The intense media skepticism surrounding Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the black pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago and arguably one of the most public adherents of black liberation theology today, initially compelled me to study the theology further. I noticed some hypocrisy in the American public sphere, which has long been awash in Christian rhetoric and aims, in its refusal to engage with this interpretation of Christianity. Wright’s defiant and racialist language was portrayed as distinctly other, outside the acceptable realm of mainstream political and religious discourse. The American public proved unable to tolerate a black Christianity that evidenced dissent and defiance, questioning the validity of the American political project. There seemed little public patience for a sustained engagement with this particular black liberation theology, despite widespread affirmation of Martin Luther King Jr.’s employment of a politically transformative Christianity. Through the course of my summer study, I sought to gain a greater and more nuanced understanding of the particularities of black liberation theology and its lack of acceptance in the American mainstream.

Wright’s rhetoric represents a political theology in that his politics and religion inform and complement one another. His specific black liberation theology, informed by the theology of James H. Cone, uses a transformative Christianity for social and political empowerment and to further progressive causes. James Cone stresses the immanence of a historically liberating God who favors the oppressed. As God freed the Israelites from Pharaoh’s bondage, God will liberate the oppressed blacks in American society. This insistence on the centrality and connectivity of biblical history and African-American people cultivates a historical race consciousness, my central point of study this summer. Cone understands God to respond to the oppression of African-Americans – including the legacy of slavery and the realities of poverty, imprisonment, and cultural genocide – and liberates the oppressed accordingly, leading African-Americans out of a modern Babylon. Furthermore, Cone cultivates a positive race consciousness to counter what he identifies as the existential absurdity of black existence in America. The centrality of blackness to his theology avoids a reductive and essentialized identity, a potential pitfall of many black political ideologies, including militant forms of black nationalism. Such a black essentialism poses a problem for race-based political ideologies in that it conflates a homogenous black identity, which does not reflect the heterogeneity of the African-American population. Avoiding this essentialism, Cone constructs a black identity centered on the ontology of oppression; identification with the oppressed, based on the black experience in America, is the norm of his political theology. His identity includes a dialectical historical consciousness, which, according to Wilson Moses and Laurie Maffly-Kipp, helps to sustain a culture, merging sacred and secular histories, for the ultimate project of liberation.

Through the summer, I sought to contextualize Cone by comparing his theology to other black ideologies, including black nationalism and feminism, as well as placing Cone in conversation with his mainly womanist critics. According to Michael Dawson’s Black Visions, most black ideologies remain skeptical toward the American political project. Cone combines this skepticism with a faith in God’s liberation that underscores his optimism, which, according to David Howard-Pitney, qualifies Cone’s theology as a jeremiad, in the tradition of Martin King and John Winthrop. I mainly examined the centrality of Cone’s historical race consciousness, as well as his reliance on biblical history in forming his visceral black dialectic of liberation. According to Mark Chapman’s Christianity on Trial, Cone’s most important ideological sources are Malcolm X and Martin Luther King; Cone responded to the former by reclaiming Christianity from the oppressive control of white supremacy, reimagining it in terms of black liberation. Black liberation theology further adopts King’s deeply Christian political theology by rekindling the American jeremiad tradition, which criticizes America in light of its empty promises to its citizen. This critique is framed in apocalyptic terminology, emphasizing divine judgment through constant referrals to biblical precedent. Some womanist critics of black liberation theology, including Delores Williams and Emilie Townes, highlight its masculinized perspective and attempt to further re-imagine a more inclusive liberating black discourse through the cultivation of a counter-memory.

Black liberation theology relies upon a deep historical race consciousness that is absent from American consciousness today, which might explain its lack of toleration in the public sphere. Compared to the prosperity gospel and positivistic religious rhetoric of today, black liberation theology combines a harsh critique of America with an ultimate faith in liberation. Now, religious discourse lacks a deep historical race consciousness, instead attempting to build a liberatory dialectic on the wet sand of pragmatism and prosperity. From Tommie Shelby’s formulation of a “thin blackness” to the gospel of success resounding from the nation’s pulpits, there is an ignorance of Cone’s deep historical consciousness coupled with his unabashedly black identity, which grounds his commitment to liberation. Cone’s rhetoric is so compelling because it is not pragmatic, but categorical – his ontological black identity and his insistence on biblical precedent forms a liberating jeremiad that, for reasons I hope to pursue further, has failed to remain relevant today.

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