

James H. Cone's Black Theology of Liberation as Post-Modern Public Philosophy (ポスト・モダンの公共哲学としての J・H・コーンの黒人の解放の神学)

Takeshi Kimura*

SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 本論文では、ジェームズ・H・コーンの黒人の解放の神学をポスト・モダンの状況における公共哲学として読む可能性について論ずる。M・サンデルなどに代表される公共哲学の議論の枠の中では、白人による黒人への暴力や差別が十分には取り上げられていない。特に、コーンの近著『十字架とリンチの木』で取り上げているような白人の暴力によって主体性を否定された黒人の生の意味を神学的に回復しようとする試みは、哲学的な公共哲学には欠けている重要な公共的問題を取り上げていると言える。このような観点から、コーンの黒人の解放の神学は、公共的な社会問題としての市民権運動、奴隷制、リンチと暴力を論じており、単に神学的議論としてだけ読み解くのではなく、公共哲学として読む意義があることを示す。特に、白人による暴力によって否定された黒人の主体性の回復は、哲学的な議論では到達できない生の次元であり、その意味でもポスト・モダンのあるといえる。

* 木村 武史 Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Ibaraki, Japan.

Introduction

It is certainly possible to consider that the Civil Rights Movement was not only social and political, but also religious and spiritual, transforming American society tremendously. Its transforming forces have been noticeable in various realms of society, one of which is the academic genre of theology. Through the intellectual struggles in the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Theology of Liberation emerged especially through the writings of James H. Cone (born August 5, 1938) along with many other important ministers, activists and thinkers. Cone is hailed as a founding figure of the Black Theology of Liberation in America.

In the post-modern and post-colonial world, Cone's intellectual work poses several intricate yet intriguing public issues concerning how to read and interpret the location of theological thinking in the multi-religious conditions of secular global societies. Compared to Martin Luther King Jr.'s and Malcolm X's intellectual legacies, Cone's influence is, intellectually speaking, limited to academic theological circles, yet indirectly observable in the practical Christian ministries of those who read his works. It is still and furthermore important to examine the public implications and significances of Cone's works in the early twenty-first century, especially considering that there is still unreasonable violence against African Americans due to racism by "whites" against "blacks" in America.

In this paper, I propose to examine Cone's Black Theology of Liberation as public philosophy in post-modern and multicultural situations. My point is that his emphasis on the black experience as the soteriological locus reflects the post-modern secular self in fragments that seeks the authentic self *à la* Charles Taylor,¹ and finds significance in fragments *à la* David Tracy.² By grounding the soteriological base in fragmented historical experience or in the negated subject of oppressed black people, Cone deconstructs the "transcendental quality" of White Western Christology, which white theologians still cling to with a claim of subjectivity, into a hegemonic and legitimating ideological tool of the white religion enslaving African Americans. Yet, considering that Cone continues to locate certain and sure soteriological meaning in the oppressed lives of African Americans, this might be in opposition to the idea of post-modernity. Nevertheless, knowing that there is diversity in Black Theology, including criticism of Cone's

standpoint, and that there are some black churches that enjoy a relatively well-to-do social and financial situation, unlike before the Civil Rights Movement, black theologies are now in multi-theological and post-modern situations. There is no longer “the” Black Theology.

In attempting to locate Cone’s writings in public philosophy, it should be noted that some “philosophical” public philosophy does not necessarily address the issues which the Black Theology of Liberation addresses. For example, Michael Sandel’s version of public philosophy, though he addresses the issue of affirmative action,³ would not touch the issues the Black Theology of Liberation addresses. Yet, the social and public issues the Black Theology of Liberation works on belong to the public sphere,⁴ and therefore contain public significance. It is my intention to propose the idea that if White Theology could be seen as a contributing part to public philosophy because whites are still the majority and enjoy relatively more powerful social status, Black Theology should also be given the same social significance in contributing to public philosophy. Like James Tully, who takes up the issue of the multiplicity of cultural diversity from the perspective of constitutionalism in his argument on public philosophy,⁵ it might be possible to see the connection between public philosophy and multicultural global situations, from which there is no reason to exclude the whole variety of theological situations. Though Cone’s books often escape the attention of non-black and non-Christian readers because they are written heavily in theological language, I think that such heavily theological language is not necessarily an intellectual obstacle to finding the public implications, because for some oppressed people theological language is the only linguistic resource for finding meaning. Furthermore, in Cone’s writing, I notice similarities with Gayatri C. Spivak’s position on the subaltern, or the marginalized. Therefore, I will argue that not only black intellectuals but also non-black and non-Christian intellectuals should engage in dialogue by philosophically reinterpreting the theologically interpreted significance of the history of African Americans.

In the first section, I discuss some justifiable reasons to read Cone today by pointing out that his intellectual studies are intended to recover the fragmented totality of African Americans. In the second section, I will examine the public significance of the development of Cone’s first trilogy of the Black Theology of Liberation. In the third section, I will examine

Cone's historical study of King and Malcolm X as his own exploration of public significance. In the fourth section, I will take on Cone's agenda to recover the fragmented voiceless voices of the lynched and murdered African Americans in his Black Theology as an important contribution to public philosophy.

1. Fragmented Authentic Experience

James H. Cone is still intellectually, academically and educationally very active some forty years after his publications of the *Black Theology of Liberation*.⁶ In his recent publication entitled *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011), Cone tries to interpret the symbolic resemblance and resonance between the Cross of Christ and the lynching tree of murdered African Americans. Cone explains that he had noticed this for a long time, yet could not take it up in public until this book. In it, Cone certainly exposes the dark side of democracy and modernity in America and deconstructs them. As a scholarly project, by referring to Mircea Eliade, a historian of religions,⁷ at the beginning and the end, Cone tries to broaden his interpretive stance a little bit beyond the Christian theological circle. To open the issue, he chose to pay attention to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, and the lynching and murder of the fourteen-year-old boy Emmett Till which recent scholarship has focused on. Cone constantly reminds the African American community of the physical, psychological and spiritual pain that their ancestors endured. By drawing readers' attention to the victims of white supremacists, Cone tries to give voices to these voiceless and marginalized victims.

When Cone wrote his *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *Black Theology of Liberation* (1979), he was still living in the atmosphere of the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. I would like to pay closer attention to Cone's emphasis upon the historical particularity of the experiential quality of black suffering in American society. Clearly Cone thinks and writes his Black Theology of Liberation by reflecting on his own experiences and emotions and on his dialogue with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Following Taylor's arguments concerning the age of authenticity in the 1960s, Cone's theological writings are a sort of intellectual expression of his

“authentic experience” of being black in a secular age.⁸ That is, his historical and social experience rooted in the Civil Rights Movement enables him to attempt to recover the experiential dimension of those black victims whose suffering and pain were inflicted by white prejudice and violence.

Through participating in that historical movement, Cone “was transformed from a Negro theologian to a black theologian, from an understanding of theology as an analysis of God-ideas in books to an understanding of it as a disciplined reflection about God arising out of a commitment to the practice of justice to the poor. The turn to blackness was an even deeper conversion-experience than the turn to Jesus.”⁹ Here, in my view, he means that the views of a “Negro” theologian are subordinated to the theological views of “white” theologians, while a “black” theologian is free from such a colonial intellectual restriction and only the “black” theologian can proudly find the positive qualities in being a “black” person in America, as Malcolm X advocated. Since Cone was raised as a Christian, his turn to blackness, stimulated by Malcolm X who was not a Christian, was a sort of “twice-born” experience, to borrowing a phrase from William James. His new identity as a black was born, and Black Theology came into being, too.

Malcolm gave black theology its black identity, putting blackness at the center of who we were created to be.¹⁰

Blackness that created a new social identity also brought a new impetus into Christian theology. “The distinctiveness of black theology is the bringing together of Martin and Malcolm—their ideas about Christianity and justice and blackness and self. Neither Martin nor Malcolm sought to do that.”¹¹ In Cone’s view, it is a sheer historical fact that being a Christian could not be an excuse for African Americans to be exempted from being the object of white supremacist violence. Having a different color of skin from white is the reason African Americans become targets of white violence. Therefore, overturning the negative value attached to the color of the skin is a more significant experience for Cone. In Malcolm, Cone found a strength and power that could be attributed to Malcolm’s being a Muslim, yet did not examine it more deeply. It is possible to say that because Malcolm was a Muslim, he could overturn the negative value of the color of skin and then give a positive significance to the color black. Furthermore, my reading of

Cone's writings shows he admits that he himself did not suffer direct physical violence by white people. It seems that his admission of this lack of direct experience of being physically struck by whites and his attempt to recover the meanings of being a victimized black demands that Cone emphasize the authentic quality of black experience as a tool in his interpretative approach.

Precisely here lies the reason why Cone's writings should be read in a contemporary intellectual and scholarly context. While I agree with Cone that there are still racist elements in American society, everywhere in American society African American people have made remarkable advancements. Through the latter half of the twentieth century, American society has also become a more multi-ethnic and multi-faith society. As Diana Eck's book shows,¹² the American context of religious and theological imagination has become more diverse. American society cannot be discussed any longer in terms of the dualistic framework of black versus white. And for many African Americans, their lives could be regarded as being those of the post-Civil Rights Movement. Some have become very wealthy and some have become leaders in various areas of American society.

Nevertheless, why does Cone continue to raise the issue of the suffering and pain of African Americans?

In 1998, Cone writes,

What deepens my anger today is the appalling silence of white theologians on racism in the United States and the modern world. Whereas this silence has been partly broken in several secular disciplines, theology remains virtually mute.¹³

Again in 2000, Cone writes with frustration:

I have been writing about this silence for 30 years but White theologians still refuse to talk about White supremacy as a theological problem.

While Cone shows his frustration over white theologians' refusal to be engaged in theological and intellectual conversations with black theologians, Kuribayashi Teruo, a Japanese theologian with a similar theological concern about discriminated minorities, writes that when Cone says that "God is Black," white theologians laugh and remain silent.¹⁴ Whatever the reasons

are, it seems to Cone that white American theologians have not succeeded in incorporating the voices of the Black Theology of Liberation. This may be one reason why Cone feels it necessary to continue to write in a similar manner. If so, then, Cone's Black Theology of Liberation has two aims: one is to establish a genre of Black Theology within theological circles, and the other is to make white theologians engage in converse with black theologians over the tragedy of African Americans and examine the issue of white supremacy.¹⁵ Cone has accomplished the first aim, but not the second.

