



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
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**“The Cross & the Lynching Tree”:
The Life & Legacy of James Cone,
Founder of Black Liberation Theology**

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4 April 2021

frederickuu.org

In preparing this Easter sermon, I have been holding in my heart that today is also the anniversary of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on April 4, 1968. Dr. King was only 39 years old when he died. If he hadn't been killed, he might still be with us today. He would be 92 years old.

Fifty-three years later, there are ways in which Dr. King’s dream has become more of a reality, and there are also nightmarish reminders—like the current trial of a white police officer for murdering George Floyd—of how far we have to go to build the better world we dream about.

Along these lines, our Intern Minister Jen and I have been co-leading an 11-week study on Tuesday evenings here at UUCF of *Widening the Circle of Concern*, a report from the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on Institutional Changes. The report offers us many recommendations of how we might become the more diverse, multicultural, beloved community that we dream about.

For many decades we Unitarian Universalists have aspired to be more Anti-Racist, Multicultural, and Anti-oppressive. And we’ve been quite successful in rejecting what we might call Stage One in that process: denouncing conscious, intentional White Supremacy as embodied in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. But too often we have stopped there. And we’re increasingly aware that rejecting what we are against is insufficient to create what we are for.

Stage Two is becoming more aware of all the ways that majority white institutions unconsciously perpetuate White Supremacy culture. One of the many ways this shows up is a tendency to center the experiences of white people and default to white cultural norms.

Stage Three calls us be consciously and intentionally multicultural, which includes centering the experiences of historically oppressed groups. Many organizations also make the mistake of holding one anti-racism workshop or releasing one statement about multiculturalism, then reverting back to the way things have always been done. To make a longterm difference at the level of genuine cultural change, we need systems and structures that keep us regularly accountable to practicing anti-racism and multiculturalism. Otherwise, the default tendency is to slip back into Stage Two—unconscious, unintentional perpetuation of White Supremacy culture.

And here's some of the good news on this Easter Sunday—as we look for signs of hope, renewal, and rebirth: I am grateful that the UUA has spent three years researching best practices for co-creating a multicultural beloved community. It's not that this new report is perfect. (Of course it isn't. As you've heard me quote before, "We are saved from perfection!" It doesn't exist.) I'm sure new and better insights will be forthcoming down the road, but there are a lot of incredibly valuable recommendations in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, and I look forward to continuing on this journey with all of you.

So, on this Easter Sunday, on the anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, it feels like a significant occasion to spend some time reflecting on the life and legacy of James Cone, known as the Father of Black Liberation Theology. Dr. King's death was a powerful turning point in Cone's life. And in the wake of Cone's death in 2018, his Black Liberation Theology continues to have powerful reverberations in our own country, particularly through The Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock, the recently elected United States senator from Georgia, who is one of Cone's proteges.

And in the terms of this UUA report, Cone's life and legacy offer a powerful example of what it looks like to live into an ever-widening circle of concern, care, and compassion. To set the stage, let's start with a brief look backward. I have been

reading James Cone for about two decades, and I want to be honest with you that one of the reasons his Black Liberation Theology means so much to me is that I was raised in an all-white Southern Baptist Congregation in the midlands of South Carolina. Growing up, I was usually at church two or three times a week for various events. And although I remain grateful for many wonderful people and aspects of that congregation, I realize now in retrospect that one among many serious problems there was a complete failure to wrestle with the legacy of racism among Southern Baptists.

Most glaringly, I never learned that the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in the mid-nineteenth century for one major reason: to make sure that Baptist congregations in the southern United States (and especially their missionaries) could teach that the Bible supported slavery. Even though I was at church multiple times a week, I never learned any of that history until I took a Baptist History class in seminary. And my experience of not learning that history is pretty common for folks who grew up Southern Baptist (Jones 5).

Previously, the major network of Baptist congregations in the country was the Triennial Convention (so named because it met every three years), but in 1844 that convention declared that it would not approve funding for any Christian missionary who was an enslaver. As a result, many Baptists in the South broke away from the Triennial Convention in 1845 to form a new denomination that would advocate for the compatibility of Christianity and enslavement. They called this denomination the Southern Baptist Convention (Jones 1-2).

