

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEMORIAL STUDIES IN RELIGION,
CULTURE, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LIBERATION

THOMAS SOWELL AND JAMES CONE
ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

One of the surprising developments in political theology is the lack of sourcing formal economics and political theory. Specifically, much political theology lacks the integration of basic insights from political economy. Political economy studies the relationship between economics and politics or, to state it more clearly, the ways in which politics effects economic outcomes. As such, this book is not a theology book. It is not a book investigating the hybridity of philosophy and theology on issues of race. This book explores a dialogue between political economy and theology proper on the black experience in America. For conversation partners I have chosen an economist, Thomas Sowell, and a theologian, James Cone, as a way of engaging in a cross-disciplinary dialogue. The emphasis of this project is to evaluate the principles of black liberation theology from the perspective of Thomas Sowell's theory of political economy. I hope to offer a social and economic analysis of black liberation theology, with James Cone as the primary representative, using the social and economic theory of Thomas Sowell to outline the implications for social justice while incorporating a classical understanding of the nature of the human person.

Why This Project?

James Cone made a theological tradition in the historic black church into an official, formal academic discipline in the late 1960s out of the frustration that at no

point in his seminary or Ph.D. studies, at predominantly white schools, were there any discussions about the racism and segregation present in the community. While completing a bachelor of divinity at Garrett Biblical Institute (now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary), Cone's frustration turned into what may seem like bitter anger. His experience of encountering racism among United Methodists at Garrett and his professors' refusal to see "racism as a *theological* problem" prompted Cone to attempt to make the connections directly on his own.¹ For Cone, it seemed that the only central problems in American theology were the issues important in the European context even though he was studying at the height of the civil rights movement. After completing his PhD at Northwestern University in 1965, he published *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 as an attempt to bring theology into close contact with the social issues blacks were experiencing in America in the 1960s. Immediately after publication, the book launched a movement that continues to shape and form the theological positions of many seminaries around the world.

Thomas Sowell spent most of his career working at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Sowell was raised by a single mother and was a high school dropout, but managed to obtain an undergraduate degree from Harvard University after taking night classes at Howard University. Sowell later studied at Columbia University and graduated with a PhD in economics from the University of Chicago in 1968. Like Cone, Sowell is deeply interested in the economic empowerment of blacks but, as an economist, looks at the ways in which politics interferes with economic empowerment potentialities. His groundbreaking books include *A Conflict of Visions* and *Knowledge and Decisions*.

In my previous book, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*, I introduced some of the limitations of Marxist thinking as a framework for theological ethics. The book is overly critical of some of Cone's ideas in ways that I would most certainly edit and nuance if a second edition of the book were published, as not to appear completely dismissive.² In the current text, my brief descriptions of Cone's ideas will be the same as those found in my previous book. I return to Cone because of a deep appreciation of the needed paradigm shift his work created by exposing the hegemonic Anglo-normativity that dominates theological and biblical studies as well as the pervasive white privilege that allowed white scholars to ignore black suffering. I would offer the same disclaimer as J. Kameron Carter in his critique of Cone:

Assessing black theology through the figure of James Cone is not meant to be reductive, rendering moot the importance of the theological and religious endeavors of prior generations of thinkers who expended formidable intellectual energy in probing the socio-cultural and political import of black faith. This inquiry proceeds with the acknowledgment that black the-

ology sees beyond its predecessors only by standing on their broader intellectual shoulders...[I focus on Cone] to recognize the unprecedented scale on which Cone's theological project has been enacted and consequently the unmatched influence it has exerted in virtually single-handedly forming a discipline of study and a specific mode of religious reflection.³

This book follows in that spirit as well. Cone remains of incomparable value and importance when evaluating this subject matter. Seeing beyond the predecessors means introducing new categories and rejects the tendency by some to simply recycle the same concepts without significant development. This book intends to move the discussion forward by introducing what could become a series of studies on the ways in which political economy can inform the analysis of the black experience in America from a theological perspective.

What is needed, I believe, is a more fundamental analysis of the social ethics of black liberation theology, in addition to the work examining the theology, to more closely test its usefulness for an ethical and economic perspective that both fit the classical picture of the human person and the nature of the world. I find this interesting to scholars because on the one hand we have Cone who offers an analysis of social sins but appeals to ideas with different presuppositions about the nature of the human person contrary to what one finds in the classical theological disciplines and, on the other hand, we have Sowell, whose emphasis is political economy, who offers an analysis that presents a picture of the human person similar to classical theological perspective yet is devoid of any theological grounding.

