

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION IN KARL BARTH AND JAMES CONE: KNOWLEDGE,
ENCOUNTER AND THE DISRUPTION OF SOCIAL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

The Doctrine of Revelation in Karl Barth and James Cone: Knowledge, Encounter and
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The doctrine of revelation is not concerned only with the attainment of right knowledge, but with the encounter of God, an event which sets the context for all succeeding epistemological frameworks. By accounting for God's activity with and for the human creature, divine revelation has the capacity to disrupt perceived social orders, which may tend toward social control and oppression. Karl Barth and James Cone are important theological voices within any attempt to reflect on revelation as an event of divine encounter. Both thinkers claim that a true encounter with God in revelation does not offer the human a complete picture of ultimate reality, but instead represents an experience of right relationship, which combats social violence replacing it with a sociality informed by the reality of who God is for creatures. Whether we focus on God's revelation as a 'black event' geared toward liberation, or an event of God's free decision to be for the creature without creaturely initiation, the doctrine of revelation operates as a disruption to social norms allowing new disruptions to continue breaking through socially ordered existence. In considering this train of thought in Barth and Cone, one must finally ask, whether their own revelatory disruptions are once and for all, or a continual experience open to further disruptions of the social norms even

they endorse. It is here that the possibilities of a continually disruptive form of divine revelation may be possible.

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Chapter 1

Divine Revelation: knowledge, encounter and social order

When the German Evangelical Church joined together in composing the Barmen Declaration they focused their attention on what they saw to be a false doctrine, the way in which the State claimed complete social control over the culture at large. "We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well."ⁱ As the authors recognized, this social control was a matter of doctrine and theology, with the Nazi regime using knowledge of God for the purpose of a new oppressive order.

Similarly, the 'Black Power Statement' written by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen in 1966, spoke of their unique struggle against authoritative white knowledge claims and the racial imbalance of power in America. Here, black church leaders claimed their cultural identity as socially valuable, and a resource toward reconsidering dominant ways of knowing in white America.

Each of these statements found a way to highlight how authoritative knowledge claims have been tied up in the production of dominant social orders, with theologians and pastors recognizing God's role as an often-utilized resource in the production of these authoritative epistemologies. Yet despite this tendency for corruption and control, many of these same theologians have reminded us that knowledge of God *also* has the capacity to disrupt dominant social orders.

For this project I will focus on the work of Karl Barth and James Cone, interrogating the ways they see knowledge of God disrupting oppressive social frameworks. To do this I will focus primarily on their engagement with the doctrine of revelation, highlighting the way this doctrinal conversation puts knowledge of God in the context of divine encounter. Divine encounter as the site of revelation means Christian knowledge does not simply result from the rational pursuit of ultimate things, but results instead from the reality of divine relatedness. For Barth and Cone this means social order and the particularity of our neighbor relationships are reframed through the event of revelation. One cannot speak of the epistemological implications of the doctrine of revelation, without understanding how encounter between God and the human creature reframe social relations in the transfer of *God-knowledge*. In this sense, God-knowledge (or revelation) transforms our perceived social order through an encounter with divine reality.

Here I propose reading the doctrine of revelation not as being in an oppositional relationship to enlightenment rationality, but as a framework for engaging knowledge paradigms through the preceding reality of God, highlighting the way revelation and knowledge function in relationship to the creaturely realities entangled within their reception. In this introductory chapter I will offer two examples of the way Protestant theology has dealt with these facets of revelation (knowledge and encounter), concluding with an explanation of how Barth and Cone offer unique insights into divine revelation's existence between these themes.

I. KNOWLEDGE AND ENCOUNTER

Since the beginning of Protestantism and its multiple reformations, revelation was understood not simply as a form of rationality, but a way of 'knowing God' through relation. Martin Luther himself highlighted this by framing the knowledge of revelation through the question: *How does God want to be known?* For Luther, the difference between 'general' and 'particular' revelation was clarified as one became more aware of the way God desired to encounter the human, through Christ.

In general revelation a person comes to an awareness of divine characteristics such as God "has created heaven and earth...is just...punishes the wicked, etc." But general revelation lacks the true knowledge of God, when it misses out on the way God *wants to be known*. This way to knowledge is accessed for Luther in 'particular revelation,' which unveils "...what God thinks of us, what he wants to give and to do to deliver us."ⁱⁱ For Luther, "*God does not want to be known except through Christ...*"ⁱⁱⁱ and it is the capacity not just to know particularities about God or religion, but the opportunity to know God through relational encounter that at least in part, forms the event of a particular revelation.

With time the Christian articulation of divine revelation changed, continuing to balance itself between epistemology and divine encounter. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 18th-19th century offered a unique addition to this doctrinal conversation, grounding revelation inside his analysis of God's relationship to the creature. His claim that the human experiences 'absolute dependence' on God, which elevates both self and God consciousness, was the ground for his understanding of divine revelation outside the confines both of supernaturalism and reductive naturalism.

"...it can indeed be said that God is given to us in feeling in an original way; and if we speak of an original revelation of God to man or in man, the meaning will always be just this, that, along with the absolute dependence which characterizes not only man but all temporal existence, there is given to man also the immediate self-consciousness of it, which becomes a consciousness of God."^{iv}

For Schleiermacher this God-dependence stemmed from a relational ontology, claiming that the self was always in relationship, finding the Infinite through the finite, and the finite through the Infinite. Though Schleiermacher's focus here is often communicated as inherently inward, experiential and individual, one cannot separate his understanding of the inward experience from the relational matrix which participates in creating it.

Schleiermacher thus, transformed conversation regarding the divine/creature relationship through his understanding of 'absolute-dependence,' making revelation an experience of increased consciousness (with the self and Other) in the relational context. Yet despite Schleiermacher's radical influence on what would become Christian liberalism, many theologians pushed back, claiming that he failed to recognize both God's sovereignty and the singularity of God's Word (and revelation), which has a particular content beyond the religious feeling of dependence.

As we come to Karl Barth and James Cone in the 20th century, we find a continuation of these connections between knowledge and divine encounter. Yet unique to our two thinkers is their decision to begin with a radical affirmation of their relationship to God in Christ. Seeing knowledge through the lens of this move, Cone

and Barth use the particularity of Christian knowledge claims to alter the normative social frameworks within their contexts.

III. KARL BARTH AND JAMES CONE

Karl Barth was the most well known Protestant critic of Schleiermacher, famously categorizing his work as 'natural theology.' Barth's concern stemmed from the political crisis of the World War period in Germany wherein he found the church failing to seek God's Word under Christ's lordship, instead identifying itself with secular society seeking theological revelation and social agency through 'natural'/modern means. Barth's entire dogmatic system in turn, began with a theology of the Word of God (which we will discuss in chapter 2) claiming that a response to modern Christian liberalism and natural theology generally, had no option but to start with God's prevenient action for the creature as seen in the revelation of God's Word.

With James Cone (who we turn to in chapter 3), the catalyst of Black Liberation Theology in America, we have another expression of Christian theology and divine revelation stemming from political and social crisis. The racial struggle in America had been fought throughout the country in a number of public domains, yet constructive theological work stemming from the black experience was left open for Cone to develop a new systematic Christian expression. For Cone, divine revelation was inherently partial toward the poor and oppressed, and the rhetoric of this Word offered by God would take on the embodiment of the oppressed people it sought to empower.

In Barth and Cone the main voices of this project, we encounter two thinkers who revolutionized Christian understandings of divine revelation. In doing so, both

theologians prioritized the reality of God's agency toward the human creature, while simultaneously disrupting the social domination of oppressors who inside and outside the church, catalyzed events of social/political crisis. The interaction between social/political crisis and claims to revelation and Christian knowledge, force us to consider each thinker's claims in light of the situations requiring such a strong theo-ethical response.¹

IV. REVELATION AND SOCIAL ORDER

As we trace the work of James Cone and Karl Barth in relationship to the doctrine of revelation we will find that while they have methodological differences, each works from the assumption that *divine revelation disrupts our perceived social order*.

As the title of Barth's brief text claims, revelation is the materiality of a *God in Action*. This activity, according to Barth, which is attributed fully to God's own decision, can be trusted as a just and responsible activity not dependent on the perceived control of humanity. In this sense, the disruption of our perceived social order is dependent on the human reconciliation with God, a reconciliation which through its grace, necessitates a new cosmological order.

