s theology relies on oppression. The black community must have an entity—the white community, white racism, American society—against which it must struggle. In this way, Anderson seems to think that instead of escaping from this white power structure, the black community becomes dependent on it for its liberation. The black community needs to have something against which it can fight, so it can assert its identity. Thus, the black theology promoted by Cone becomes a theology of “crisis” and “struggle,” and does not function productively.

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<sup>77</sup> Anderson, 87.

This seems to relate back to Roberts, as when comparing Roberts to Cone, it seems that Roberts's theology moves society forward by focusing on collaboration, whereas Cone's theology does seem locked in the faults of history in attempting to repair and address all the struggle. However, in attempting to focus so strongly on the past, society cannot move forward. Furthermore, Anderson's perspective points to the notion that in merely addressing "blackness" and emphasizing the power of the black community, then it is inevitable that this sense of blackness will work against the opposing white power structure. The black community then becomes dependent on the white community even as it attempts to work against it. As long as there is an opposing force, then the black community cannot act on its own, as its own powerful force.

Anderson states, "Therefore, while black theology justifies itself as radically oppositional to whiteness, it nevertheless requires whiteness, white racism, and white theology for the self-disclosure of its new black being and its legitimacy."<sup>78</sup> and later, "The new black being remains bound by whiteness. Politically, it remains unfulfilled because blackness is ontologically defined as the experience of suffering and survival."<sup>79</sup> Anderson states in various ways in these two passages that black theology as it stands, according to Cone, remains bound to whiteness and white racism. Anderson demonstrates that by focusing on blackness as a group and attempting to create black solidarity, this creates an opposition against the white community which makes the black community dependent on whiteness in order to move forward.

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<sup>78</sup> Anderson, 91.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 93.

## Part VI

### Conclusion

However, this is exactly what Cone and Anderson both agree society should move beyond—that being locked into any system of oppression is unproductive and ineffective—that we should move into a space where the black and white community can coexist peacefully and comfortably. Thus, I can see why Cone wants to instill strength in the black community and work to create a sense of being in order to incite a desire to take action and create change. However, if this change is dependent on white power structures, this change is still part of an oppressive structure. The point of working for change is to move beyond this power structure. If this power structure dictates and dominates over the change, then instead of moving beyond institutional racism in America, we become further entrenched in it. We further perpetuate the cycle of racism and white power structures further.

Anderson points out how Cone's argument is ineffective, but what is the appropriate way to move forward, then? In addressing issues of intercommunication and love and gender and moving beyond blackness, is there a black liberation theology that can encompass all these principles without being caught or trapped further in the already-established oppressive white-dominated power structure of America?

I can see why Cone wants to create a sense of being and agency in the black community. Even if the black and white communities work together, the white community does have the advantage based on the privilege of merely being white. On the other hand, however, it does seem that the best way to move forward is to address and acknowledge the wrongs of America and let the black community voice its opinion. Then

we can move forward, keeping these in mind. The white community can then work with the black community to create a productive space for both communities which engages with a sense of love and keeps in mind issues of gender. In this way, we ensure comfort and awareness and acknowledgement of the importance of each individual within the community.

In the end, there would be no need to assert blackness as oppositional to whiteness, but instead acknowledgement and respect for both the black and white communities. We can acknowledge the beauty and strength of each individual in each community. We can acknowledge the strength of the community as a whole—not as asserting its strength against the other, but as a unit in itself. This, ideally, would take into account all of the issues brought up.

However, is this idealistic? If the ideal community that takes into all these accounts of reconciliation is not realistic, then how can we best move forward in a realistic fashion and incorporate these theologians' perspectives into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

In the end, it seems to me, that we must function within a model of gradual reconciliation. As I brought up in the beginning of this paper, we may not reach Cone's ideal of reconciliation for decades or centuries, even. Thus, we must acknowledge the small victories we achieve with each year. Focusing on one complete reconciliation that will fix all issues in America is not practical.

Instead, we must not lose track of where we have been in America's history. We must acknowledge the imperfections of our society and strive to make them better, but we must not get frustrated when we cannot fix these imperfections quickly. In the end, we need to engage with these imperfections, remain aware of and acknowledge the

various individuals in each community, and keep the communication steady. In the end, even if we cannot fix America, we can at least engage in change, and make gradual steps toward a reconciled country.

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