A similar dynamic played out in many other parts of the Christian tradition in this country. In 1845 there was also a similar schism between Northern and Southern Methodists over slavery (6-7). Or we could consider Roman Catholicism. Here in Maryland in the late eighteenth century, about “one-fifth of Catholics were enslaved human beings owned by white Catholics or white Catholic institutions.” And during the “great migration,” when many African Americans moved north, the Catholic church often modified its policy of encouraging Catholics to attend the Catholic church closest to their home and instead segregated all African Americans in one or more congregation to avoid racial integration (7-8).

There's a lot more to say about all this, and if you are curious about the details, I recommend the excellent and powerful book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* by Robert Jones, a religion scholar and founding director of the Public Religion Research Institute (2020).

Having laid out this history, it may be helpful to bring back in the three-stage process we started with. As Jones's book details, the devastating truth about that first stage of conscious, intentional White Supremacy is that:

While it may seem obvious to mainstream white Christians today that slavery, segregation, and overt declarations of white supremacy are antithetical to the teachings of Jesus, such a conviction is, in fact, recent and only partially conscious for most white American Christians and churches.... **For nearly all of American history, the Jesus conjured by most white congregations was not merely indifferent to the status quo of racial inequality; he demanded its defense and preservation as part of the natural, divinely ordained order of things.** (6)

Most historically white congregations have, at best, progressed to the early parts of Stage Two: unconscious, unintentional perpetuation of White Supremacy culture.

With this history on our minds and hearts, let's begin to consider how the life and legacy of The Rev. Dr. James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, can inspire us to more boldly widen our circles of concern into Stage Three: conscious, intentional multiculturalism.

James Cone was born in 1938 in Arkansas, which means that he grew up in a racially segregated town. Indeed, in the early 1950s (a few years before *Brown vs. the Board of Education*) when Cone was a young teenager, his father sued the local school district to try to get them to integrate, and was threatened with lynching ([NPR](#)).

If you are curious to learn more, I recommend his short and accessible memoir, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*. For our purposes, I'll limit myself to a few significant turning points. In the early 1960s, during the heart of the Civil Rights Movement—when nonviolent “sit-in and Freedom Rides were erupting all over the South” and often being met with White Supremacist violence—Cone was one of the few Black seminarians attending Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois.

At that time, race was barely mentioned in the curriculum, and one day in a Church History class Cone found himself unexpectedly yelling at his professor: **“You have been lecturing for days about the violence of Catholics against Protestants during the sixteenth and seventeen centuries in Europe, and you’ve said nothing about the violence of white Protestant against blacks in the South today”** (Cone 2018: 5)! After reconciling with his professor after class, it is really hard to read Cone’s confession: “I put my mask back on, and saved my degree” (6). That’s what he felt he had to do to survive in the White Supremacy culture of the time. But it was also a significant inflection point in Cone’s becoming more conscious of the cognitive dissonance between what he was learning in school and the reality of the contemporary world he was living in as a Black man.

In 1965, he went on to earn a Ph.D. at Northwestern University, writing his doctoral dissertation on “The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth,” a white European theologian. Ironically, though, after proving himself according to the standards of white Christian theology, Cone got to the top of the mountain, looked around and realized: “For me, nothing was at stake in European theology. It didn’t matter whether Barth or Harnack was right in their debate about the meaning of revelation. I wasn’t ready to risk my life for that” (8). Whew. That’s powerful, especially after all it takes to complete a Ph.D. In contrast, he was feeling increasingly drawn to the Black Power movement, and he realized: “I was ready to [risk dying for] Black dignity.” And how much better still to *live* for Black dignity, which is how Cone spent the remaining five decades of his life.

Especially after the Newark and Detroit racial justice uprisings in the summer of 1967, Cone found that for him there was no turning back (Cone 2011: xvi). And in June of 1968, two months after Dr. King was assassinated, he felt compelled to start writing what became his first landmark book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, published the next year in 1969. He quickly followed it up the next year with a sequel, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

In these two books (and many others to follow over the years), Cone built a powerful case that authentic Christian theology is always in alignment with the liberation of oppressed groups. And here’s where the widening circles of concern come

in. It would have been enough if Cone had spent his career writing theology out of the Black male experience. But he remained remarkably open throughout his long career as a Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City to widening his circles of care, compassion, and inclusion.