James Cone on the other hand disrupts the dominant social order of white supremacy in America by offering the preferential language of chosenness for the betterment of oppressed black communities. The controversial nature of Cone's claim

¹ By theo-ethical I mean constructive theological work, which at the very least through its rhetorical expression, develops a deep ethical responsibility. I do not mean to conflate theology and ethics here as both thinkers recognize the need for a distinction between these two disciplines.

to a 'black event' of revelation does not stem from its chosen status alone, as this is a method employed by Christianity for centuries. Instead it is contentious as it claims special or chosen status for the welfare of poor and oppressed black communities in America, whose experiences challenge much of what is foundational in the western Christian tradition.

In Barth and Cone, divine revelation disrupts social order, balancing knowledge and relational encounter in the disclosure of God to the world. Both, revelation as a black event and revelation as the prevenient initiative of God, seeks a transformation of our social position in relationship to other creatures and God. Through these articulations of divine revelation, subtle ecclesial oppression and social control are challenged as each thinker considers God's activity amidst oppressive social structures.

In the following pages I will set forth the way in which Karl Barth and James Cone disrupt social order through their doctrine of revelation, each balancing the embodied relationship between creatures and God and creatures and creatures. Chapter 2 will guide us through the work of Karl Barth and his emphasis on the sovereignty and initiative of God. Barth's claim that revelation is the activity and self-expression of God not defined by human reception, allows the reader to consider how God's reconciliation with the human (through Jesus Christ) is the medium through which social order is transformed and justice achieved. Barth transforms Christian theologies of revelation with a renewed emphasis on divine relational encounter by

prioritizing revelation as primarily an event where God meets humanity, making any increase in knowledge responsible to this prevenient (and Christological) moment.

In chapter 3, we consider revelation as a 'black event' in the work of James Cone. Here a contextual methodology allows Cone to claim that in divine revelation God shows God's partiality for the poor and oppressed black community. This rhetorical device allows us to see the interconnection of the creaturely relationship to God, and the creaturely relationship to other creatures grounded in radical particularity through a hermeneutics of liberation.

Having looked particularly at each of our two thinkers, chapter 4 takes a turn considering the way crisis informs both theological systems. In this chapter I ask how social/political crisis motivates a new Christian revelation and how reconciliation functions as the hope of revelation in crisis? From there I will speak to some of the limits of a doctrine of revelation stemming from social/political crisis.

Chapter 5 will continue from this space by engaging the way these two understandings of divine revelation relate to the broader reconciliation of the world. I will consider what capacity these articulations have not just to disrupt social order, but to reconsider social order beyond their own scope in light of divine encounter and knowledge. Here I will enter into dialogue with the *Cosmopolitan Theology* of Namsoon Kang, pursuing revelation's engagement with the particular and the universal. The final concern of this project centers on this question of a new understanding of social order. I will consider the critique of social order by the revelation theology of Cone and Barth, questioning whether the goal of these accounts is a new 'order,' or a different relational

structure capable of being continually disrupted by the revelatory event of divine encounter and Christian knowledge.

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Chapter 2

Revelation and Divine Encounter in the Theology of Karl Barth

"*God is.*"ⁱ

If God is the starting place, the primary actor in the event of revelation, then any knowledge gained from this experience will not stem from enlightenment rationality or an existential experience of 'absolute dependence.' Instead, if one truly begins with the assumption that 'God is' and 'God does,' then *God*, must be trusted more than the epistemological capacity of humans alone. For Karl Barth, revelation is God's decision to reveal Godself outside the limits or parameters of human experience. This framework takes its starting place not from the state of human existence, but from the assumption of God's ontological reality. God for Barth is not an intellectual exercise but a reality and encounter. In the event of revelation, God encounters the human creature making God known through the event of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. This means that one encounters God through revelation not by a fervent intellectual or existential struggle over *who* God is, but instead by a recognition of (and response to), the fact *that* God is.

From this foundation we will consider Barth's doctrine of revelation, highlighting the way in which divine revelation centers on the experience of divine encounter by the creature. If as I mentioned previously the doctrine of revelation disrupts our perceived social order, Barth accomplishes this task by removing the capacity for human mastery over divine mystery, calling the Church to respond to God's act of revelation in Christ. Through Barth divine revelation is seen not simply as an

increase in knowledge for the community, but as a relational (yet nonreciprocal) event of divine encounter by the human creature.

I. NATURAL THEOLOGY

Barth's theology is well known for its opposition to 'natural theology,' or the way in which knowledge of God is capable of being understood through natural/creaturely means. For Barth, the faulty sense that one's ultimate projections lack corruption necessitated a methodological reversal. A belief that as he saw it was affirmed in the reality of Nazi Germany and the complicit German Church whose enlightenment rationality and pursuit of ethics failed to speak truth to the power of a totalitarian German regime. Speaking of neo-orthodox theology after the 19th century 'natural' theologians who relied heavily on natural science, philosophy of history and modern technology, Barth said, "Modern man can no longer impress us, as he impressed them, in the light of his performances in this century."ⁱⁱ It was through the human projections of truth and social order that Germany was plunged into social chaos of Nazism, and for Barth, a reminder of God's sovereign activity in the world was the only theological move capable of removing corruption in a society accepting the lordship of a new Caesar.

It is in this concern over natural theology where Barth found an affinity for the likes of Feuerbach and others. For Feuerbach like Barth, anthropocentric projections were a religious reality. "Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God

is self-knowledge."ⁱⁱⁱ Despite their agreement on this point, the differences between Barth and Feuerbach came not in this initial critique, but in the response to it.

Anthropocentrism was no doubt a foundational problem, yet according to Barth it was the Christian's role to respond by affirming God's sovereign claim over divine self-disclosure. In this move Barth put a Reformed spin on Feuerbach's initial claim while at the same time forcing all subsequent Christian thinkers to consider whether revelation precedes human reason through God's freedom.

II. REVELATION AND THE WORD OF GOD

Not only does Barth's response to natural theology necessitate a return to the sovereign God as central but it also forces him to begin his dogmatic project with the reality of the Word of God as known through God's self-revelation. To begin with the revelation of the Word of God was Barth's way of recognizing that any theological reflection had been preceded by God's desire for the creature in Jesus Christ. This act of 'being for' is the doctrine of revelation, wherein through this event God's relational disposition is made manifest in the world. Though testimony and confession by the Church make an attempt at transmitting God's revelation it cannot be guaranteed to do so, as the foundation of revelatory communication is, "an event of the free and sovereign activity of God toward man."^{iv}

Clarifying how this figures into the Trinity is helpful in understanding Barth's use of the doctrine. As I stated, it is God (commonly known as 'Father'/'Mother' etc.) who chooses to disclose Godself to the world in complete freedom. Jesus Christ then is not conflated ontologically with God, but takes on a unique identity as the act or content of

the revelation which God has chosen to disclose. Christ then as the Word of God is always at the center of the revelation as the manifestation of God in full-blooded history. But if this is the case, the question then arises for Christians, whether God's revelation in Christ is simply an act of memory as creatures try to remember the historical event of revelation farther and farther into the future. Pneumatology for Barth seems to come into play here, reminding the Church that revelation of Jesus Christ by God, happened in history yet at the same time *happens* in the present. This is the indwelling of the Spirit, which in the creaturely choice of faith becomes the gift of God to become people of God. "The Spirit bloweth where He listeth. It is indeed not a natural condition of man for him to have the Spirit; it will always be a distinction, a gift of God. What matters here is, quite simply, belonging to Jesus Christ."^v

Revelation is Jesus Christ and Christ is the limit of all revelations which is clarified in Barth's threefold form of the Word of God. In the threefold form, the most direct encounter with God happens in the Word of God, *revealed*. To experience the revelation of God's Word is to encounter God and have responded in faith. Yet the Word of God is not just revealed, it is also written (scripture) and proclaimed (preached/spoken). The written and proclaimed forms are not in themselves encounters with the revelation of God unless they truly become unified with the Word of God's revealed status. This can be clarified or confirmed as these forms bring attention to the way God is known in the event of Jesus Christ.