If I follow Cone's argument, it might be possible to note that the reason why white theologians don't take the tragedy and suffering of black people at the hands of white supremacists is that Christian theology had been perceived and constructed from the viewpoint of the winner and suppressor, resulting in a speculative, idealistic and unreal theology, something apart from human reality. White European theologians have also identified themselves with the winner. In this context, Anthony B. Bradley's criticism of Cone over his emphasis on victimology can be seen as one thread of Black Theology moving apart from the historical experience of African Americans toward a more speculative European style of theological thinking.¹⁶

It is also possible to say that Bradley's theological thinking rather reflects an emerging new black reality, that is, many of blacks have become successful and wealthy. The same Civil Rights Movement that bore Black Theology eventually brought the Black Megachurch into being. Black Megachurches are far from being poor. They are prosperous, wealthy, extravagant and populous, offering various kinds of social services to the needy and poor like their white equivalents. As Tamelyn N. Tucker-Worgs explores in her *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement* (2011), the social reality of black Christian churches has gone farther than the Black Theology of Liberation. She focuses on the social services provided by members of Black Megachurches, and finds there is no longer any difference between the black church and white church in term of size and finances.

Here, it is possible to note an ironical situation for Cone's Black Theology of Liberation, being trapped between white theologians ignoring his call to include the black experience in theological constructions and the wealthy black church's search for a new black identity. In emphasizing Marxist criticism of social oppression, Cone should be happy to see the

upward mobility of these black churches. Yet, the more the black church moves toward a higher social status, the more their social experiences become separated from the historical experiences of their African American ancestors who suffered enslavement. Therefore, in this context, it is important to notice that in occupying a transitory location, Cone constantly reminds Black people of the core of the collective memory of African American identity and attempts to recover the human totality from the unvoiced fragmented experiences of the lynched and murdered black ancestors.

Precisely because of his aim to secure and recover these voiceless voices, he is close to what Nancy Fraser calls the "subaltern counterpublics" in the public sphere.¹⁷ I think it is necessary to regard Cone's Black Theology of Liberation as public philosophy to be communicated in the public sphere in the sense of Habermas,¹⁸ and to be read by both white theologians and black theologians. Racist violence against the invisible is certainly a public issue, so theological attempts to rescue the shattered meaning of being a person could be public, too. In this regard, we can note his intellectual resonance with Spivak's concerns about the underprivileged in the South in the inequalities of globalism. She writes:

What I was concerned about was that even when one uttered, one was constructed by a certain kind of psychobiography, so that the utterance itself—this is another side of the argument—would have to be interpreted in the way in which we historically interpret anything.¹⁹

Utterance and talk are to be interpreted as something meaningful, otherwise they remain as mere representation without making sense. Recovering and bringing out the public significance of the unheard voiceless suffering inflicted by hegemonic power and violence is an important intellectual endeavor for the sake of promoting public awareness and public philosophy. Cone asks how public philosophical discourse can become possible when it does not attempt to recognize these suppressed and enslaved victims. It is of more public importance than anything else, given that white aggression against African Americans based on racial categories is still a social problem in America. Violence and racism by whites against blacks is a real philosophical public issue, even though Cone writes about the issue in strong theological language.

2. Emergence of the Black Theology of Liberation: Exploring Public Significance

Reading Cone's writings makes the reader aware that they are a sort of response to the social and religious transformations underlying the academic study of theology. This is especially true of the early trilogy *Black Theology & Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). Through this Black Theology of Liberation trilogy, with one book on spirituals and blues, Cone establishes and explores an independent genre of the academic study of Black Theology and has become its pioneering figure. As Cone himself explains on many occasions, Malcolm X and Martin L. King, who were activists, orators and thinkers, were his intellectual and theological bases in attempting to ponder and construct the Black Theology of Liberation.

In the academic field of theology, Cone felt frustrated with American theologians' blind reliance on White European theology, which could not incorporate the history and experience of black people. Cone argues that an American theology needs to originate in American experience, especially from the experience of black people, which could be said to be fragmented due to historical and social predicaments. This emotional and intellectual urge led to the publication of the Black Theology of Liberation series.

Interestingly, his first book was hailed as an intellectual declaration of independence by Black Theology from White Theology, yet was also criticized by his black and female colleagues for his unsatisfying references to African American history and experience and women's issues. Cone responded to them and revised and rearticulated his view of the Black Theology of Liberation. Therefore, his Black Theology of Liberation is not only a reflection of his own intellectual development, but also that of the black intellectual and Christian communities.

Below, I will examine the intellectual and historical process behind Cone's theological sophistication as a basis for understanding his Black Theology as public philosophy.

The first book entitled *Black Theology & Black Power* is Cone's declaration of theological independence from what he calls White Christian theology, which he criticizes for being an element in racism, oppression, and domination, basing his claims on the concept of Black Power. "Black

power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness."²⁰ "Instead, in order for the oppressed blacks to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressor ridicules—blackness."²¹ With this structural reversal of the value attached to blackness, Cone attempts to release black theologians and black ministers from the reign of White Theology.

Historically speaking, Christianity was conveyed to black people through white oppressors who demanded that they reject their concerns for this world as well as their blackness and affirm the next world and whiteness. The white church was the vehicle to justify this enslavement. Cone even says that "white Christianity in America that was born in heresy."²² With this historical legacy of white Christianity, then, he asks if it would be possible for wo/men to be really black and still feel any identity with the biblical tradition. Cone answers affirmatively, saying that the goal and message of Black Power is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ since, as the New Testament shows, Christ is present among the oppressed and must be working through the activity of Black Power. "Black theology firmly believes that God's revelation in Christ can be made supreme only by affirming Christ as he is alive in black today. Black Theology is Christian theology precisely because it has the black predicament as its point of departure."²³ In terms of revering the relationship between the white church and black church, one of the core arguments is that black Christians will no longer accept the terms of the relationship defined by white racism and racial theology even in church, and black Christians will define their own theology grounded in the black experience of America.