I'll give you three quick examples. First, Cone came to realize that his Black Liberation Theology was too focused on the United States and failed to account for related Liberation Theology movements in Latin America. To widen the circle, he invited the Peruvian Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez to co-teach a course with him at Union on "Theology from the Underside of History" (Cone 2018: 115). Cone also invited Paulo Freire, the Brazilian author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to write the preface to the 1986 edition of Cone's book *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone literally gave the first word to the perspective he had previously neglected.

Cone also realized his work had failed to account for the insights of womanist theology, which focus on Black women's experience. Through reading womanist theology such as Delores Williams's classic book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Cone changed his theology of atonement. As with many male theologians before him, he had overemphasized Jesus's suffering on the cross as central and salvific instead of emphasizing that what can actually save us is living a life dedicated to social justice—of which Jesus's life is an example (Cone 2018: 121-123).

Finally, there is a powerful story that parallels the anger Cone felt as a seminary student when his white Christian history professor was oblivious to the Black experience. The difference is that in this version Cone is the *heterosexual* professor oblivious to the LGBTQ+ experience. Twenty years after Cone yelled at his own professor, Cone himself was teaching a "Foundations in Christian Theology" class when a gay student yelled at him: "Dr. Cone, you don't know a...damn thing about the gay experience!" That's a significant challenge, and it would have been understandable if Cone had reacted harshly. But unlike his own professor who reacted poorly at first to Cone's accusations of racism, Dr. Cone was able to draw from his own experience of having once been a seminarian, and affirm that student's protest.

He said to the student, "You are right," and confessed that he did have a lot to learn in some areas. Most importantly he added:

Your anger is how theology begins. It starts with anger about a great contradiction that can't be ignored.... You must use it to speak out and to write as creatively as you can, about the fire burning in you. Go to the root of your experience and articulate what no one can express except people who hurt like you. That's what I did. You can do it too" (108-109).

The beautiful epilogue is that this student went on to write a doctoral dissertation on the gay experience and eco-justice, and is a prominent social justice activist today (111).

I would be remiss, however, if I stopped here, because the legacy of James Cone is still playing out today. There are many examples we could explore among the huge number of people Cone mentored and influenced over the years, but one of the most interesting is The Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock, the recently elected United States Senator from Georgia, who was born in 1969, the same year that Cone published his landmark book *Black Theology and Black Power*.

Cone was Warnock's doctoral advisor when he earned a Ph.D. In turn, when Cone was dying in 2018, he asked Warnock to deliver his eulogy. And let me pause here to highlight a few powerful historical echoes. Since 2005, Warnock has been the senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was co-pastor from 1960 until his assassination in 1968. And when Warnock ascended to the pulpit at Riverside Church in New York City to deliver the eulogy for James Cone, he was standing where, on April 4, 1967—one year to the day before he would be killed—Dr. King delivered what may be his most important sermon, titled "Beyond Vietnam."

And as Warnock took on the task of speaking to Cone's life and legacy, he was aware of the profound historic resonances. At the heart of his eulogy was that "**Cone's legacy is truth-telling.**" In Warnock's words:

We need that today. Truth-telling amid the mendacious character of hegemonic power as it destroys the earth, and tells lies about oppressed people, and lies about people of color, and lies about the poor, and lies about women, and lies about [our] LGBTQ [siblings], and lies about a

white Jesus and a male God. And if a nation keeps on telling lies about itself, it will eventually elect a liar-in-chief.

One of the boldest ways that Warnock has lived out Cone's truth-telling legacy occurred during the 2008 Presidential campaign, when he refused to denounce Rev. Jeremiah Wright after the video of one of Wright's post-9/11 sermons was taken out of context. (As you may recall, the Obama family had been members of Trinity United Church of Christ, an 8,000 member congregation in Chicago, where Wright was the minister.) Cone was a major influence on Jeremiah Wright, and during the controversy, Warnock said publicly that, "We celebrate Rev. Wright in the same way that we celebrate the truth-telling tradition of the Black church, which when preachers tell the truth, very often it makes people uncomfortable."