"The Bible, then, is not in itself and as such God's past revelation, just as Church proclamation is not in itself and as such the expected future revelation...The

Bible, speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word, bears witness to past revelation. Proclamation, speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word, promises future revelation. The Bible is God's Word as it really bears witness to revelation, and proclamation is God's Word as it really promises revelation."^{vi}

Ultimately, revelation is not simply a new epistemology for the chosen but an event of divine encounter that through the response of faith, opens up access to relationship with the transcendent divine and a new social order in light of God's revelation. Scripture and proclamation in themselves do not guarantee the Word of God will be revealed, but instead they remain important mediums uniquely capable of being a conduit for such revelations.

III. THE KNOWLEDGE OF REVELATION

Despite the fact that revelation for Barth is not focused on developing a new pure religious rationality, in the encounter of God through revelation knowledge still holds an important place. Knowledge here is understood in terms of how God gives Godself to be known, as opposed to the way in which humans discover what knowledge of God is possible through their own initiative. Though one may know God as an object, observing characteristics of the divine through a human curiosity or intuition, the creaturely recognition of God as an active subject is key to understanding the knowledge Barth finds compatible with revelation in Christ.¹ As Geoffrey W. Bromiley has put it:

¹ "What man can know by his own power according to the measure of his natural powers, his understanding, his feeling, will be at most something like a supreme being, an absolute nature, the idea of an utterly free power, of a being towering over everything." Barth, Karl (2011-11-09). *Dogmatics in Outline* (SCM Classics) (p. 23). Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition.

“While God posits himself as the object of knowledge before whom we stand, he always remains the subject too. In this sense the subjectivity of the knowledge should certainly be given prominence, that is, with a reference to God as subject. As subject, God confronts us, shows himself to us and opens our eyes to see him so that we may truly know him as God.”^{vii}

The context of knowledge according to Barth stems from the reality that in God’s freedom God has chosen to be for the creature, affirming Kevin Vanhoozer’s statement that, “Theology’s task therefore is not to formulate human thoughts about God but to explicate God’s thoughts about us.”^{viii} Behind the event of revelation is the God who is an active subject pursuing creatures outside the bounds of human comprehension. As Barth says himself, “God is always the One who has made Himself known to man in His own revelation, and not the one man thinks out for himself and describes as God.”^{ix}

If we accept Barth’s assumption that any knowledge of revelation stems from God’s initiative as opposed to a successful epistemological quest by the human, then a few important implications will follow. Here we see four detailed implications of framing revelatory knowledge through God’s subjectivity, further clarifying what it means for God to reveal and creatures to ‘know’ thanks to God’s revelation in complete freedom.

1. Certitude: **The knowledge of revelation must breed ‘certitude’.**

What does Barth mean by certitude? And what must one be certain of? As cringe-worthy as Barth’s claim to certitude may seem, his use of the term articulates a theological nuance distinct from the overzealous dogmatism so prevalent in religious

discourse. When Barth says the knowledge of revelation begins with certitude, he is not saying that one must come to a rational justification of the Divine that is impermeable by outsiders. It is not pure rational integrity that creates certitude but dramatic encounter with God in the event of God's self-disclosure (revelation).

"Knowledge of revelation does not always begin with clarity. It may increase...however, diminish also in clarity. But under all circumstances, **it begins with certitude**. Either God has spoken or He has not spoken...Innumerable human questions may arise in the face of this divine presence. But every one is related to the answer which has already been given in the revelation of His presence. Certitude has the first and last word, not as our certitude but as the certitude of God."^x

The question implied here is: *has God spoken?* The details and implications of this Word may increase or decrease in clarity, but whether God has spoken need not be so volatile. The rational doubt that says 'I need an apologetic,' seeks a natural answer incapable of coming from the event of divine encounter in revelation.

2. Singularity: **The knowledge of revelation is singular.**

Revelation is one event with one content. "Knowledge of revelation may be interrupted. It may even cease altogether. It may be bartered away for false knowledge and vain revelation. But, **wherever it takes place, it possesses the character of singularity.**"^{xi} A person does not choose between a multiplicity of revelations but instead decides for or against *the revelation* of the God who is for us in Jesus Christ. In this choice all other revelations which seem unique and varied, must be viewed within the limits of the way God is known in Jesus Christ.

3. God/Human: **The knowledge of revelation shows the God/human distinction.**

In the event of revelation humanity may be opened up to a variety of experiences due to an encounter with God, but the separation between the creature and God must remain. This is where we begin to see Barth clarify that the 'knowledge of revelation' does not mean Christians are given an epistemological commodity to be contained by people. Though there is a particularity and/or exclusivity in Barth's doctrine of revelation, it is not through Christian ownership of rational truth propositions, but instead is through the reality of an encounter with the God who speaks a Word for the creature through Jesus Christ.

"Knowledge of revelation may be surrounded and accompanied by a rich variety of human fate...For revelation concerns itself with man...But there remains...**the world-wide difference existing between, and separating, God and man**...There is not another moment in time, not another place in all the world, which offers less opportunity for the temptation of mixing and fusing man and God than where God and man really find each other: in God's revelation."^{xii}

This also clarifies how though a relational event between God and creatures occurs in the encounter of revelation, this relation is not reciprocal. The ontological (and in turn epistemological) divide between the two necessitates God's prevenient action, which is not evenly balanced by human participation.

4. Miracle of Revelation: The knowledge of revelation stems from God's initiative.

Revelation is a miracle, for it is a concrete event stemming from God's sovereign action.

“Knowledge of revelation can and must mean, then, a knowledge of the far away, strange, and holy God...**Knowledge of revelation means always an acknowledgement of the miracle by reason of which this meeting takes place**...Knowledge of revelation does not mean an abstract knowledge of a God confronting an abstract man. Rather, it is a concrete knowledge of the God who has sought man and meets him in his concrete situation and finds him there. Revelation is a concrete knowledge of God and man in the event brought about by the initiative of a sovereign God.”^{xiii}

Revelation is not something reasoned to by creatures, but instead is chosen by God stemming from a desire for relational fellowship with the human creature.

As we see in Barth’s doctrine of revelation, knowledge stems ultimately from God’s freedom to be an act for the human creature in Jesus Christ. To say that God has been revealed epistemologically is to say the meaning of whatever knowledge is articulated finds itself to be in coherence with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This revelation highlights God’s desire for fellowship and relation to the human creature which develops a new social order based on the human response to God through faith.

IV. FAITH AND FELLOWSHIP

God’s desire to be for the human creature, thus prioritizing fellowship as a main goal, is central to Barth’s work. This fellowship is not inherent to human nature (as clarified in Barth’s critique of natural theology), nor is it possible due to the way humans and God participate equally in the betterment of the world (as was made clear in Barth’s explanation of the knowledge of revelation). Instead, fellowship is only possible due to God’s decision to be for the creature, which allows for the affirmation of faith.

Faith for Barth, coming out of the Reformed tradition also takes on a unique understanding after prioritizing God's prevenient initiative prior to any human response. This means faith as opposed to simply being about the freedom of humans to choose, is always preceded by God's divine choice. Revelation is the act of Jesus Christ by God's revelation which precedes the human decision to respond. Making God's decision to be for the creature the context for any creaturely response.

"Christian faith is the illumination of the reason in which men become free to live in the truth of Jesus Christ and thereby to become sure also of the meaning of their own existence and of the ground and goal of all that happens."^{xiv} Faith for Barth is the activity of creatures to respond to the prevenient pursuit of God, which has always come prior (through revelation) to the human response. In this response, faith has the effect of leveling the field of power, enabling creatures to recognize their limitations outside the realm of relation to God in Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

Karl Barth's theology of revelation was a direct response to chaos in Germany during the World War period. His theology thus motivated Christians to rethink their existence from the reality of God's existence and the potential of divine encounter. This would radically shift Protestant theology, forcing Christians to consider how starting from God's reality motivates a new social existence and a new capacity for ethics stemming from divine encounter. As we move on to the way divine revelation operates

in the work of James Cone, we will see how this move by Barth influenced all subsequent work (including Cone's). Here Cone will follow Barth in claiming that the black community's relation to God was not a question to be answered, but a reality to be lived into as a response to white supremacy in America.