Approach

In this book I seek to evaluate several issues important to both James Cone and Thomas Sowell as they relate to the black community, the black church, and the church at large. I hope to offer a social and economic analysis of black liberation theology, with James Cone as the primary representative, using the social and economic theory of Thomas Sowell to outline the implications for social justice while incorporating a classical understanding of the nature of the human person. The scope of this study is limited primarily to the works of Cone and Sowell regarding anthropology, knowledge, oppression, Marxism, and social justice. Accordingly, each chapter will provide descriptions of each human person's respective position while incorporating the implications of Sowell's position for black theology.

Key themes that will serve as evaluative tools are the anthropological perspectives represented by each scholar's work. These anthropological perspectives will be used to explore the logical consequences for social thought. Given the theological

limits of Cone and Sowell, I hope to offer some parameters for further study which incorporate a classical anthropology with new applications in light of the economic realities of living in a disordered world.

Outline of the Book

In the first chapter I will present the anthropological positions of both Cone and Sowell in order to lay the foundation for the remainder of the project. The chapter will begin with an introduction to categories Sowell uses that may be foreign to the average theological reader. Thomas Sowell uses the language of “visions” similar to the way that Van Til and others use the term *presuppositions*. Sowell points out that one’s presuppositions about human nature determine one’s thinking in the realm of economics, ethics, and social justice. Sowell fundamentally believes that human persons have severe moral limitations which must be taken into account when thinking about social justice.

Cone’s anthropology, which fits with Sowell’s concept of the “unconstrained vision,” often ignores the moral limitations of individuals and focuses too much attention on social structures. In Cone’s understanding of human disorderedness—sin, race, the authority of Scripture, and so on—he begins to move away from the classical Christian teaching on these matters which, in the end, determines the trajectory of his thought on all other issues. Perhaps for Chapter Two a more accurate title would replace the word *knowledge* with *information*, but I am choosing to use Sowell’s categories for consistency. This chapter will describe Sowell’s understanding of the proper function and use of knowledge about human action. This is not a chapter about epistemology proper but rather a presentation of Sowell’s landmark work in the early 1980s on the use of certain types of information as signals in applying justice and limits to the human person’s capacity to know. The chapter will examine Sowell’s articulation of the use of knowledge as a means of social analysis in the areas of politics, economics, and the nature of the human community. The chapter concludes with a presentation of how black liberation theology fits into several of Sowell’s categories. The notion that black liberation theology is a “decision-making unit” determines all thinking on social issues in terms of problems and proposed solutions. The main idea in this chapter is to show how Sowell’s use of presuppositions (visions) operates within a black theology framework limiting the liberation project in the end.

Chapter Three will test the criteria of the Conian framework regarding the application of Christ’s redemptive activity to those who have a historical connectedness to oppression. Cone is clear that this God is the God of the oppressed and that the person and work of Christ is only for those who come from an oppressed peo-

ple either through direct or indirect oppression. Using Sowell's international histories of oppression this chapter will demonstrate that, using Cone's own criteria, Christ's redemptive activity is for all people in the world, not just people of color, because all people come from a history of being both oppressor and oppressed. Cone's entire project, then, succeeds only in including those he seeks to exclude.

In Chapter Four we step away a moment from Sowell's and Cone's direct ideas to broaden the understanding of the community of discourse in the work of Sowell. The chapter specifically looks at the theories of John Stuart Mill and John Locke presenting categories that emerge in various iterations of thinking about the relationship between the church and the state. These will prove crucial in understanding why Sowell's emphasis on freedom can help black liberation theology be more inclusive of the principles of political economy.

The goal of Chapter Five is to offer principles helpful in the analysis of Cone and Sowell to cast a vision of an interdisciplinary approach using several tools of cultural analysis that remain consistent with classical Christianity. Among the vital issues are an understanding of anthropology and the Fall, Abraham Kuyper's understanding of the role of sin and error, knowledge grounded in special revelation, oppression and the mystery of evil, economics, and social justice.

The last chapter lays down the fundamental elements of political economy that need to be considered and reconsidered for black liberation theologians seeking to serve the church and black communities. These include understanding the effective role that governments, markets, and social institutions play in establishing a context for sustainable liberation that meet both the concerns of Sowell and Cone.

I am painfully aware of the limitations of this study for those who are interested in theology and philosophy proper as well as those situated in political economy who expect greater economic specificity. This work is meant to be introductory in nature, highlighting areas of needed investigation, exploration, and dialogue among scholars in the future. In order for black liberation to move forward in ways that inform social and political liberation it will require a greater interaction with economic theory. I hope that this critique and reassessment stirs interest in that direction.