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James Cone's Liberative Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

James Cone is known primarily as the founder of Black liberation theology. Yet for those who were his students, his teaching was equally as powerful. Cone managed to mentor people, create dialogue, and foster collaboration, all around the common collective task of seeking justice and liberation through theological study and construction. These things made Cone such an effective teacher. His work existed on a continuum, in which the liberation of Black people, of all the oppressed, was a non-negotiable baseline. While he used “traditional” methods, primarily lecture and seminar formats, the purpose behind his teaching wasn’t traditional at all. And as a result, he has put in place a network of clergy, academics, and of many other vocations, who in one way or another are promulgating that commitment to liberation and justice quite literally throughout the world. This is one of several short [essays](#) presented by recent students at a public forum at Union Theological Seminary after his death in 2018.

KEYWORDS

James Cone, liberation theology, black liberation theology, pedagogy, mentorship

At the time of writing this, it has been nearly ten years since I took “Systematic Theology 103” (ST 103) with Dr. James Cone, and yet in so many ways it still remains the center of gravity of both my teaching and research. I later had the privilege of serving as a Teaching Fellow for that class, and that experience has remained definitive for my own teaching and my views concerning what can be accomplished in a classroom and what should be striven for. On the occasion of first offering some of these reflections on Cone, his work, and in particular his teaching, I was back in the room where I took that class for the first time in quite a long while. To be there without the possibility that Cone might walk in was strange. I took other introductory classes in Room 207, Union’s biggest lecture hall. But that room nonetheless felt like the ST 103 classroom. Cone’s presence, his shouting, open-palmed hand slapping on the podium, sudden dramatic pauses, cadence that meandered between lecture and sermon, still reverberates in that technologically and acoustically strange room. I think anyone who took the class can still feel liberation resonating in the walls.

As anyone who took ST 103 with Cone will attest, the syllabus itself as an object is a course in theology and a resource to be saved, with its layers of required reading, suggested reading, and an extensive bibliography, covering twentieth and early twenty-first century theologies. Various recent pedagogical resources have made the case that syllabuses themselves can and should be teaching tools. Ahead of the game, Cone had already made his syllabus into a learning tool before the concept gained wider acceptance: a narrative was proposed, the various levels to which a person could dig in an exploration of any given topic, and true to his constant admonition to “Find your own theological voice,” it offered the bibliographic foundation for any student of his to continue referring back to his syllabus, to the class, in order to find conversation partners, people with whom to disagree, and people to critique. It

was a class and a syllabus with a past, present, and potentially open future. It helps students learn how to speak theologically, and to find what they have to say.

I didn't fully understand the depth of the narrative constructed in ST 103 with Cone until I taught under Cone as a Teaching Fellow in the PhD program. It starts with a self-reflective liberalism, building tension through what is often known as neo-orthodoxy with Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, which reaches a boiling point with the "Death of God" theologies of Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton. But that's when the turn happens, and the pressure is relieved, not by any reconciliation with the challenges that led to theological liberalism, but by the culmination and embrace of the death of the white, sexist, heteronormative, colonialist God. The sense of relief paired with energization that came with turning from fretting over the non-believer to advocating on behalf of the non-person, as Gustavo Gutierrez so elegantly put it and as Cone embraced, was palpable. Students began to see themselves in theologies, or to be convicted in their privilege by those theologies, to see the expansive possibilities of placing oneself passionately into the struggle for liberation and justice, as presided over by God. The result was always both seamless and explosive. Whether students registered the narrative or not, the effects were felt. From Cone I learned the importance of incorporating an overarching narrative arc to the argument one makes through a class in the course of a semester, and to making plain how students themselves are participants implicated in that narrative. Cone's narrative, however, didn't offer any simple conclusions, especially not in moments of injustice and potent discord, as was the case with Occupy Wall Street and the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter while I was a Teaching Fellow in ST 103. The next step in the narrative was always the students themselves, and the contributions to theologies that were needed from their own contexts and experiences.

One of the most poignant moments in my classes with Cone, as a student, came in his course on Reinhold Niebuhr. Holding everyone back for nearly the entire semester, insisting that we all hear Niebuhr on his own terms, I'll never forget the moment Cone finally leveled his critique, declaring solemnly, "In the end, Reinhold Niebuhr was a racist." What stood out to me was the profound sadness that came through in his pronouncement. There was no joy or vindictiveness in his voice whatsoever. There had been a lot of anticipation of Cone's big take down of Niebuhr in the class. But ultimately his reticence about it was even more powerful. It has made me think of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, where he wrote, "In Black theology, blacks are encouraged to revolt against the structures of white social and political power by affirming blackness, but not because blacks have a chance of 'winning.' What could the concept of 'winning' possibly mean? Blacks do what they do because and only because they can do no other; and black theology says simply that such an action is in harmony with divine revelation" (2010, 18). Further on, he continues,

