

Black Theology as Critical Theology

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ABSTRACT

The argument of this essay is that James Cone's theology was from the beginning to the end a critical theology. Since its inception and following in the footsteps of James Cone, Black theology has always been simultaneously a critical theology and a critique of theology. Given its paradigmatic social commitments, it follows that, at its most prophetic, Black theology is also a form of social criticism. This is the fundamental shape of Cone's intellectual trajectory. Black theology inherits its critical structure from Cone and through him from the intellectual sources of his theology. These are significant claims to make. In making these claims, the essay argues that Cone's thought stands in a long history of the use of the idea of critique in both Christian thought as well as in western philosophy going back at least to Immanuel Kant.

Introduction

The ideas in this article were long in conception, incubation, and gestation. I have thought and fantasized about the *possibility* of a relationship between Black Theology and the modernist idea of 'critique' for over ten years. I have been fantasizing about writing a book on that relationship.¹ However, this particular article was written in haste at the request of colleagues in South Africa to compose, with other colleagues, a kind of collective requiem for, a solemn remembrance and celebration of, Professor James Cone who passed this year, 2018. Alas, in writing with speed and under the pressure of time, I discovered that prolonged gestation of ideas, and one's confidence in them, does not necessarily translate into good writing or even good expression of what is on one's mind. What follows is a rather tentative and halting attempt to argue that Black Theology is a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', a kind of critical theology because Cone's theology was itself critical theology. To illustrate this, I play with the modernist notion of 'critique'. I claim, without at this point providing much detail and evidence, that Cone's theology is part of a modernist genealogy of critique. Although, critique

¹ Several years ago I outlined the contents of a book on the idea of Black Theology as Critical Theology. But, unhappy at what seemed, and still seems, to me to be Black Theology's overall failure to make significant theoretical advances, I shelved the idea. I was not sure how the proposal to rethink Black Theology through an *apparently* white category of thought would be received.