As I begin to move toward my conclusion, I'll add one more important piece of this story. Following the retirement of Jeremiah Wright, the new minister of Trinity UCC is The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, who was born in 1970, the same year that Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* was published. His father, Otis Moss, Jr. worked with Dr. King in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and took over as minister of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta after Dr. King's assassination.

As I've traced these various strands of Black liberation history, I hope you are getting a sense of the broad impact of Dr. Cone's life and legacy, and how they connect back to Dr. King and many others, and forward to Senator Warnock, Rev. Moss and many others; a are powerful manifestations of what our UU Seventh Principle calls the "interdependent web of all existence." As Dr. King said:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.... This is the inter-related structure of reality.

The reason I particularly wanted to bring up Rev. Moss is to give you another profound example of how James Cone's legacy is continuing to play out today. In 2011, Cone published another in a long line of powerful books. This one was titled *The*

Cross and the Lynching Tree. (Keep in mind that Cone's father was threatened with lynching for his attempt to integrate the local public school.) And I would like to invite you to watch just a brief, two-minute clip of Rev. Moss preaching a sermon inspired by Cone's book after the tragic killing of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. This sermon is a powerful example of Black Liberation Theology today:

Video

As Cone wrote devastatingly in his book: "One can lynch a person with a rope or a tree" (163), the equivalent taking of a life can happen with a gun, with the New Jim Crow assault of mass incarceration, or the racially-biased enforcement of the death penalty (2018: 136-137).

So what do we do differently to get a different result? Here's the conclusion James Cone reached at the end of his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*: "If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation there is hope 'beyond tragedy'" (169).

And that brings us full circle to our three stages. **Repentance** and **reparations** mean more than *denouncing* the first stage of conscious, intentional White Supremacy. As we've explored, stopping there results in an unconscious, unintentional perpetuation of wWhite Supremacy culture. As Robert Jones writes in a passage that could easily describe the Southern Baptist Congregation I grew up in:

Even as Jim Crow laws have been struck from the books in the political realm, most white Christian churches have reformed very little of their nineteenth-century theology and practice, which was designed, by necessity, to coexist comfortably with slavery and segregation. As a result, most white Christian churches continue to serve, consciously or not, as the mechanisms for transmitting and reinforcing white supremacist attitudes among new generations. (186)

As a nation, we need to take that third step of conscious, intentional multiculturalism that institutionalizes the centering of historically oppressed groups—which is part of why we voted here at UUCF to add an 8th UU Principle: "Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our

actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

Now, as I prepare to conclude, I want to take the risk of sharing with you what is perhaps the single most devastating sentence in Robert Jones's book on the legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity. Remember that Jones is a sociologist of religion, whose organization PRRI does polling and data analysis about contemporary religion. And the summary of his data on race and religion today is that,

If you were recruiting for a white supremacist cause on a Sunday morning, you'd likely have more success hanging out in the parking lot of an average white Christian church—evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, or Catholic—than approaching whites sitting out services at the local coffee shop. (185)

By no means is that intended as an attack on all Christians. To be clear, Jones identifies as a Christian, and wants to help co-create a more anti-racist Christianity. But the truth is that folks growing up in majority (or exclusively white) congregations are usually, at best, in that second stage of unconsciously perpetuating White Supremacy culture. So our challenge is to intentionally widen the circle of our concern, care, and compassion—to change our systems, structures, and institutions to be accountably anti-racist.

In that spirit, I'll close by inviting you to hear the words emblazoned on the wall of The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. This museum is dedicated to victims of White Supremacy. "It is our nation's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved Black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence." I urge you to visit if you get a chance.

Toward the exit of the museum, you'll find these words—beneath memorials for people who were lynched—words that call us both to an honest reckoning with our past and to a more emancipated future for all:

For the hanged and beaten,
For the shot, drowned, and burned.

For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized.

For those abandoned by the rule of law.

We will remember.

With hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice.

With courage because peace requires bravery.

With persistence because justice is a constant struggle.

With faith because we shall overcome.

There is hope on this Easter Sunday that we can overcome if we collectively commit to co-creating a future with peace, liberty, and justice—not merely for some—but for all. A future of collective liberation, in which we all get free.

Works Cited

Cone 2011: Lynching

Cone 2018: Said

Cone 1969: