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# James H. Cone, founder of black liberation theology, dies at 79

By WASHINGTON POST  
MAY 04, 2018 | 2:15 PM



The Rev. James H. Cone, shown in 2017, sought to reconcile the fiery cultural criticism of Malcolm X with the Christian message of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (Filip Wolak / Union Theological Seminary)



In the late 1960s, the Rev. James H. Cone later recalled, "I was within inches of leaving the Christian faith." He had spent a decade immersed in theology — poring over the teachings of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, studying for a

doctorate and closely following the sermons and speeches of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose nonviolent civil rights tactics were informed by his ministry.

Then he heard Malcolm X.

The Black Power leader proclaimed that "Christianity is the white man's religion," one that encouraged African Americans to wait patiently for a "milk and honey" heaven, and he called for blacks to fight for their rights "by any means necessary." His assassination in 1965, followed by the killing of King three years later, plunged Cone into what he described as a full-fledged spiritual crisis.

To gather his thoughts, he traveled to Little Rock, Ark., and all but locked himself inside the church office of his older brother, also a minister. Six weeks later, he emerged with a new perspective, dubbed black liberation theology, that sought to reconcile the fiery cultural criticism of Malcolm X with the Christian message of King.

Through books such as "Black Theology & Black Power," "A Black Theology of Liberation" and "God of the Oppressed" (1975), he "changed the way we do theology," said the Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan where Cone was long on the faculty.

Cone, she said, centered the Gospels on racial justice and later on the struggles for gender and class equality. "He could not understand how anyone could do Christian theology in America without talking about the black struggle for freedom, and how anyone could do Christian theology in general without talking about the oppressed."

"When crucifixion is at the center of the faith," said Douglas, who is also dean of Union's Episcopal Divinity School, "you have to talk about the crucified classes of people."

Cone, who upended the U.S. theological establishment when he argued that God had a "radical identification" with African Americans and poor peoples across the globe,

died April 28 at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, Douglas said. He was 79.



In his writings, Cone suggested that God was black — an argument that was famously advanced by his 19th century predecessor Henry McNeal Turner, who spurned the traditional image of Jesus as a blond, white-skinned prophet.



Cone "wasn't arguing that God was physically black, or that only black people were righteous," said Anthony B. Pinn, a religion professor at Rice University. "He was arguing that Christians — white, black, purple, red — have to be committed to racial justice. That whites in their churches have to be committed to racial justice, or they need to call themselves something different."

While Cone's theology was founded on a King-like embrace of love and acceptance, he was fiercely critical of white churches and theologians, telling the New York Times in 1969 that "white theology is basically racist and non-Christian." He once called himself "the angriest theologian in America" and explained that he was driven to rage by the failure of leading white theologians to forcefully condemn institutional racism, and especially lynching.

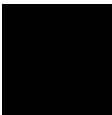
James Hal Cone was born in Fordyce, a small town in central Arkansas, on Aug. 5, 1938. He was raised in nearby Bearden and said he was called to the ministry at 16.

After receiving a doctorate in divinity from Northwestern University in 1963, Cone was teaching at Adrian College in Michigan when his political views began to shift toward the Black Power movement.

According to Dwight N. Hopkins, a theology professor at the University of Chicago, Cone was the first to publish books of liberation theology — works "that said the heart of Jesus Christ ... is liberation of the economically poor." He was soon followed by Catholic theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, who called for the emancipation of the poor in Latin America.

"Hope," Cone told the Jesuit magazine *America* in 2006, "is found where two or three small groups of people ... become willing to bear witness to the Gospel's transcending

racial bonding and move toward human bonding. We need some signs of that transcending. Where will they come from if not from the church?"



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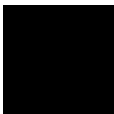


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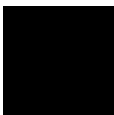
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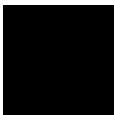
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