Cone's second book entitled *The Black Theology of Liberation*, to borrow his own words, "represents my initial attempt to construct a new perspective for the discipline of theology, using the Bible and the black struggle for freedom as its chief sources."²⁴ In the biblical narratives, Cone identifies the essence of God's work of salvation in liberating people from oppressed conditions, as exemplified in "Exodus."

Black theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in the light of the black

condition. It believes that the liberation of the black community *is* God's liberation.²⁵

Cone offers justifiable reasons for employing the term "black" as an adjective for theology because his theology is identified with a particular community, that is, the black community in America. Secondly, the biblical message that God always takes side with a particular group of people for his work of liberation means that "the God of the oppressed takes sides with the black community."²⁶ Thirdly, it is part of the risk of faith for black theologians to get involved in making sense of the black struggle for freedom in a racist society by intentionally choosing the issue for theology.

In emphasizing blackness in his theological discourse, he claims that "an authentic understanding [of his book] is dependent on the blackness of their existence in the world."²⁷ This strong insistence is directly related to his listing the sources of Black Theology as followings: 1) Black experience, 2) Black history, 3) Black culture, 4) Revelation, 5) Scripture and 6) Tradition. There is a direct relationship between the author who is "black" and "Christian" and the written theological discourse.

The third book of the trilogy entitled *God of the Oppressed* is, in Cone's words, part of his most developed and engaged theological work, which he wrote by responding to several criticisms. In the preface to the 1997 edition, he summarizes the criticisms against him from white theologians and his fellow black theologians. Some white theologians criticize Cone for having been too much influenced by Malcolm X and the radical black movement, and for not sufficiently accommodating King's moderate and integrationist stance and for having been too subjective and selective. Against such criticisms, Cone defends himself by acknowledging the different hermeneutical standpoints and claiming that his reading of the Bible is closer to King than white theologians because King and Cone are from the black community. His fellow black theologians criticize Cone in a similar manner. Some say that Cone did not pay enough attention to the African aspects of black Christianity, and others say he did not give more consideration to rational and moderate discussions of racial reconciliation. Against them, Cone stresses that his work is an attempt to empower black people struggling to be free from white supremacy. The last point clearly explains his stance. The Black Theology of Liberation is a theological endeavor to offer

empowerment to the oppressed black people by constructing a theological justification for the black struggle for freedom.

Cone argues that the source of the Black Theology of Liberation is the black experience not only of the church but also of history. There is no dichotomy between the sacredness of the former and the secularity of the latter. The latter is also sacred,

because it is created out of the same historical community as the church experience and thus represents the people's attempt to shape life and live it according to their dreams and aspirations.²⁸

Therefore, in his theological discourses, Cone employs a variety of historical resources such as animal tales, folk tales, slave seculars, blues, and accounts of personal experiences. These so-called secular tales and experiences are usually not employed in theological thinking, yet in the case of the black experience, reference to "transcendence" is hidden. And black scholars can understand these hidden references hermeneutically. Partly, his emphasis on historical black experience at the forefront is a hidden dimension driving force in the first book. By responding to several criticisms from his fellow black activists and friends, Cone consciously enumerates a series of important events in black experience. Even though words such as Jesus, Christ, and God do not appear in these mundane narratives, they do not necessarily lack any "sacred" quality. In this regard, Cone also articulates the role of a theologian, that is, "to speak the truth" and "the authentic experience of blackness" by excavating the hidden religious meanings. In and through the black experience to struggle for freedom and to survive under the cruelty of white supremacists, Cone justifies his theological interpretation of the Bible story by selecting the motif of "liberation" from bondage, and he rightfully claims that Christ is the center of his Black Theology of Liberation.

One of the core statements of Cone's Black Theology of Liberation is "Jesus is black." It could be seen as one of his counterattacks against white theologians who are used to depicting Jesus as being white and who developed their theology from their own experience as whites. In addition, Cone argues that white theologians' attitude toward black people is quite similar to that of an oppressor in any society. In this regard, it is necessary to remember that Jesus was a Jew, who was oppressed by the Romans and

whose history signifies the history of their liberation by their God. Therefore, Cone makes the following statement:

It is in the light of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus in relation to his Jewishness that Black Theology asserts that “Jesus is black.”²⁹

Jesus suffered on the cross and black people suffered enslavement. Cone finds the essential identification of black people’s suffering with Jesus’s cross. But he adds that Christ’s blackness is literal and symbolic. His blackness is literal “in the sense that he truly becomes one with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of our struggle, the story of our pain, and the rhythm of our bodies.”³⁰ The “blackness of Christ” is a statement about “transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed along in struggle.”³¹ According to Hayes, who studies Cone’s theological language by referring to Paul Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor, Cone’s statement that “‘God/Christ is Black’ expresses clearly what is meant about metaphor,”³² and is a calculated error. “By means of this calculated error, metaphor discloses a relationship of meaning hitherto unnoticed between terms which were presented from communicating by former classifications.” So the new meaning emerged.

