

James Cone's brother Cecil Wayne has come up with something--THE IDENTITY CRISIS IN BLACK THEOLOGY [AMEC/75], adapted from his Emory U. doctoral thesis--I can't resist commenting on, though I do it with diffidence and doubt, fearing not to distort his message but to overextend it in direction of my own incurably white thinking.

1. With him, I'm persuaded of an authentic Afro-core in black religion, so I go almost all the way with [p.32] "Africans were not converted to Christianity but...converted Christianity to themselves." Surely the centrality of the Almighty Sovereign God in black religion roots in the Afro-hyperCalvinism that would have made Calvin both happy and nervous. It's set over against, in America, the anthropocentric tendency in all religion sophisticated enough to be influenced by Euro-American white theology.....I've one caveat: In African tribalism, old and new, the unquestionability of the chieftan once he's made up his mind [with little, no, or much consultation] fits with the Almighty Sovereign God and reminds me of Nixon's White House....but that's only a side worry, as I'm heart and soul for the restoration of theocentricity in Christian life.
2. ASG [the Almighty Sovereign God], says this Cone, should be the permanent center of both black religion and black theology. Blacks who take "liberation" as central are focusing on blacks and not on ASG, and blacks who take "reconciliation" as central are focusing on whites and not on ASG.....Comment on LIBERATION THEOLOGY in general: It's a polemical theology and as such legitimate when in the spirit of Jesus Christ, but it often vaunts itself as theology itself, i.e. as the full form theology takes in situations of oppression. How liberation theologies [of color or shape of skin, or any other] are to avoid this hybris is yet to be demonstrated, though Letty Russell's HUMAN LIBERATION comes close.
3. The right point of departure for a theology is the experience of the religious community that is the primary consumer/critic of the particular theology. Therefore, "black theology" must be primarily interpretive of the black religious experience, not of any other aspect of black experience, such as economic or sociopolitical. Here's where this Cone, who obviously deeply loves and is deeply indebted to his brother, clashes with that [James] Cone's writing to date. P.141: "Politics is not the starting point of black religion. Rather, God is!....Jesus encountered them [the slaves] and gave them new names...." He goes on [p.142] to accuse some black theologians, including his brother, of being "infatuated with the themes of liberation, freedom, and equality" as shaped by black power, Euro-American white theology, and white theological seminaries.
4. This Cone has the advantage of (1) being in a seminary that is (2) not white: Atlanta's ITC's Turner Theological Seminary, of which he is dean. If I am properly informed by Andy Young and others, Atlanta is the closest to a showcase city for improvement of the black condition and black/white relations. ITC is thus, in more than one way, very far from that other Cone's white seminary on Morningside Heights. Is this geographical note important as the two brothers "do theology"? I don't know. I'm strongly inclined to think so.
5. AMBI: The more I learn about racism, the more clear and mysterious it is. Lord, may I pay up to the clarity and not cop out through the mystery.