Theologian as Truth Teller

BY GEORGE R. GRAHAM

Theology is the urgent desire to understand the gospel message in the world and "should come out of experience and seek to understand unjust society," said James H. Cone, the 1996 Cole Lectur-
er at the Divinity School. In lectures given on February 7 and 8, the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Pro-
esor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, reflected on his own experi-
ence as a theologian and on the issue of race in society.

In his first lecture, "The Vocation of a Theologian," Cone argued that the urge to explore theology is a matter of both faith and not merely an intellectual endeavor. Central to the development of his thinking were his family and the Macedonian AME Church in Baux-
den, Arkansas, where "Jesus was the domi-
nant reality." While Cone was growing up, a conspicuous and confusing boundary for him was the separation between black and white society.

White churches hung welcome signs out-
side, but blacks were not welcome. Cone ob-
erved the hostility of white law to those who attempted to transcend the bound-
aries. The hypocrisy of an unjust society and of the white church, which preached love but practiced segregation, could have led him to hate, but it was his faith that pre-
vented him from doing so. He recognized himself as a child of God: "I have always known my worth wasn't determined by what others said but what God did in cre-
ation and redemption," he said. His parents provided an important example of people who had "survived with dignity in a society that didn't recognize their humanity."

At 16, Cone felt called to the ministry, which he assumed would take the form of preaching. Yet he was troubled by the sometimes anti-intellectual posture of the black church, which seemed to contradict what his parents and the history of slaves had taught him. He saw that together reli-
gion and education "invested the spirit and empowered people to take hold of their lives and shape their future." He pursued his education with the same fervor he had his faith, eventually earning a Ph.D.

When he began to teach at Princeton, Smith College, he realized that his educa-
tion had not prepared him to deal with questions of the time. It was not enough to simply rearticulate the doctrine of white Europeans and Americans.

With the rise of the civil rights and black power movements, blackness exploded "like a volcano" in Cone's theological con-
sciousness, and he found his theological voice—one that addressed theology and race—beginning with the first of his ten books, Black Theology and Black Power (1969). At that point he felt "like the angriest theo-
ligian in America," compelled to speak out. From this experience he came to under-
stand the vocation of the theologian as truth teller. It was a difficult role. He did not enjoy exposing the hypocrisy of the white church or the anti-intellectualism of the black church.

Cone credited the civil rights and black power movements for making a theologian of him. Leaders of these movements—Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—have played foundational roles in his thinking: "Malcolm taught me how to make my theol-
ogy black," he said. "Martin taught me how to keep my theology Christian." In the second Cole Lecture, "Martin, Malcolm, and Black Theology," Cone focused on the contribu-
tions of these two leaders to black theology. King was the most important theologian in American history, Cone argued, because he addressed an issue that had plagued the United States since colonial days: the problem of race. King showed the disparity between racial dis-
crimination and the gospel that the church proclaimed, eventually destroying the moral legitimacy of racism. Cone noted how King's death has become fundamental to liberation movements throughout the world. Rather than doing theology within the security of the academy, King wrote from a prison cell and did theology with the poor in the face of death.

It was Malcolm X who eventually forced Cone to make sense of his blackness. Mal-
colm saw the complexity of race in the United States, both in the South and the North. For Cone, Malcolm's critique of race is as far-reaching and important as Marx's cri-
tique of economics or the feminist critique of patriarchy.

Through King and Malcolm X, black theo-
logy has received a double consciousness, Cone said. King showed that the meaning of Christianity was inextricably linked to jus-
tice in society. Malcolm demonstrated that the identity of African Americans was inextricably linked to blackness. Black theology must attempt to hold these contributions in tension.

Cone cited race as the most intractable problem in the United States. Because the races can live largely separate from one another, they can deny the existence of the problem and lack an arena in which to address it. Two institutions that should raise our consciousness to the problems of race are the church and the academy. The issue of race—not the sole responsibility of black theology, he adamantly argued—must be addressed by all theologians.

"Theology can't be true to itself until it deals with race, until it deals with Malcolm and Martin together," Cone concluded.

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