In his first three books on Black Theology of Liberation, Cone gradually developed his theological discourse from the very emotionally charged declarations in *Black Theology and Black Power* into the more matured theological thinking in *God of the Oppressed*. It is possible to discern how both his emotionally charged arguments and intellectual thinking deepen. Yet he maintains his basic conviction that Jesus is with black people. Interestingly enough, Cone has incorporated Marxist analysis and criticism into his theological discourse. Bradley criticizes Cone for introducing the dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed, an aspect of the class struggle in the black people’s struggle for liberty.³³ He also criticizes Cone for advocating victimology in his theological thinking. But what is important in the Black Theology of Liberation is that under Malcolm X’s influence, Cone succeeded in reversing the meaning and significance attached to the word “Black” from the downgraded and negative to the upgraded and positive. Black has become not only powerful and beautiful, but also the historical and social locus where Christian “truth” is living. It has become the symbol of

difference in Christian theology.

Yet the emerging new meaning of the Black Christ that is based upon the historical and fragmented experiences of slaves and oppressed African Americans creates intellectual tensions between white and black and between the fragments and the whole. Slaves' lives and oppressed African Americans' lives are known only as fragments. These fragments are to be recovered through imagined pain, suffering and agony which, historically speaking, white Christianity inflicted upon African Americans. That is why Cone requests white theologians to take into consideration these pains and white Christians' wrong-doing. But as Cone's criticisms of white theologians show, Christian theology can deal with pain and suffering caused by others, yet cannot deal with pain and suffering caused and inflicted by those who are the so-called "saved" themselves. In the end, Black Theology makes White Theology and Black Theology fragmentary from each other.

3. Public Religious Implications of the Civil Rights Movement

One of the peculiar features of Black Theology is its emphasis on referring to "black" history, which is an important source of the Black Theology of Liberation. Yet several questions arise. Why do black theologians pay attention only to the history of black people? It seems that a sort of a metahistorical consciousness is functioning in justifying and allowing this kind of scholarly attitude to the past. Is it because the "black experience" could only be understood by black theologians? When W. E. B. Dubois says that double consciousness is the Soul of Black Folks, it is a sort of structure of consciousness imposed on black people by the oppressive whites which black people had to escape. In that case, what would happen to the structure of consciousness of black people when they are liberated? Now, black scholars are only interested in studying and examining the history of black people. The history of black people becomes a closed source for black scholars to construct their theology and philosophy.

While Cone was devoted to constructing his Black Theology of Liberation, other black scholars were engaged in studying the history of slaves and black people. In 1973, Gayraud S. Wilmore published *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of*

Afro-American People. Wilmore acknowledges that “Black religion began in Africa, was mixed with European Christianity in the Caribbean and in Latin America, and was further molded by, and recoiled from, American evangelical Protestantism on the slave plantations of the South and among the tiny communities of free blacks in the North.”³⁴ His view of the history of black people points out that Christianity for the African American people is rather a late-comer. It is acutely different from Cone’s view of the history of black people which he would like to paint as all Christian history. It is also pointed out that several percent of African Americans are Muslims; therefore, painting all Black history as Christian is betraying the history of African Americans. In the 1970s, Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* was published.

For his early Black Theology, Cone was criticized for not paying enough attention to the history of African American people. In addition, his interpretation of the historical experience of black people is theologically colored, which should not be necessarily denied since he is not a historian, but a Christian theologian. And he remains a black theologian of liberation born out of the Civil Rights Movement, as seen in his choice of studying King and Malcolm X in his “historical” study of the Black Theology of Liberation.

After Cone firmly established himself as a proponent of the Black Theology of Liberation with the first three books by the middle of the 1970s, he revisited the history of the Civil Rights Movement by focusing on Malcolm X and Martin L. King, Jr. His study of Malcolm X and King is an extension of his own hermeneutical perspective into the historical experience of black people as the source of his Black Theology of Liberation. At the beginning of the book, Cone acknowledges that he spent ten years collecting and reading materials regarding both leaders. It is a scholarly and secular work, regarding both of them as historical figures. But his theological perspective helped him understand both historical figures in deeper senses. Without his theological knowledge and deep understanding of religious lives, this study could not have reached the same historical depths.

Before I discuss his study of Martin and Malcolm, at this point, it might be possible to say that there is a connection between his *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1991) and his recent *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. In the former, Cone devotes himself to studying and interpreting two contrasting

religious leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. In the latter, he gives his attention to the lynching and murdering of black people from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. In the manner of Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"³⁵ Cone struggles to find and locate meanings, at least of the theological kind, in the unheard voices of those who were lynched, murdered, and subordinated into becoming negated unsubjects, though there is a big difference between the two. In the case of Spivak, she takes up the case of Sati, the Hindu self-immolation by widows, while Cone takes up cases of innocent victims of racist violence. If Spivak's writings can be read broadly, Cone's "theological" writings can also be read without requiring any "religious" agreement.

Cone opens *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by writing about the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis "Bo" Till from Chicago in Mississippi in 1955 as the major historical tragedy that spurred the beginning of Black resistance that developed into the Civil Rights Movement.³⁶ "Only three months after the Till lynching, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, and a 'New Negro' was born."³⁷ Here Cone is reflecting recent scholarly developments. For example, Christopher Metress who edited *The Lynching of Emmet Till: A Documentary Narrative* (2002), writes in his introduction, "When the producers of the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* had to select an event to mark the beginning of the movement, they chose not Rosa Parks's protest but, tellingly, Emmett Till's murder."³⁸ In her *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (2006), Clenora Hudson-Weems argues that the death of Emmett Till is the real beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.³⁹ It was certainly a butterfly effect.