The gospel offers no assurance of winning. Again, what could 'winning' possibly mean? If it means what white racists mean by it—enslavement of human beings on the alleged basis of white supremacy—then, 'God deliver us!' The idea of winning is a hang up of liberal whites who want to be white and Christian at the same time, but they fail to realize that this approach is a contradiction in terms—Christianity and whiteness are opposites. Therefore, when whites say, 'That approach will not win out,' our reply must be, 'What do you mean? Who's trying to win?' (2010, 43)

His critiques were devastating. But he always insisted on understanding each theologian on their own terms. At the very least, to find one's own contradiction. Further, he lived his own theology in his pedagogy. His classes could be contentious, dialogic, agonistic. And yet the idea of anyone winning was foreign to them. The point, in his teaching as his theology, was to achieve liberation, insights, revelations of God's liberative work in history, including in classroom settings. Growth, learning, contention, striving, wrestling (as he was especially fond of saying) were crucial to his classes. Yet it seemed he always held high standards that encouraged more than memorization and internalizing concepts. It meant searching for liberation in those concepts, in theology, and in one's own theological voice engaging with the contradictions they encounter.

As a white scholar and teacher, I try to hold myself accountable to the standard that if I couldn't say it out loud in a room with James Cone there, I shouldn't say it and I should rethink my own views on it. Obviously that applies especially to race. But it also counts for anything to which race critique and criticism of power applies, and both in a positive and a negative sense. In the negative, I think it means always trying to be alert to my own language, the power in the room, and trying to remain vigilant against the logic of whiteness in the power dynamics of higher education and the classroom. And in the positive sense, not to be afraid to use passionate, invested language that rises to the occasion when naming injustice for what it is in an academic setting.

At Union Theological Seminary, where I did my PhD, one of the four comprehensive exams in theology must be done as a public lecture, to which anyone and everyone is invited. My lecture hinged on a fine grained analysis of the use of “love” by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) in conversation with Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism and against the backdrop of contemporary police violence against people of color. Everyone from my advisor to Cone himself asked why on earth I had decided to do this particular exam as my public lecture. Cone had been teaching a fiery class on James Baldwin, who he characterized as one third of his intellectual trinity alongside Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. The immediate traumas to which #BlackLivesMatter responded were still recent and raw. The exam was an extended meditation on Baldwin’s conception of “love” in light of racism in the United States.

After my exam prospectus went to the theology field for approval I got an urgent, sort of frantic email from Cone saying he needed to meet with me right away about the exam. I was able to assuage Cone’s concerns (for the most part). What he wouldn’t let me leave without acknowledging is the fact that I stood a risk of doing great harm. Intellectual work, research or teaching, isn’t disinterested, disembodied, or neutral. The possibility of violent power, of whiteness, manifesting is always a present reality in academic work. The public aspect of the exam, that I would be addressing not only my readers, Cone and Cornel West, but also my students as a Teaching Fellow, my peers, and the wider community, made the potential even greater. And what he drove home was that whatever academic, intellectual point I intended to make, I’d better first be really, very, extra sure that the oppressed in the room knew whose side I was on. That applies in writing, in lectures, and, I think most crucially, in the classroom. And that has stuck with me, that teaching liberation has to be wrapped up with the work of liberation. Academic spaces aren’t value neutral. Coming down firmly on the side of the oppressed without reservation is a key to liberative pedagogy, which is a reflection of both Cone’s scholarship and teaching. I don’t always live up to that ideal, but Cone was absolutely an embodiment of it.

Cone’s teaching, like his writing, was thoroughly invested in the work for Black liberation. A good deal of technical theological language, in my internal monologue, reflexively sounds in Cone’s voice (I think of the very word “theologian” itself, with Cone’s distinctive drawn out second “o,” somehow managing to emphasize both the “theo” and the “logos”). Studies and techniques in pedagogy may emphasize more creative, more collaborative tactics and activities than the classic lecture style Cone was known for. And yet his teaching nonetheless managed to mentor people, create dialogue, create collaboration, all around the common collective task of seeking justice and liberation through theological study and construction. That, for me, is what made Cone such an effective teacher. His work existed on a continuum, in which the liberation of Black people, of all the oppressed, was a non-negotiable baseline. While he used “traditional” methods, primarily lecture and seminar formats, the purpose behind his teaching wasn’t traditional at all. And as a result, he has put in place a network of clergy, academics, and of many other vocations, who in one way or another are promulgating that commitment to liberation and justice quite literally throughout the world.

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FORUM ON DR. JAMES CONE

Editor. 2020. “Introduction to the Forum on Dr. James H. Cone as Teacher and Mentor.” *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 1(2): 79–80. <https://doi.org/10.31046/wabashcenter.v1i2.1501>.

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Jason Wyman received his PhD from Union Theological Seminary. His first book, *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch*, looks at the history and method of constructive theology as a coherent tradition. He has also published articles in *Black Theology: An International Journal and Theology Today*. Wyman teaches classes on theology, social ethics, and religion in New York.