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Chapter 3

Revelation as Liberation in the Theology of James Cone

The struggle for racial justice in America was in many ways fought between two forms of Christianity. Whether we can fairly dichotomize them as *white* and *black* or not, one thing is clear: predominantly white expressions of Christianity in America did little to affirm black identity, and even the most progressive of these traditions failed to rethink the faith of American Christianity in light of such an affirmation. In this chapter I will present James Cone's engagement with the doctrine of revelation, highlighting the way his work builds on the assumption that black Christians need a constructive *theological* voice to partner with the acts of Christian resistance against harmful white ethics. I will show how in the doctrine of revelation, Cone presents God's self-disclosure (revelation) as a) *contextually located*, b) *communally focused*, and c) *liberation minded*. With these moves James Cone offers us an entry point into a contextual articulation of divine revelation, confronting the dominant theological (white) discourses with "a black event," where God encounters people within the confines of blackness for the sake of liberating the poor and the oppressed.

I. A BLACK DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

If we take for granted the assumption that *divine revelation disrupts our perceived social order*, then social-political crisis (wherein social order has been corrupted) will necessitate a new revelation, and in some senses a new doctrine. Though Cone has been critiqued for dismissing his reliance and/or relationship to the western theological

(and doctrinal) tradition, we must at least recognize that his desire to due away with white/western conceptions of God and revelation stemmed from the hope of developing a doctrine capable of being rethought outside the bounds of dominant racial Christian discourse.

With this in mind, the doctrine of revelation became a necessary place of theological construction for black theologians like Cone in order to articulate theologically the difference between receiving knowledge of God within the context of white control, and the encounter of God within the context of a free and liberated black existence. If in the event of revelation, Christians claim God is unveiled and encountered, black Americans (beginning with the slave communities) were forced to differentiate between the transfer of Christian knowledge by cultural *masters* on the one hand, and the encounter of God through divine revelation on the other. Thus, the transfer of Christian knowledge to slave communities serves as an important example and norm for the correlation between race and Christianity in America.

The interaction between white and black Americans during the time of slavery had deeply religious and specifically Christian themes. Religious rhetoric became an important tool for maintaining power differentials by oppressive whites, while at the same time representing themes of liberation which offered hope to black slaves. This tension is key to the historical narrative of race as Cone sees it in his work. From the perspective of white slaveholders, the decision to offer/articulate Christian identity to slaves was a complicated endeavor. The intention with which powerful white Christians considered this issue helps us recognize that white Americans were not simply

evangelizing black slaves using the white experience as the sole source, as if contextual irresponsibility was their only sin. Instead, as Albert J. Raboteau highlights, the conversion of slaves (and in turn the transfer of theological knowledge) was dependent on the master's belief that Christian identity would not lead toward empowerment or liberation of the slave community.

"From the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans claimed that the conversion of slaves to Christianity justified the enslavement...Yet the conversion of slaves was not a high priority for colonial planters...opposition was based on the suspicion that English law forbade the enslavement of Christians and so would require slaveholders to emancipate any slave who received baptism."ⁱ

For Cone, this intentional act of control shows that even the white master recognized the Gospel's inherent liberating qualities, capable of freeing the oppressed black community when properly revealed and practiced. Despite the potential for liberation within the Christian Gospel, the transfer of Christian knowledge within slave communities was anything but the divine self-disclosure so central in Barth and Cone. This means slaves were forced to discern ways of receiving "something other than what they were given."ⁱⁱ It is at the site of this injustice that James Cone first decided to speak, calling black Christians to the very paradox of authoritative white Christian knowledge, and the self-disclosure of Godself found in the black experience's liberating spirit.

The black resistance seen in the slave communities and the independent church movements represented an alternative way made possible through black religion's

opposition to oppression. Though Cone found energy from these movements, their goal to change American Christian ethics left a constructive theological gap, necessitating a new voice. An unapologetically black American expression of God's work in the world, from the standpoint of those who have suffered slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, police brutality and mass incarceration. In essence what was missing, was the recognition that, "Revelation is a black event...what blacks are doing about their liberation."ⁱⁱⁱ

The blackness of this revelation is key for Cone not only because it can be 'discovered' through investigating black cultural/historical sources, it is central because it stems from the real experience of God and the divine within the black community. Like Barth and Bonhoeffer, God for Cone is not a riddle to be solved but a reality to be explicated. "The reality of God is presupposed in black theology. Black theology is an attempt to analyze the nature of that reality, asking what we can say about the nature of God in view of God's self-disclosure in biblical history and the oppressed condition of black Americans."^{iv}

It may be that Cone presumes God's existence because, "The black church is the single most important institution in the black community,"^v and any theological system that does not make such an assumption would be irrelevant to black America. But if one looks further, they will find that Cone starts with the reality of God's existence because *the experience of encountering the divine* had been a defining reality for the black community and especially the black church throughout its history. Facing the challenge of black existentialists and secularists, who claimed the language of God was inherently

harmful due to its colonizing implications, Cone responded by highlighting the way divine presence had been central to black identity all along, "Black theology must retain God-language despite its perils, because the black community perceives its identity in terms of divine presence."^{vi} Cone's work on black sources such as literary figures, the black arts movement, and the blues and the spirituals have gone even further in representing the existential encounter with divine presence inside much of the black community in America.

Having considered blackness and the way in which race has been internalized within American Christian history, how does one then encounter key doctrinal conversations? How does the doctrine of revelation take on a unique content directly related to the black experience in America?

II. JAMES CONE AND THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

Cone's engagement with the doctrine of revelation is most intentionally explicated in his earlier works: *Black Theology and Black Power*, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and *God of the Oppressed*. It is here that he attempts an outline of the doctrine within the terms of black experience and black theological sources generally, laying a foundation for a contextual understanding of divine revelation.

Biblical Revelation

For Cone, the doctrine of revelation is a biblical doctrine, yet one layered with the theological complexities of an uneven social sphere that resists reductive Biblicism often presented within Protestant history. "The biblical emphasis on God's continuing act of liberation in the present and future means that theology cannot merely repeat

what the Bible says or what is found in a particular theological tradition.”^{vii} As a theologian Cone goes to the Scriptures not to read ‘purely,’ but instead to read theologically by presenting the reader with his own hermeneutical principle that bases biblical exegesis on the Lordship of Christ as liberator, within the realm of the material world and its social/political dimensions.^{viii} The Bible thus functions for Cone toward these ends.¹

As revelation in scripture is dissected further, Cone engages the Old and New Testaments in compatible yet distinct ways. Looking back at the Hebrew Bible, Cone finds a unified divine voice toward liberation. “In the Exodus-Sinai tradition Yahweh is disclosed as the God of history, whose revelation is identical with God’s power to liberate the oppressed.”^{ix} In Old Testament revelation, the revelatory experience is based on looking back at a historical reality (liberation), which is only relevant as it affects the controlling social and political frameworks.

In turning to the New Testament Cone also sees the God of history revealing Godself in liberation, yet he maintains that the new event (and central revelation) of Jesus Christ transcends the limits of history.^x In this case the New Testament’s revelation of Jesus Christ is the most central revelation, as it incorporates the need for revelation to have happened materially, while simultaneously pursuing an eschatological future based around the liberation of the oppressed. It is in his Christological revelation that I read the influence of black determination (and black

¹ As Delores Williams has pointed out, Cone can be read as presenting the Scriptural narrative as homogeneously directed toward liberation, a claim biblical scholars (and womanist scholars) would resist. That said, Cone clearly recognizes that this principle is not simply a logical product of internal (textual) coherence, but instead is also a product of his contextual-location.

power) for Cone. Though one can look back and see that revelation is a real and material revelation that cannot be mistaken for an abstract otherworldly event, the future oriented revelation of Christ empowers black people toward the future of freedom stemming out of one's self-affirmation by God. In this sense Cone's focus on black determination and black power can be best understood as *empowerment* toward freedom stemming from a love of self and one's own community.

Once we recognize Cone's Biblical framework we will see an important methodological affinity with Karl Barth² as he claims, "Christianity begins and ends with the man Jesus-his life, death, and resurrection. He is the Revelation, the special disclosure of God to man..."^{xi} Like Barth, one cannot start a conversation regarding Cone's depiction of divine revelation without taking the Jesus Christ figure seriously, yet the distinction is clear. Though most have shown this difference between Barth and Cone based on Cone's hermeneutical principle of reading liberation into the Christ-figure, I believe it is the centrality of black determination (or empowerment of black identity toward the future) that manifests an equally important difference.

In the revelation of Christ one is empowered to look forward to the potential for black freedom at least in part through the determination of black people. This move for Barth would not do enough to affirm God's pure sovereign/agency in revelation.