While it is difficult even for Cone to find any theological meaning directly in the lynching and murder of Till, he writes about his mother Mrs. Bradley's deep religious experience:

She spoke about a strange experience, a voice that said to her: "Mamie, it was ordained from the beginning of time that Emmett Louis Till would die a violent death. You should be grateful to be the mother of a boy who died blameless like Christ. Bo Till will never be forgotten. There is a job for you to do now."⁴⁰

What was the turning point was Emmet's mother's demand that his body be

brought back to Chicago and that the sealed casket be opened for a three-day viewing, exposing “his battered and bloated corpse” so that “everybody can see what they did to my boy.”⁴¹ Emmet could not speak, yet his corpse spoke more clearly so that those who saw the sign could hear the message. After Cone discusses her faith a little bit, without going into a discussion of the subsequent media coverage and the court case, he shifts quickly to Martin L. King’s theological views on bearing the cross and to his usual attack on white theologians of the time, especially Reinhold Niebuhr.

In his reconstruction of the case of Emmet Till, Cone tries to give a voice to the voiceless Till in recovering his humanity by focusing on his mother’s grief and on theological relief. Through his mother’s grieving voice, he tries to hear the unheard suffering and agony uttered by Till. His mother chose to expose his brutally lynched body to the eyes of African Americans in Chicago. Till’s lynched and murdered body speaks.

Cone, then, tries to locate the tragedy of Till in the history of the widespread lynching and murdering of black men and women by white supremacists in the South. “Strange Fruit,” an image of the hanging bodies of lynched and murdered black people, poses critical questions about the “truth” of the white religion in the South.⁴² Cone describes the bravery and suffering of these innocent black people and acknowledges that the Christian faith could not save them. Then, he asks:

What is the meaning of this unspeakable black suffering—suffering so deep, so painful and enduring that words cannot even begin to describe it?

As Cone writes, many African American people say to themselves, “It could have been me.” He attempts to explore a theologically reasonable way of finding some segments of meaning in such a random, meaningless and dark death, and concludes that only faith can help them to endure the tremendous dark depth of being “Negro.”

Within this historical and theological context, then, the Civil Rights Movement began. In *Martin & Malcolm & America*, Cone traces the process and development of these two leaders. While tracing their lives from the early stages and analyzing the social and economic conditions in which their personalities were shaped, Cone juxtaposes King’s Dream for America and

Malcolm's America as Nightmare, King's integrationist and Malcolm's black nationalist views, and King's Christianity and Malcolm's Islam. Cone writes:

Martin's and Malcolm's movement toward each other is a clue that neither one can be fully understood or appreciated without serious attention to the other. They complemented and corrected each other; each spoke a truth about America that cannot be fully comprehended without the insights of the other. Indeed, if Americans of all races intend to create a just and peaceful future, then they must listen to both Martin and Malcolm.⁴³

Cone attempts to incorporate the two black leaders, who are often regarded as two extreme opposites, who avoided each other and never crossed each other in their lives, by means of this creative hermeneutics, into his own perspective. While Cone is a Protestant minister influenced heavily by Martin L. King, his harsh critical stance against white theologians reminds the reader more of Malcolm X than of King. This is interesting because Malcolm was a Muslim who criticized Christianity as the white man's false religion. Cone accepts this seemingly radical stance against white Christian society. Though Cone himself consciously claims to be following King's Christian theology, he appears to refuse to be integrated into its society in his writings by emphasizing the significance of Malcolm X. Cone attempted to locate and contextualize both King and Malcolm in historical and social America, and to incorporate both King's Dream and Malcolm's Nightmare, two contrasting and opposing views, into the hermeneutical base of his Black Theology of Liberation.

Since the historical experience of Africans and African Americans as being slaves and oppressed and segregated is the basis on which Cone constructs the core perspectives of his Black Theology of Liberation, it is a reasonable move for him to re-experience the histories of Malcolm X and Martin L. King as a hermeneutical and theological exercise. As we read his books, at the beginning Cone argues that racism is the core problem, and then gradually recognizes the class problem, noticing a sort of Marxist class struggle. After he himself was criticized for not paying enough attention to feminism's claims that women were oppressed by men, especially that black women were treated negatively by black men and by white men and women,

Cone tried to incorporate the feminist perspective. These points, for which Cone was also criticized, were taken up in his reevaluation of Malcolm and Martin.

Probably, when Cone himself incorporated both Malcolm and Martin into his theological discourses, he noticed that closer to their final years both King and Malcolm X were getting closer to each other. Especially, after Malcolm X was assassinated, King became much closer to him.

He [King] made a similar observation in a Los Angeles news conference immediately following Malcolm's assassination: "I think it is even more unfortunate that this great tragedy occurred at a time when Malcolm was reevaluating his own philosophical presuppositions and moving toward a greater understanding of the nonviolent movement and toward more tolerance of white people generally."⁴⁴

King acknowledges that Malcolm was accepting his philosophy of non-violence. Interestingly, King himself was accepting Malcolm X's philosophy.

He [King] too was re-evaluating his presuppositions and was moving toward a greater understanding of Malcolm, especially regarding black pride, separatism, and white America's lack of commitment to genuine black equality. He began to urge blacks to be proud of their "blackness," a word he almost never used publicly before he turned his attention to the North.⁴⁵

The converging histories of King and Malcolm X gave a new reason for Cone to bring them together. They were quite different but in some ways quite similar. Dream became Nightmare and Nightmare became Dream. Then, tragically, both of them were assassinated.

