

Faculté de Théologie protestante de Paris

*Laudatio* for Professor James H. Cone

Upon the occasion of his honorary doctorate, *honoris causa*

Vendredi 28 mai 2010

We are very honoured today to award a doctorate *honoris causa* to Professor James Cone.

This doctorate honours one of the most unique, influential and vibrant theological *oeuvres* of the twentieth century. From his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, in 1969, to his most recent, *Risks of Faith*, in 1999, James Cone has written a major chapter in contemporary theology; that of Black theology. A theology of liberation initially for the blacks of the United States of America, the theology of the struggle against oppression and for the emancipation from servitude. A theology of rage that denounces racism and social injustice and especially the religious support for them by the God of the white majority, this God of social immobility and the colonial spirit. A theology of rage and also a theology of hope which, far from being more alienating, a drift into the surreal, is in fact the expression of renewed confidence in the capacity to act and to effect social transformation. *Black Theology* is born of experiencing racism. This is what James Cone was subjected to, born in 1938 in Arkansas, and which he describes in the preface to *Risks of Faith*:

"I attended segregated schools, drank water from 'colored' fountains, saw movies from balconies, and when absolutely necessary white adults from the back doors of their homes." (*Risks of Faith*, p. IX)

Black theology was also born of the blues and of Gospels, of a world torn between Saturday night and Sunday morning, between the 'music of the devil' and 'the sweet melodies of Jesus', two worlds respectful of each other, each attempting to rise above daily cares. Out of this tension was to come, in 1972, a book called *The Spirituals and the Blues*. *Black theology* was also born of dissatisfaction with the place of anti-intellectualism in black churches, an attitude which, in the name of their friend, companion and saviour Jesus, 'the lily of the valley and the bright and morning star' refuses all reflection and critical distance. Black Theology was also born of the coming together of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, which was so significant for James Cone. He was to combine these 'two voices for liberation' when he saw that Martin Luther King made it possible to retain Christian theology, and Malcolm X made it possible to turn it into black theology. From this combination came a book called *Martin and Malcolm in America, a dream or a nightmare* (1992). This was translated into French as *Malcolm X et Martin Luther King*, published by Labor et Fides in 1993 and re-issued in 2002. Finally, Black theology was born of a return to the Gospel sources, a return evoked by the first line of *Black Theology of Liberation* in 1970: 'Christian theology is a theology of liberation'.

This honorary doctorate honours theological work that has contributed to change America. *Black theology* gave back to African Americans the possibility to be Christians; that is to say to be gripped by a Gospel that speaks again in order to rally *against* injustice and *for* liberation. This theology showed them that God is not colour blind, that the God of Jesus

Christ is a God who takes sides. This God, constantly revealed by means of acts of liberation, is incarnated in Jesus Christ as a black God, as the 'God of the oppressed,' *God of the Oppressed*, his book of 1975 which became a considerable success. His criticism of the Christ of the white majority of racist Churches in America was very strong, this antichrist Christ, instrument and legitimation of religious oppression. Since the 1960s James Cone's thought has given a theological framework to the civil rights movement; in the 1970s it nourished the debates of the great social resistance and protest movements. It enlivened and continues to enliven the preaching in black churches and the church solidarity movement. Through his eleven books, his 150 articles and the considerable influence he has had upon preachers and believers, James Cone's theology has given back to millions of Christians a theological dignity. We also read frequently in the press that James Cone's theology has influenced some of Barack Obama's speeches.

This doctorate honours a theological *oeuvre* that has changed systematic theology. Contrary to what we may have thought, *black theology* is not a theology for the few, and certainly not only for those who are black. James Cone addresses this point at length and in various different ways. This theology is the expression of the particular experiences of blacks, but could not possibly be limited to them. Black theology redefines the whole of theology as, and I quote from *A Black Theology of Liberation*: 'the rational study of the being of God in the world, in the light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospels which is Jesus Christ.' Black theology re-interrogates all the categories of dogma, to which James Cone addresses himself in his second book, in 1970, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, which presents a dialogue as if it is tightly argued between Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Yet if *Black Theology* has changed theology, it is above all because one can no longer do theology the way one did it before, once one has read Cone. He brings theology out of its own exclusive approach in order to confront it with the questions of our time. To put it bluntly, James Cone marks the end of theological innocence. He shows that theology is never pure theology, that the categories it uses are never neutral, and that the systems of belief are never without consequences or social impact. To speak of God, is to speak of the world and to talk about life.

This doctorate honours a theological *oeuvre* that constitutes magnificent preaching. Theology is not here simply at the service of a preaching style, it is not only the development of new language or of the critical moment. This theology is, itself, preaching that is appropriate for telling the Gospel, in other words to give voice to the power of creativity and of the liberation that gives it life, and thereby to redeem, to give us back meaning, and by its capacity to mobilise each person and to give them back the possibility of believing that they are capable of action. The theology of Cone is the theology of rage and of passion, which reminds us of the intensity of biblical prophecy, so critical and so loving, that is shattering in its capacity to compel conversion.

This doctorate honours a theological *oeuvre* that remains to be finished. Above all, James Cone is honoured. This is the twelve honorary doctorate that he has received, but none of these honours would be able to sanctify and embalm his thought in order to neutralise it and get rid of it. James Cone is not the voice of the 1970s and the 1980s. *Black Theology* must be practised always because if God is black, this God calls us again and always to deal with social injustice. It calls upon theologians to come out of the comfort of their libraries, it calls upon priests and ministers to leave the warmth of their sacristies and to call upon Christians to leave behind their habits and their readymade preconceptions: it brings us out into the world to decipher here the transformative and liberating acts of God, and to serve

this justice that Christ incarnates. This theology serves the cause of liberation from all forms of oppression.

Prof R. Picon, dean of the Faculté de théologie protestante de Paris.

Translation by Dr Alison Scott-Baumann