² It is important to note that much of Cone's initial critics after his first text centered in on his use of white theologians such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and others. Black thinkers such as Gayraud Wilmore, Cecil Cone and others felt that justifying a black theological position via white German theology undermined much of the task itself. This is not a controversy I engage with much depth, suffice it to say I find that Cone's early work utilizes Barth a) because of his intellectual dominance and b) because Barth represented a system tried and tested within a world in crisis and c) because Cone does not rely on Barth as a primary foundation, but as an important dialogue partner to understand the connection between the black experience and the protestant theological tradition.

Whereas Cone sees revelation as connected to what black people are doing about their own liberation, Barth would need to frame the conversation around the question 'What is *God* doing about liberation?' In this sense Cone is distinct in claiming that the revelation of Christ represents a free future for black people based on what the oppressed are doing for their liberation *in partnership* with God's self-disclosure.³

IV. THREE THEMES IN CONE'S DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

Having grounded Cone's understanding of divine revelation within the context of scripture I will highlight three themes within his articulation of God's self-disclosure. The following statement by Cone offers a helpful insight into the way these three themes operate for him theologically:

"The development of black theology is an attempt of the black community itself to define what the knowledge of God means for its existence in a white racist society. To ask about the epistemological justification of our claim to the knowledge of God is to ask about the concept of revelation. When a religious community is asked, "How do you know that your assertions about God are valid?" the only reply is, "We know because of revelation." Revelation, then, is the epistemological justification of the claims of a community about ontological reality."^{xii}

Contextually Located: Cone's work is not a universal theological project. His hope is not directed toward universal harmony, which tends to imply an alleviation of responsibility for the oppressor. Instead his language and theological constructions are intended to

³I believe Cone agrees with Barth in saying God accomplishes God's purposes (liberation) in history, yet Cone is willing to press language to its limit in hopes of empowering poor and oppressed black people. Barth is not willing to use such a rhetorical move due to concern about 'natural theology.'

offer a 'preferential option' for the oppressed black community. With time Cone's work has included more facets of oppression to include issues of sexism, poverty, sexuality among others, but his engagement with these issues in large part depends on how they fit into black theology's goal of defining knowledge of God within the 'black community' itself. Cone's rhetoric, which emphasizes *blackness* is based on the assumption that God's self-disclosure speaks a particular word to a particular people, in favor of a just future.

Communally Focused: The communal nature of divine revelation is key to Cone's work as he claims that revelation answers the question posed to a community about their understanding of God. Communities according to Cone offer a particular expression of who God is to the world, and it is through their understanding of revelation that they can justify such claims. Revelation therefore is not focused on individual piety, but is based on highlighting the way communities create normative standards based on how they believe God interacts with them as a subculture. Though Cone would nuance his understanding of piety in the face of womanist theology, during his initial articulations of divine revelation he desired to keep white culture from claiming revelation as an act of individual piety, which tended toward a 'logical' euro-orthodox conclusion.

Liberation Minded: If revelation is the contextual definition of who God is, and the communal articulation of why it is so, then the content of this revelation for Cone is the liberation of the oppressed. "...revelation must mean more than just divine self-disclosure. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind in the context of liberation."^{xiii} This claim stems from the need for revelation to be both biblically

grounded and relevant to oppressed blacks. Black power and black determination represented the freedom and liberation orientation by Cone in his early work, but as he has continued writing the complexity of liberation has allowed him to broaden his sources, allowing freedom to take on new forms in the black community.

These three characteristics frame Cone's understanding of divine revelation, yet they are not void of challenge. Though the white church has struggled to articulate legitimate critiques of Cone's work outside of a call for 'more universalism and less contextual exclusivism,' those within his community have been able and willing to dialogue within his own methodological framework, as a sort of 'self-test.'^{xiv} Womanist theology, where we now turn, has engaged Cone's contextuality, communalism, and orientation toward liberation uniquely, by reading it through the lens of black women and the black family, offering a powerful new voice to black theology's respondents.

V. WOMANIST THEOLOGY

As a critique from within Cone's own community, womanist theology struck a powerful cord especially with the work of Delores Williams and her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, in 1993.⁴ Prior to womanism Cone had written off much of the white feminism which came his way, due to the impact white women had on lynching and the overall oppression of blacks in America alongside their male counterparts.

"When I began writing...the problem of sexism was not a part of my theological consciousness. When it was raised by others, I rejected it...as an intrusion upon the legitimate struggle of black people to eliminate racism. I had assumed that

⁴ This is important because Cone was often concerned that critics from outside his community were intending to distract him instead of bring about a further refined theological project.

the rise of women's liberation was a white trick to distract from the injustice...As a Southern black, I could not forget the role that white women played in the lynching of black men."

Despite Cone's initial rejection of white feminism, the black woman's struggle amidst oppression was distinct in that it critiqued both black liberation theology and white feminist theology. In this move its hope was to highlight the way race and gender were nonseparable concerns, while bringing light to the subject of the black family and issues of poverty seen most clearly in the black woman's experience. As Karen Baker-Fletcher has said, "Womanist theology, being contextual theology, commences by considering the revelation of God in the lives of Black folk historically and in the present, particularly in the lives of ordinary women of African descent."^{xv} In turning to "ordinary women of African descent," womanist theology has grounded the experience of revelation in the most oppressed and invisible people within black communities. The result of this disposition has been to focus divine revelation not on the ultimate events of God's pure self-disclosure, but instead on the day-to-day life encounters of God by black women and the black family as a whole.

Delores Williams, a former student of Cone, offers one of the starkest examples of this methodology in speaking of divine revelation.

"...the Christian womanist theologian can refocus the salvation story so that it emphasizes the beginning of revelation with the spirit mounting Mary, a woman of the poor: "...the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee (Luke 1:35). Such an interpretation of revelation has roots in nineteenth-century black abolitionist and feminist

Sojourner Truth. Posing an important question and response, she refuted a white preacher's claim that women could not have rights equal to men's because Christ was not a woman. Truth asked, "Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him!" This suggests that womanist theology could eventually speak of God in a well-developed theology of the spirit."^{xvi}

Not only had Williams rejected black theology's focus on the cross of Christ due to its relationship to surrogacy, but here she rejected the claim that the core of revelation was found exclusively in Jesus. Alternatively, the socio-political location of Mary as a poor women who gave birth to Jesus within a treacherous social landscape, offered a more complex and realistic biblical scene for God's choice to self-disclose. In turn, womanist pneumatology became a key theological emphasis as it represented for many womanists the most empowering manifestation of God within the lives of black families seeking survival in the 'ordinary' experiences of life under poverty and oppression.

Womanist theology engages black theology's doctrine of revelation by focusing not just on black women in general, but on the 'ordinary' experience of black women and the black family. 'Ordinary,' forces black theologians to reconsider their ideal of freedom and liberation in sight of the economic and gendered complexities of racial oppression for black women and the black family.

VI. CONCLUSION

James Cone's claim that revelation is seen within the context of liberation shook up a theological landscape dominated by the likes of Barth and neo-orthodoxy. Cone's

color terminology was a rhetorical confrontation to the white and western theological structures who spoke of revelation under a universalist guise, failing to recognize their own social location. In critique of these voices, a new revelation was necessary that would disrupt the social matrix operating in 'Christian America' by articulating a God who encounters particular (oppressed) communities in their particularity, amidst their suffering.

After reading Cone and Barth through divine revelation, we are directed toward the question: How is revelation connected to situations of social/political crisis? What is unique about social/political crisis that causes it to catalyze such robust articulations of divine revelation? What also, are the pitfalls of developing a theological claim within a contextual moment limited by such clear social/political particularities? To this we turn next.

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Chapter 4

Revelation as Crisis Theology

If revelation occurs in an experience of divine encounter, the context of this encounter varies greatly. As James Cone would bring to the American theological consciousness, black and white experiences of revelation and divine encounter are not to be equated.

“What is the connection between life and theology? The answer cannot be the same for blacks and whites, because blacks and whites do not share the same life... Therefore when the master and slave spoke of God, they could not possibly be referring to the same reality. When slaves spoke of Jesus Christ, they spoke out of the depths of suffering and despair and the pain of `rolling through an unfriendly world.”ⁱ

The disparity between white and black Christian experience was not just a cultural disconnect, but according to Cone, an American racial crisis.