4. Black Theology of Liberation as Public Philosophy

Cone's intellectual influence can be discerned in many places in Black Theology. For example, he is ubiquitous not as a contributing author but by being referred to by most of the contributing authors in *The Oxford Handbook*

of African American Theology published in 2014. His insights have been well received by his black colleagues. In an article entitled "Humanity in African American Theology," J. Kameron Carter writes that Cone set the terms of discussion for African American theological anthropology, by inquiring "into the meaning of the human using the tools of Christian theology" on the one hand, and bringing "a disciplinary inquiry into conversation with the 1960s and 1970s Black Power movement."⁴⁶ Carter argues that Cone's interest in the human condition started with his dissertation on the doctrine of man in Karl Barth's theology. According to Carter, Cone was forging "an oppositional relationship to theology itself in order to conceive and reframe the task of theology itself under conditions of civil rights, Black Power, and decolonization efforts around the world."⁴⁷

Yet, despite Cone's intellectual contributions to the growth of Black Theology, his theological proclamations seem to be not necessarily well received by white theologians, as we have already seen. In 2009, Ryan P. Cummings says:

Black theologians have forcefully articulated the role which their experiences and insights *as blacks* must play in their theology and have demanded attention to these experiences and insights from their white counterparts. This challenge, however, has not been met by most white theologians.⁴⁸

It is possible to ask why white theologians could not respond positively to the development of Black Theology. Precisely because white Christian theologians regard racial issues only as social, but not as theological and religious, they do not feel any necessity or any responsibility to incorporate the perspective and issues of Black Theology into White Theology. Or, as Cumming speculates, the reason why most white theologians neglect Cone's Black Theology of Liberation is that they regard Cone's theological scholarship as not counting as scholarship at all, but more like a sort of rhetoric in response to social evils. If that is the case, probably white theologians did not understand his Black Theology of Liberation as a part of public philosophy. Many white theologians could not treat their own theology as a part of public discourse.

With this intellectual context in mind, then, it is understandable why

Cone wrote *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2010), where he writes that innocent black people were lynched and murdered by whites just because their skin was black. The color of the skin could be the only reason for African Americans to have been lynched and murdered. Yet contemporary white theologians failed to take into consideration the case of the murder of Emmett Till in their theological thinking, and today's white theologians continue to fail to do so. Especially, Cone targets Reinhold Niebuhr. Cone's criticism of Niebuhr stands in stark contrast to Cornel West's examination of Niebuhr in his *American Pragmatism*. West's argument about Niebuhr lacks Cone's harsh criticism of white theologians.

Since Cone has framed his Black Theology of Liberation within the experiential and epistemological frame of black experience, that exact linguistic frame appears to restrict and control who can participate in its argument. It is all about being black as Cone frames it, and therefore white theologians could not come nearer to it. Within his clear-cut theological structure, Christian liberation is only found among black suffering and any white claims for Christian truth are decisively false. Furthermore, Cone's theological hermeneutics does not start with a universal and un-experiential concept of Christ's salvation, but with a peculiar and experiential embodiment of black history. Therefore, there is no room for any white theologian to participate in this conversation. How could Cone expect white theologians to participate in communicating with the Black Theology of Liberation while he accuses white theologians of being false and untrue? It seems to me that it is necessary to reframe Cone's argument into a different and broader intellectual scheme, that is, into a public philosophy.

From this predicament that Black Theology faces, a few issues emerge. As David Tracy argues, in the polycentric world of the post-modern secular age, everything could become fragmentary in multicultural situations. Black experience is also partial and fragmentary. As Tracy points out, African American thought has led the way to recover a repressed intense, saturated and fragmentary religious form, the intense form of black religion, recorded in the historic records of the slave songs.⁴⁹ In this regard, it is not possible to say that only the Black Theology of Liberation is the true Christianity as Cone fervently argues. Cone needs to accept that the Black Theology of Liberation is also fragmentary. Then, secondly, Cone needs to accept that white Christians were also truly Christians, as black Christians

are truly Christians, though he might not be able to accept the historical facts that Christian slave owners enslaved Africans, treated them cruelly, and white Christians murdered and lynched black people. Thirdly, as the Black Megachurches show, some black ministers and other black leaders are wealthy and prosperous. Their social and religious experiences are worth examination. Suffering and pain are no longer the only meaningful experience for Black people.

Yet, in my reading of Cone, his hermeneutics could be located in the broader public philosophy beyond the inner-circle of Christian Theology since he attempts to listen to and recover the unheard voiceless voices of those whose lives perished in agonies and meaninglessness. For those violently fragmented lives, Cone tries to seek some soteriological possibility. I am afraid that mere philosophy could not reach the same dimension. Yet, in post-modern and secular polycentric societies, all claims to truth are fragmentary and authentic. Even so-called public philosophy is fragmentary and authentic. In this reinterpreted framework, it is possible to treat Cone's Black Theology of Liberation as public philosophy, because, especially, for the oppressed and underprivileged people, theological and religious language could be the only source of meaning, not political and philosophical language. Within this framework, not only white theologians but also other non-Black and non-Christian scholars would be able to read his Black Theology of Liberation as public philosophy.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to examine James H. Cone's Black Theology of Liberation as a part of the post-modern and multicultural self-seeking of authentic experience and to show that it is important to read it as public philosophy. It is still important to read Cone's writings because he bases his theological discourse on recovering the voiceless voices of the enslaved, targeted and lynched African Americans and on his experiential dimension of being a black in post-modern and secular America. By examining the emergence of the Black Theology of Liberation, I have tried to explore its public implications. In the third section, I took up Cone's historical study of King and Malcolm X, which shows his basic historical hermeneutics of

Black Theology. Finally, I argued that it is necessary to read Cone's Black Theology as public philosophy so that both white intellectuals and non-black scholars can see that his intellectual work is worthy of engagement in constructing public philosophy.

