

## Black theology and a legacy of oppression

M. Shawn Copeland June 24, 2014



For white people living in the United States, the entanglement of Christianity with chattel slavery and antiblack racism forms a set of deep and confusing paradoxes. As a nation, we understand ourselves in terms of freedom, but we have been unable to grapple with our depriving blacks of freedom in the name of white prosperity and with our tolerance of legalized racial segregation and discrimination. As a nation, we have been shaped by racism, habituated to its presence, indifferent to its lethal capacity to inflict lingering human damage. Too often, Christians not only failed to defy slavery and condemn tolerance of racism; they supported it and benefited from these evils and ignored the very Gospel they had pledged to preach.

Not surprisingly, 11 a.m. on Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour in Christian America, yet most white Christian theologians have given little attention to slavery or racism. In the wake of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the black liberation theologian James H. Cone denounced the lukewarm responses of mainline Protestant and Catholic Christians to the plight of black Americans as well as the willful blindness of Christian theologians. He declared racism to be America's original sin and proposed the concept of black theology.

When confronted with this unseemly history, many Catholics argue the “immigrant thesis,” which dates the bulk of Catholic European immigration from the 19th century, thereby exempting Catholics from earlier slaveholding and active participation in racism. This is not the case. Many Catholic planters in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries acquiesced in and prospered from slaveholding, and many white Catholic neighborhoods in the 20th century intentionally staved off housing integration. Most Catholics have heard little, if anything, about black theology, and given our national insistence that we now live in a “post-racial age,” many may wonder whether such a theology is at all relevant. Recurring public acknowledgments of landmark events in the modern black struggle for civil rights provide opportunities for reflection on our nation’s recent past and for an examination of conscience.

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### **Time of Turmoil**

The years extending roughly from 1954 to 1968 remain a controversial yet pivotal period in American history. These 14 years were marked indelibly by the courage and suffering, prayer and resolve of American women and men of all races and religions who dedicated themselves to secure basic civil rights for the disenfranchised, the segregated and oppressed black women and men of the nation. These were the years of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. King’s leadership of the civil rights movement, the involvement of black and white college students in sit-ins, freedom rides and voter registration drives. These were years of bombings and burnings, of police wielding batons, water cannons and cattle-prods, of sanctioned torture and murder of blacks and those whites who fought for justice alongside them; of protest and marching, mourning and rebellion. Montgomery, Little Rock, Jackson, the Mississippi Delta, Selma, Birmingham, Cicero, Memphis, Watts and Detroit were other stations of the cross.

Given Dr. King’s thoroughgoing appeal to the Hebrew prophets and the teachings of Jesus, the civil rights movement could not but present a challenge to the consciences of Christians and Jews. Catholic vowed religious women and men, along with priests, seminarians and lay people, Jewish rabbis, Protestant pastors and ministers joined protests and marches; several Catholic members of Congress supported civil rights legislation; bishops of many Christian churches denounced racism as a sin; and some Catholic bishops either integrated parochial schools under their direct control, or condemned publicly the most egregious instances of discrimination. Many individual Catholics made a difference. But what John Deedy argued in his 1987 book *American Catholicism: And Now Where?* still rings true: The Catholic Church in the United States, as an institution, had a marginal effect on the civil rights movement.

Despite passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960 and 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the masses of black people in the United States remained disenfranchised, segregated, discriminated against and mired in poverty. Sidelined by intentional presidential and bureaucratic refusals to deploy government resources and enforcement, these laws proved to be little more than legislative gestures. When in 1966 Stokely Carmichael, then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, took up the phrase “black power” (most likely from a speech given by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell at Howard University), he

disrupted the ethos of the civil rights movement and captured the frustration many blacks had begun to feel about nonviolence as a strategy for social empowerment.

The notion of black power was freighted with manifold meanings. In an economic sense, black power called for black ownership and control of economic and institutional resources in black communities—housing and schools, businesses and industries, banks and health care, land and real estate. Supporters of black power reasoned that even if blacks were guaranteed the exercise of political rights, without economic resources they remained locked in a distinctive type of colonial subjugation and economic exploitation. In cultural expression, black power advanced an aesthetic aimed to eradicate the internalized self-hatred that extended and deepened the psychic effects of slavery. Ron Karenga and Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. LeRoi Jones), both activists and writers, were among its most notable advocates, and James Brown sang its slogan in the song “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.”

Cultural nationalism promoted research, adoption and creative adaptation of African rituals and practices, but too often in uncritical ways. Since blacks already were racially segregated in schools and housing, black power argued its embrace as separation and demanded that blacks build up their communities and ebonize academic curricula. This was also a poignant period. The sudden and violent deaths of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy sowed suspicion and conspiracy theories that left the nation anxious, wounded and jaded.

Black theology emerged from the existential, discursive and cultural energy generated in black people’s struggle for human dignity, liberation and flourishing. Through black theology, James Cone aimed to demonstrate that, as he wrote in his book *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*, “the politics of black power was the Gospel of Jesus to twentieth-century America.” Just as Jesus put his ministry at the service of “the little ones”—the physically impaired and ill, the outcast and the poor—so, too, black power was committed to the liberation of the black outcast and poor from oppression. In his 1969 book *Black Theology and Black Power*, Professor Cone questioned the meaningfulness of the Gospel to:

powerless black [people] whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of white power. Is there a message from Christ to the countless number of blacks whose lives are smothered under white society? Unless theology can become “ghetto theology,” a theology which speaks to black people, the gospel has no promise of life for black [people]—it is a lifeless message.

Despite the passionate language and polemical tone of *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone’s theology remained a Christian theology, taking into account the complex religiosity of the enslaved Africans and their descendants as well as the tradition of radical advocacy of the historic black church. Professor Cone sought to give voice to the seething pain black people felt at the betrayal of the Gospel through the indifference and racist behaviors of too many white Christian clergypersons and lay people. Thus, he distinguished sharply between sacred Scripture as the word of God and sacred Scripture as it had been manipulated to serve the social and cultural interests of white Protestant and Catholic churches and their memberships. Black theology demanded a new consideration of the cultural matrix that is the United States in light of God’s revelation in Jesus of Nazareth.

## Against ‘Elegant Racism’

Under James Cone’s inspiration and practical commitment to training doctoral students, for more than 45 years theologians of the black theology movement have sustained within Protestant Christianity one of the most provocative, intellectually stimulating and methodologically innovative movements in Christian thought in North America. Initially, these mostly male scholars failed to confront sexism and homophobia within the black community, but in the ensuing period black theologians have put forward an agenda dealing with issues of gender, race, class, culture and sexuality as these have been posed by womanist theology (that is, theology that takes the differentiated historical, religious, cultural and social experiences of black women as its starting-point).

Black theological reflection calls attention to the perspective of oppressed black men and women as its point of departure; critically probes the meanings and consequences of the religious, historical, cultural and social experiences of black people in the United States; critiques the schism between Christian practice and Christian teaching in relation to race and gender; and contests the persistence of white supremacy and racism.

Public displays of vicious anti-black racial animus have become rare, although racially reactionary opinions are not hard to find. Disdain for these reactionary comments can afford us moments of self-congratulation: “We are colorblind. We have put race behind us; we have elected an African American as president.” But our self-righteous reactions to displays of boorish racism distract us from what Ta-Nehisi Coates aptly described in *The Atlantic* (5/1) as “elegant racism,” which is “invisible, supple, enduring.”

Elegant racism is embedded in our vicious national practices of housing discrimination, redlining and real estate covenants. “Housing discrimination is hard to detect,” Mr. Coates writes, “hard to prove, and hard to prosecute.” Elegant racism constricts black and Latino access to adequate public transportation, first-rate schools, good jobs, good quality supermarkets and adequate public services. Elegant racism accounts for the disproportionate rates of incarceration of African-Americans and Latinos in comparison with whites; elegant racism explains what Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* describes as the “sevenfold increase in the prison population in less than 30 years due to [putatively] rising crime in poor communities of color.” Racism, Mr. Coates writes, is “elegant, lovely, monstrous,” sinful and evil. Racism, America’s original sin, makes black theology crucial and the collaborative theological critique of racism among white theologians necessary.

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In 1979, reportedly at the urging of their black confreres, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued a pastoral letter on racism, “Brothers and Sisters to Us.” The bishops defined racism as an enduring evil in society and in church. Racism, they stated, is a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. Yet we have a way to go before we can claim to live out these truths fully as a church. John Deedy’s assessment of

Catholics and race rings as true today as it did 30 years ago: The church as a whole has never gone “out of its way to make blacks feel welcome as Catholics” in the United States.

Few white Catholic theologians have engaged with the topic of racism or placed the condition of black Americans at the heart of their scholarly work. The recent work of black Catholic historians and theologians—Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., Cecilia Moore, Diane Batts Morrow, Bishop Edward Braxton, Shawnee-Marie Daniels-Sykes, S.S.N.D., Diana Hayes, Bryan Massingale, LaReine-Marie Mosely, Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., and C. Vanessa White—has enlarged our knowledge of black Catholic experience and enriched Catholic theological and ethical reflection.

But a new generation of white Catholic theologians, following the example of Jon Nilson from Loyola University Chicago, have begun to alert us to the stranglehold white racist supremacy maintains on our church and society—women and men like Jeremy Blackwood, Laurie Cassidy, Katie Grimes, Alexander Mikulich, Maureen O’Connell, Margaret Pfeil, Christopher Pramuk and Karen Teel.

Scholars like these, both black and white, work in the service of faith—exposing racism’s sin against the body of Christ, its defilement of the sacrament and celebration of the Eucharist, its disruption of the bonds of charity and love that draw us into union with God and one another, and its mockery of the self-gift of the One who nourishes us with his very flesh and blood.

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