For Karl Barth, crisis was also the context for his work motivating his call to a renewal of Christ’s lordship over all social structures and ways of knowing. During this time Nazism in Europe pursued a utopic future grounded in charismatic leadership, submitting divine encounter (and any hope for revelation) to its own control. As Barth said, “The enterprise of Adolf Hitler, with all its clatter and fireworks, and all its cunning and dynamic energy, is the enterprise of an evil spirit, which is apparently allowed its freedom for a time in order to test our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱ

Simply put, Karl Barth and James Cone's insights regarding the doctrine of revelation came out of a context in crisis. The social threat (and theological lack) of war torn Germany and racist America set the stage for each thinker's work, making their articulations of divine revelation directly implicated in their respective social/political realities. In this chapter I will consider the way Barth and Cone's doctrine of revelation come out of a broader crisis theology. In doing so I will speak about the way each understood reconciliation and the hope of divine revelation amidst crisis. From there I will consider some of the limits to understanding divine revelation within the confines of social/political crisis.

I. REVELATION AND RECONCILIATION

The layers of a person's theology is most clearly understood when one takes into consideration the writer's intended audiences, and in this regard Karl Barth and James Cone are no exception.

For Barth, though the catastrophe of the World War period seemed to necessitate a theology with universal implications, there remained a particularity in his words as they were received by the Christian church in Germany and Europe, communities who were often complicit to the controlling and oppressive structures present there. Barth's theological corrective was intended to destabilize dominant conceptions of religious truth and social order, which found themselves disconnected from the revelation of God in Christ.

Cone on the other hand wrote for black Christians in America, who he saw needing theological resources to consider the Christian faith in light of their own

experience. For Cone, any universal implications of his work would come out of a deep engagement with the particularity of oppressed existence and racial identity, reframing faith in a way that promoted self-love in light of the Biblical narrative and black experience.

For both thinkers the doctrine of revelation was a theological resource capable of responding to a world in crisis, finding hope in the pursuit of a reconciliation that confronts political power and presents an alternative form of sociality in relation to God. This means reconciliation could only be the hope of revelation as it presents an alternative conception of social order and political power in light of divine encounter.

Despite the centrality of 'reconciliation' within Christian discourse, the 'ministry of reconciliation' does not have a unified Christian voice. To understand what one means theologically, we are forced to ask: Who is doing the reconciling? Who is being reconciled with? What are the social-political implications? What are the 'spiritual' implications? How are these interrelated? These concerns both explicitly and implicitly guide Christian perspectives about reconciliation.

Cone's Reconciliation

For James Cone reconciliation is not only a theological resource but also a theological hindrance. "Being free in America," Cone says, "means accepting blackness as the only possible way of existing in the world. It means defining one's identity by the marks of oppression. It means rejecting white proposals for peace and reconciliation, saying, 'All we know is, we must have justice, not next week but this minute.'" ⁱⁱⁱ A point he would come back to throughout his writing was that reconciliation often

represented for white people, the hope of a less extreme and less black expression of Christian identity, a compromise Cone was never willing to concede. In this view, reconciliation would advocate racial integration instead of the black determination and separation Cone proposed.

Cone's concern about 'white' talk of reconciliation came not from his opposition to a future reconciled society, but instead from the reality that reconciliation was often a veiled attempt to suppress black Christian experiences in America. As Paulo Freire writes in his forward to Cone's text, *A Black Theology of Liberation*,

"Some who promote white theology propose an even greater passivity for the oppressed classes by disregarding the link between reconciliation and liberation. For them, reconciliation is nothing more than the capitulation of the dominated to the will of the dominant...Such an elitist concept of reconciliation will find no acceptance in the theology of liberation...of which James Cone is one of the most eloquent representatives."^{iv}

Until white Christians dealt with their desire to resist a Christian unity which comes after an encounter with the realities of white supremacy, there would be no hope for an integrated or reconciled American society. In terms of social order, reconciliation as integration would not go far enough in challenging dominant conceptions of racial identity in America, forcing Cone to move farther toward a radical affirmation of the black identity.

So what particular significance does reconciliation have for Cone and black theology? Reconciliation's significance lies in its content as an act within the black community itself. It is the movement by black people to become reconciled with

themselves in view of their Christian faith and cultural history. This reconciliatory vision intends to empower black Christians to rethink their communal identity in light of the experience of being black in the United States. "Reconciliation, like love, must begin at home before it can spread abroad...reconciliation precedes liberation. For unless we are reconciled with each other and begin to join hands in the struggle of black freedom, we black people will not be able to survive in this troubled world."^v

For Cone, a broad social harmony was only possible following the reconciliation of the self within the black community, an act Cone found integration incapable of achieving. As he has shown in his most recent book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone's method for encouraging this type of reconciling event occurs by observing the interconnections between important symbols and experiences from the history of black people in America (the lynching tree), and the central symbols and beliefs of Christian faith (the cross of Jesus). "I write in order to start a conversation so we can explore the many ways to heal the deep wounds lynching has inflicted upon us. The cross can heal and hurt; it can be empowering and liberating but also enslaving and oppressive."^{vi}

Reconciliation assumes a previous wound and a necessary healing. If we accept this fact, then we will understand Cone's claim that to encourage black Christians to develop their ministry of reconciliation toward the goal of integration and harmony with white culture, means ignoring the ways in which wounds of racial division stem from systemic racism and the dominance of white theological discourse on black Christian faith.

Barth's Reconciliation

For Karl Barth, reconciliation takes on a very different form by focusing first and foremost on the reconciling of the human creature to God through the act of faith. In his work on reconciliation the reader encounters the most comprehensive vision of Barth's Christology. Though Christology is *the* focus throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, it is in these texts on reconciliation that the reader sees how Jesus Christ is...

"God's mighty command to open our eyes and to realize that this place is all around us, that we are already in this kingdom, that we have no alternative but to adjust ourselves to it...To follow His invitation and demand is to find ourselves in the situation already created in Him and in Him already our own situation. That is man's reconciliation with God in the form of the issuing and receiving of the divine direction..."^{vii}

When talking about revelation, Jesus Christ is not simply a revelation for the world, but the act of God in the world. This act, in creating the opportunity for a faithful response by the human creature, necessitates a reconciled state between God and the creature. By framing this act in terms of God's initiative or election, Barth presents God as a Divine agent in pursuit of the human, making Christ the image of a reconciled relationship, affirming his claim that, "Reconciliation is God's crossing the frontier to man."^{viii}

But despite the focus on the reconciliation between God and the human, Barth retains within this framework the priority of ethics and love of the neighbor. For him reconciliation with God levels the field and increases relational accountability to one's neighbors. By giving credit and agency to God in Christ, one cannot accrue any sense of superiority to one's neighbor in light of this deep separation between God and

humanity. For Barth, this has ethical implications grounding social order under God in Christ, while simultaneously promoting neighbor-ethics. Claiming, "...love to God- to the God who reconciles the world to Himself in Jesus Christ-evokes love to the neighbor and the brother. And love to the man who is made a neighbor and a brother in Jesus Christ follows love to God."^{ix} Barth knew that ethics were central to a context in social/political crisis, and he brought them to the forefront through an articulation of God's prevenient action for the human creature.

For Barth and Cone the revelation of God to people has hope beyond claims to insider knowledge. Yet the complexities of their world(s) in crisis compelled them to develop layers of reconciliation, and original theological methods for attaining it. Whether it is reifying the sovereign God as ultimate purveyor of all life, or redeveloping the continuity between one's own experience and the theological language present within one's own community, we see in social/political crisis that divine revelation functions for more than just a commodification of knowledge, instead moving toward the hope of a reconciled world through divine encounter.

III. THE LIMITS OF CONE'S CRISIS THEOLOGY

Developing the doctrine of revelation amidst a situation in crisis also draws its critics. In the work of James Cone two concerns rise to the surface. 1) Revelation as crisis theology may struggle to consider the hope of reconciliation outside the present crisis moment, and 2) Through the fervor of its own revelation, theologians in crisis may fail to highlight other oppressions existing under the surface. Both Karl Barth and

James Cone can be seen as struggling in the face of these concerns, as they highlight new revelations of God in response to cultural crisis.