Since Cone's writings are mainly theological and philosophical, they appear to be narrowly appropriated. Yet he has been engaged in dealing with the history of African Americans theologically and publically. Cone's theological insights into the fragmented experiences of slaves and African Americans who were lynched and murdered would help non-black intellectuals pay serious attention to his attempts to recover their human totality. It is possible to read Cone's theological writings as public philosophy in order to gain a deeper understanding of American religious history.

Notes

1. Charles Taylor, "The Age of Authenticity," in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 473-504.
2. David Tracy, "African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology & Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 29-38.
3. Michael J. Sandel, "Arguing Affirmative Action," chap.16 in *Public Philosophy: Essays in Morality in Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 101-04.
4. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, eds., *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing/ The Sociological Review, 2004). Editors summarize three different views into the public sphere in the post-Habermas era: the late-modern school, the post-modern school, and the relational and institutional school. In this paper, I take a position between the post-modern school and the relational and institutional school.
5. James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
6. For the history of Black Theology up to 1992, see James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1: 1966-1979 (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), and *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2: 1980-1992 (New York: Orbis Books, 1992). For recent scholarship, see Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
7. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 3, 153. Cone actually does not refer to Eliade in the main text, but only in a note in the first chapter. In the conclusion, Cone quotes Eliade.

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8. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473-504.
9. James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Bacon Press, 1999), xxi.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperOne, 2002).
13. Cone, "White Theology Revisited," in *Risks of Faith*, 130.
14. Kuribayashi Teruo, *Keikan no shingaku* [A Theology of the Crown of Thorns](Tokyo: Shinkyō Shuppan, 1991), 337.
15. According to Rufus Burrow, Jr., there was a discussion about to whom Cone was addressing his theological works, especially when he wrote that "This is a word to the oppressors, a word to Whitey." Rufus Burrow, Jr., *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 59.
16. Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2010), 17. Bradley writes as follows: "The overall thesis is that Cone's starting point for black identity as victim supplies a fundamentally flawed theological anthropology for later developments in black liberation theology."
17. Crossley and Roberts, *After Habermas*, 14.
18. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 57. "It [The idea of 'the public sphere' in Habermas's sense] designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction." Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1989).
19. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean, eds., *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 291.
20. James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 8. Originally published in 1969.
21. Ibid., 18.
22. Ibid., 103.
23. Ibid., 118.
24. James H. Cone, "Preface to the 1986 Edition," in *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010). Originally published in 1970.
25. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 5.
26. Ibid., 7.
27. Cone, "Preface to the 1970 Edition," in *Black Theology of Liberation*, ix.
28. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 22.
29. Ibid., 124.
30. Ibid., 125.

31. Ibid., 126.
32. Diana L. Hayes, "James H. Cone's Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 623.
33. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*.
34. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), ix. Originally published by Anchor Press/Doubleday in 1973.
35. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271-313.
36. In his *Martin & Malcolm & America*, Cone does not think that the lynching of Emmett Till was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. "The 17 May 1954 Supreme Court Decision, which declared school segregation unconstitutional, symbolized the North, and the brutal lynching of a fourteen-year-old Chicago youth, Emmet Till (28 August 1955, in Money, Mississippi) symbolized the South." James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 59.
37. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 69.
38. Christopher Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 2-3.
39. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmet Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouseTM, 2006). Yet in his book entitled *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*, Stephen J. Whitefield tries to consider the connection in a cautious manner, writing that "Although that newspaper had given prominent display to the Till case, it is difficult to ascertain any direct relationship between the sensational murder and acquittal and the buy boycott one state to the east. But a connect is not inherently plausible, even though perhaps the most that can be argued is that the news of yet another terrible death and miscarriage of justice added to the mounting frustration with racial oppression." It seems that there was some discussion concerning the connection between the two, yet Whitefield could not find any concrete evidence to ascertain this in his research. It had to wait until the publication of Hudson-Weems' work. Stephen J. Whitefield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 88.
40. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 68.
41. Ibid.
42. "'Strange Fruit' captures the great contradiction in southern culture and the religion that defined it. 'Lynching is part of the religion of our people,' one white man told another. Blacks have always wondered how whites could live comfortably with that absurdity. How could white Christians reconcile the 'strange fruit' they hung on southern trees with the 'strange fruit' Romans hung on the cross at Golgotha?" Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 135; Donald G. Mathews, "Lynching Is Part of the Religion of Our People," in *Religion in the American South: Protestant and Others in History and Culture*, ed. Beth B. Shweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 153-94. "Strange Fruit" is Billie Holiday's song about southern lynching.
43. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 246.
44. Ibid., 256.
45. Ibid.

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46. J. Kameron Carter, "Humanity in African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, 177.
47. Ibid., 178.
48. Ryan P. Cumming, "Contrasts and Fragments: An Exploration of James Cone's Theological Methodology," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no.3 (Summer 2009): 395.
49. Tracy, "African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments," in *Black Faith and Public Talk*, 31.

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