Victor Anderson offers an important critique of Cone's crisis theology in his book *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. In this text, Anderson pushes back against black theology's identity politics stemming from social crisis focusing on 1) the oppositional nature of black identity over and against white racist identity, and 2) the inability of black theology to transcend the crisis moment in a movement toward flourishing. Says Anderson, "...as long as black theology remains determined by ontological blackness, it remains not only a crisis theology but also a theology in a crisis of legitimation."^x

This critique by Anderson has been articulated by important black theological figures including Gayraud Wilmore, Cecil Cone and others, yet it is with Anderson that we see a direct relationship to transcending limited ontology's by taking seriously the intersections between race and class, gender etc. Anderson claims that Cone's term 'blackness' creates an ontological category too defined by its opposition, limiting its scope.

"For Cone, the essential theological meanings of black experience...all of which represent the black collective consciousness-emerge in a symbolic expressive play of the heroic survivalist culture of the black community, the pain and joy it derives from 'reacting to whiteness and affirming blackness' and 'the mythic power inherent in [its historical] symbols for the present revolution against white racism.'"^{xi}

Ultimately what Anderson presents us with is a critique of Cone's way of understanding 'the black community,' or 'the black collective consciousness,' and it is Cone's desire to

create a deep solidarity amongst black people, which makes this such an important critique. So how would Cone respond to Anderson's concerns? Is black identity for Cone defined or as Anderson says, 'grounded' in white racism? Can Cone's perception of black identity be identified beyond the oppositions of the contemporary racial crisis?

It is important to note that Cone accepted parts of Anderson's concern saying, "We allowed our definition of black theology to be too much a reaction to racism in the white churches and society." This was not just a tendency for Cone's own work, but for the coalition of black Christians who came together in writing the 'Black Power Statement,' an important moment in the history of black resistance whose message was directed in large part toward the white church establishment.^{xii}

Despite agreeing with the reactive critique, it is important to recognize that part of the reason Cone's ontological blackness may seem reactive still, stems from the reality of racial crisis still present in our midst. As present phenomenon such as mass incarceration and police brutality show, white supremacy is still prevalent in our society, necessitating for Cone a theology that accounts for these societal habits. Yet though Cone sees racial crisis continuing presently in America, he has made an effort to develop a more complex understanding of blackness through a rich and expanding interrogation of black cultural sources.

This strategy of understanding 'blackness' through black cultural sources can be seen in Cone's early writing. It was his initial use of black power rhetoric and the work of black intellectuals, which began his cultural framing. Once he expanded black sources to include the blues and the spirituals, the role of the mother, wife and family, and

ultimately the particular critique of womanist theology, Cone was able to nuance 'blackness' and include black experiences beyond the often patriarchal sources of black power and black intellectual culture in the mid 20th century. In this sense like all ontological terms, blackness was an incomplete framework in Cone's earlier work, yet remained fertile ground for more complex forms of resistance to be reflected as he dialogued with critics amidst his own community.

IV. THE LIMITS OF BARTH'S THEOLOGY IN CRISIS

Karl Barth can also be accused of overlooking the potential for unique social oppressions distinct from the ones that confronted him, and James Cone's decision to value experience as a source of liberation theology is one challenge to Barth's stringent critique of natural theology. Barth makes a point of resisting the use of experience to inform knowledge of God in hopes of challenging the creaturely capacity to control divinity for its own social purposes. In the context of Nazi Germany this response is valid, and as I have stated earlier, Barth offered the church an opportunity to reaffirm the concrete implications of their confessions and divine relation by beginning with God's action for the human creature. Yet, Barth finds himself unable to recognize the shortfalls this concern may have for the likes of Cone, who claims that the experience of oppressed black people is an essential source for discovering revelation through divine encounter.

Says Cone, "Just as Luther and Barth were uncompromising in their stand against the corruption in the theologies and churches that elicited their theological rage, black theologians and preachers were also uncompromising in their confrontation

with white racist churches and their theologies.”^{xiii} Cone recognized Barth’s own response to liberal theology and Nazi Germany would necessitate theological blindness, claiming it was due to Barth’s experience in Germany that he took such a strong theological stand.

“When theologians and preachers experience contradictions in life that shake the foundation of the accepted faith of the community, they are forced by faith itself to return to its source so as to interpret faith in a new light...Barth returned to the Reformation and then to scripture...Black theologians returned to the mothers and fathers of black faith and then to scripture...”^{xiv}

Though Barth may disagree with the claim that experience motivated his theological claims (instead of the Word of God through revelation), Cone’s bears an important truth on a Barthian methodology, specifically that the prioritization of experience in the theological process does not *only* make possible a tendency for human mastery over divine mystery, but it also opens up potentials for liberation through a revelatory encounter with Christ in one’s contextual suffering.

V. CONCLUSION

As Karl Barth and James Cone found themselves amidst situations in crisis, their doctrine of revelation was an important theological resource toward realizing an alternative social order despite the limits of its articulation. The hope for reconciliation would not be understood logically from the standpoint of the dominant order, but would represent a counter-society reconsidering relational existence in light of divine encounter.

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Chapter 5

Disrupting Revelation

The revelation of God disrupts our perceived social order, creating an alternative-world from the experience of divine encounter, making it an important resource for theologians in a state of social/political crisis. But how does revelation relate to the universal community beyond its scope? Otherwise said, can an encounter with divine revelation both disrupt perceived social orders, and be open to its own disruption?

In this chapter I will ask whether the encounter of divine revelation opens itself up to the broad creaturely community beyond the scope of its own particular knowledge. I will start by looking at negative theology, considering the way Barth and Cone are able to pursue an apophatic sensibility despite (or better yet, within) their strong claims to God's revelation. From there I will present the ways in which Cone and Barth are open to disruptions of their own revelatory encounters and perspectives on sociality. Namsoon Kang's work in *Cosmopolitan Theology* will offer a helpful dialogue as well, motivating the question: can we value both the particular and the universal in our experiences of revelatory encounter?

I. DISRUPTING THE DISRUPTION

When asked whether their own revelatory attempts to disrupt perceived social order could itself be disrupted, Barth and Cone would respond with an emphatic 'yes.' That said their 'yes,' would not be without its limits. Both Barth and Cone are working

to undermine human control over knowledge of divine revelation, believing that either humans as a whole, or specifically those in positions of power, seek control over the knowledge of God. Since both thinkers speak of the human tendency to either incidentally project themselves onto God's authority, or intentionally control society through claims to knowledge of God, they are motivated to develop a theological understanding with the capacity to undermine human assumptions and claims to divine authority, including many of their own.

For James Cone, continual disruption of his own perceptions of theology and sociality is welcomed as long as they show up in a common concern for liberation of the oppressed, allowing us to consider new theological possibilities through those participating in resistance to oppression. This means that *Black Theology and Black Power* did more than equate the Gospel with the black power movement, it drew a connection between the Gospel and communities of resistance to social domination and oppression in general.¹ For Cone, black power is not the only avenue toward liberation, and neither is it limited to movements around racial injustice, instead it is through communities of people fighting for freedom that Cone finds the possibility of new theological disruptions. As I mentioned previous, the womanist critique motivated him to reconsider his core values through the experience of black women and the black family, while it was through thinkers such as Cornel West, that Cone's understanding of racial oppression was reframed through concerns over economics and poverty. Cone's

¹ This is not meant to undermine the particularity of this text. Cone saw a unique connection between the Gospel and black power, but as his work has progressed he has been willing to see the Gospel articulated in other forms of resistance to oppression.

thought can be disrupted by further revelations, while it is through the black experience that many of these further revelatory disruptions are encountered, be it issues of: gender, sexuality, poverty, ecology etc.

For Barth disruption of his own theological perceptions is accepted within his work, as long as those disruptions are seen as stemming from God's act in the world. In this sense Barth sees metaphysical realities (even those implicit in his own work) to be capable of disruption by God's interaction with the world, an event limited by the Christocentric understanding of the God known in Christ. No human, including himself has direct insight into a perfect world order or understanding of God, which means it is through the miraculous encounter with God's Word where revelatory disruptions are capable of continuing. Recognizing how Barth frames his openness to further revelatory disruptions, one limit persists, that of pluralism.

For Barth, the potential for a new revelation that disrupts his own encounter with God is only possible within a Christo-centric framework. This does not necessarily mean that the human creature who claims a different religious identity exists outside the scope of reconciliation with God, as Barth would not limit God's capacity to pursue creatures across religious lines.

"Christian love as the complement of love to God is real neighbourly and brotherly love to the extent that it is exercised *without any ulterior thought or question*, being shown freely and purely to the neighbour as neighbour and the brother as a brother, being shown only because in his Christian and also in his non-Christian form he is a member of the people of which Jesus Christ is the King..."ⁱ

Barth works from the assumption that whether one accepts it or not, humans live in the reality of the God who is known in Christ. For him, this necessitates an act of love for the neighbor (no matter their religion), yet it fails to allow for a pluralistic sensibility, wherein diverse religious perspectives can reframe or disrupt the way God is known in God's Christological self-revelation.

II. NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

When one thinks of divine revelation, they tend to think of what a person or community is saying about God, what insight this person or people is claiming to be true. But as the theological tradition has taught us, for any word that is communicated another is negated or left unsaid. The negative theological tradition is important to the doctrine of revelation (specifically in Barth and Cone) as it brings attention to how God both discloses Godself, and fails to disclose Godself to creatures. Inherent to apophatic theology is the resistance to human control over God. Though this comes across as a linguistic concern, it also has implications on the human capacity for social control. Many who claim knowledge of God, according to Barth and Cone, develop harmful patterns, controlling revelatory language which otherwise may be capable of breaking the bonds of social domination.

For Cone, the affirmative statements that equate God and Jesus to the black experience may seem hyper-concrete, yet in reality they recognize their literal limits, breaking down dominant knowledge claims through their emphatic affirmation of God's blackness. It remains clear to Cone that one does not know God fully or with complete clarity, making his call to divine blackness a negation of the dominance of

whiteness. Hence his goal is not to speak of a literal divine race, but instead to work analogously toward an understanding of God's character through the experience of those who are often negated in the most common forms of God-talk. In America, this necessitates an understanding of God through the experience of black people.

For Barth a similar move is made to undermine firm knowledge claims arrived at outside a direct encounter with the Word of God. In highlighting the way God-talk cannot supersede the encounter with God in revelation, Barth negates dogmatic or socially normative knowledge claims, awaiting God's activity, which disrupts the world through revelation. Though Barth clearly does not intend to exist in an apophatic moment long term, he does encourage a proclamation or witness that waits to speak until it has found continuity with God's Word as it has been revealed. The work of theology then, is to help explicate these events of revelation, allowing the words that are said, to be consistent with what God has chosen to reveal of Godself.

This oscillation between claims about God and the process of unsaying does the work of allowing revelation to be an experience capable of breaking the bonds of human control. In this sense, negative theology like revelation, has to say something, yet must simultaneously allow its own words to be overtaken by the possibility of what is to come. As Catherine Keller says, "The apophatic is not a wrecking ball," instead it participates both in negation and affirmation, recognizing truth amidst the tension of what can be said and what must be left unsaid.ⁱⁱ

For Cone and Barth, this movement between saying and unsaying, contains an inherent recognition of the limits of knowledge, both the limits of knowing God and the limits of knowing creatures beyond one's own context.

III. UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR

This concern over how one's knowledge and encounter of God informs one's knowledge and encounter of the neighbor, is key to the impact of revelation in the world. Revelation is an inherently particular event, if for no other reason than because it is contextually located. Yet despite its particular reality, the community who encounters God in revelation cannot be understood only in this particularity without considering their relation to the universal, or the cosmos. In *Cosmopolitan Theology* Namsoon Kang considers how these two poles of particular and universal, function within theological discourse. Can one be a member of one's local community, while remaining a 'citizen of the cosmos?' How would this function within the doctrine of revelation, wherein Christianity has been primarily focused on encountering God and attaining knowledge?

Kang gives us a helpful way to frame the connection between revelation and cosmopolitanism by asking how a theory, idea or doctrine, functions. "The question is not, whether a theory is grand or small, or whether it is universal/global or particular/local, but what function a theory plays and whose interest it serves."ⁱⁱⁱ

Working from the assumption that theory is practice, Kang encourages us to consider the way an idea like revelation, operates for certain communities and against others. If cosmopolitanism causes us to consider ourselves as members of the cosmos as well as

members of our particular tribe or context, then how do we encourage our ideas to work in the interest of more than just ourselves, most especially those on the margins?

As a 'public theology' cosmopolitan theology is directly relevant to public life.^{iv} This means despite the utopian nature of cosmopolitanism, there is something concretely real about the need to understand oneself as a member of one's own community while remaining a citizen of the cosmos. Valuing difference, cosmopolitan theology "claims that we humans have obligations and responsibilities to others," and that recognizing our membership in the cosmos develops with it a responsibility toward our neighbors, known and unknown.^v

When it comes to religious identity and its partner religious authority, Kang takes on a deeply pluralistic sensibility, finding unity between religious identities not within their claims to truth and authority, but within their possibilities for transforming the cosmos together. "An ultimate goal of teaching and learning religious diversity and building interreligious relations is to work for the justice and betterment of the cosmos." A cosmopolitan sensibility, which seeks the goal of cosmological transformation, means that a "fundamental reexamination" is in order for all important Christian theological terms which determine who and what has value within the Christian tradition.^{vi}

For the doctrine of revelation as read in Cone and Barth, cosmopolitan theology can be helpful, asking: Who does revelation serve? And, how does it empower communities to see themselves both as a member of their community, and a member of the cosmos? Cosmopolitan theology furthers the inquiry into revelation's capacity to

be continually disrupted beyond itself, pushing theologians to be affected beyond the bounds of one's tribe, considering religious identity to be a particular expression, capable of relating itself beyond its own categories.

For Cone, the goal of a transformed society, who combats white supremacy at its foundation, motivates his black Christian expression. This shift not just in spiritual understandings but in social/political practice, makes him capable of incorporating diverse perspectives to achieve these ends. By starting his work with a reference to black power, Cone recognized that black people needed to be bound together through the experience of resistance to white supremacy, and this resistance would not always take on a homogeneously Christian expression. In some cases it was most capably expressed in the black arts movement, while in other cases it was the spirit of the black Muslim's and Malcolm X who generated the most fruitful energy. Though Cone is clear that his call is to the task of *Christian* theology, he cannot avoid the way in which black resistance is constituted by a multitude of expressions which can be meaningfully understood amidst the Christian Gospel, while at the same time remaining distinct. For Cone, black Christians can understand themselves as a member of the cosmos through delving deeply into their own experiences. As black Christians recognize diverse influences within their own identity, one can move toward a mutually transformative relationship to the broader community, without losing hold of what is known through the constantly changing realm of blackness.

For Barth the combination of a Christo-centric context for theology, and the move in which God is given credit and responsibility for revealing Godself to creatures,

leads to a contradiction with Kang's pluralistic sensibility. For Barth, religious identity is not focused primarily on a sense of mutual citizenship capable of creating avenues for social transformation, instead religious identity centered in Christ allows creatures to respond to what *God is doing in the world*. Yet in this sense, by focusing on what God is doing, creatures do not have priority over one another. Though Christian identity seeks to align itself with the revelation of God in Christ, God does not desire fellowship with any one people over another due to merit or correct religious affiliation.

Despite this, it is fair to say that for Barth, the confessional nature of finding the revelation of God only in Christ, means that revelation is not found within the confessional elements of a non-Christian tradition. With this in mind, by putting all activity within God's providence, Christians are encouraged to pursue the love of neighbor and the realization of a social order under Christ's lordship, in a way that does not avoid religious difference but sees it as implicated in what God is doing in the world.

Though Barth and Cone both highlight a particular Christian expression in a way that might concern cosmopolitan theology, they each recognize that the pursuit of a new social order through the experience of divine revelation, must account for the relationship with communities beyond their own scope. Both the priority of what God is doing in the world, and the emphasis on a Christian expression of black liberation, means Christians must account for the variety of diverse neighbors who find themselves directly or indirectly encountered in the event of divine revelation.

IV. CONCLUSION

As I have accounted for in this project, the doctrine of revelation, when seen as the way one attains right knowledge, can lead toward exclusivism and the most harmful forms of communalism. On the other hand, when divine revelation frames knowledge through the experience of divine encounter, the involvement of God as an active agent makes possible continual disruptions of both social order and normative forms of Christian identity.

Karl Barth and James Cone represent revolutionary changes to the theological landscape in general, and our understanding of the event of revelation in particular. This event, grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, disrupts perceived social orders, which tend toward control and oppression, allowing Christians whose identity stems from an aesthetically tangible and experiential encounter with God, the opportunity to access a prophetic Christian voice capable of speaking truth to power, while remaining open to further forms of revelatory disruptions through an encounter with God.

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