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THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

A Retrospective and Prospective Roundtable on the Fiftieth Anniversary of *Horizons*

Editor's Introduction

There is a time and a season for everything, so the Qoheleth teaches. In 1999, John Connolly wrote in the pages of *Horizons* that James H. Cone admonished white Christians not to speak about the struggle for Black liberation but to be quiet and learn from Black Americans; Connolly further observed that Cone *also urged* "whites to speak out on the oppression of blacks in the United States."[1] There is a time and a season to listen and a time to advocate.

The editors of *Horizons* conclude the commemoration of its fiftieth anniversary with a theological roundtable on Connolly's article "Revelation as Liberation from Oppression: Black Theology's Challenge for American Catholic Theology," which offered his theological response to the work of James H. Cone. Connolly was compelled to speak. Coincidentally, Connolly's challenge to readers was published in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Horizons*. This fourth anniversary roundtable affords the membership of the College Theology Society as well as the wider readership of *Horizons* (both historically predominantly white) an opportunity to reflect on Connolly's challenges and to consider when we were vocal when we should have been silent and when we were silent when we should have been protesting for liberation.

M. Shawn Copeland (Boston College), winner of the 2024 College Theology Society's Presidential Award, and Karen Teel (University of San Diego) generously agreed to write analyses of Connolly's work. Their clear-eyed and

[1] John Connolly, "Revelation as Liberation from Oppression: Black Theology's Challenge for American Catholic Theology," *Horizons* 26, no. 2 (1999): 241. Editor's note for the reader: The editorial conventions for the use of uppercase and lowercase for "white" and "Black" are evolving and a matter of discussion. *Horizons*'s current position is to defer to the author's preference. The reader will notice different usages throughout this roundtable.

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expert reflections invite readers to reevaluate their engagement or lack of engagement with the charges from Cone and Connolly to reenvision white theology. Indeed, the shortcomings and sins of *Horizons* as complicit in structural racism and white theology necessarily emerge as a result of the roundtable. May the staff, authors, and readers of *Horizons* heed, ever so late, Cone's challenges and Connolly's example to us.

REVELATION AS LIBERATION FROM OPPRESSION: BLACK THEOLOGY'S CHALLENGE FOR AMERICAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT

Based on a reading of James Cone's and Avery Dulles' analyses of revelation, this article raises questions about the adequacy of the American Catholic theology of revelation. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone criticizes contemporary American theology's understanding of revelation for not including the category of liberation from oppression in its definition of revelation. *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives defines* revelation as symbolic communication, but does not include the category of liberation from oppression. Dulles' omission, in light of Cone's criticism, suggests the possibility of and the need for revising the American Catholic theology of revelation. In pursuing this question, the article begins with an examination of Cone's notion of revelation and the challenge which it presents to American Catholic theology. This is followed by an investigation of some of Dulles' other writings to consider if such a revision would be compatible with his thought. In the final section, drawing upon the works of Dulles, Mark Kline Taylor, Cone, and other black theologians, suggestions for a revision are made.

I. Introduction

This article examines the implications of James Cone's theology of revelation for an American Catholic understanding of revelation.[2] The motivation

[2] When I use the term American I am referring to white theology and white theologians in the United States. I am aware that Latin American liberation theology has pointed out that

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for the undertaking comes from my study of black liberation theology. Reading black liberation theology has led me to question whether the American Catholic understanding of revelation, to which I adhere, is adequate to meet the challenge which American Catholics face in a society still severely fractured by racism.

The initial challenge to my understanding of revelation came when I read James Cone's analysis of revelation in his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In this work Cone criticizes contemporary American theology's understanding of revelation for not including the category of liberation from oppression. Cone affirms that black theology agrees with American theology that God's self-disclosure is the distinctive characteristic of divine revelation, but, he contends, American theology does not go far enough. According to Cone, this definition of revelation as God's self-disclosure is inadequate because it does not take into consideration the experience of the oppression of blacks in the United States. Cone goes on to make the challenging assertion that even a racist can accept this understanding of revelation.

Upon reading this, I began to question my present understanding of revelation from both a personal and theological perspective. From a personal perspective my reading of Cone led me to reflect upon my personal history as an American Catholic theologian who was raised in Mobile, Alabama during the days of segregation. What sparked this reflection was a statement that I read in Cone's book, *God of the Oppressed*. In recollecting his own youth as a black growing up in Arkansas during the days of segregation, Cone writes:

> The white people of Bearden [Arkansas], of course, thought of themselves as "nice" white folks. They did not lynch and rape niggers [blacks], and many attended church every Sunday. They honestly believed that they were *Christian* people, faithful servants of God. Their affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ was a source of puzzlement to me, because they excluded blacks not only socially but also from their church services.[3]

When I read this statement, I saw myself. This is the way we were brought up in Mobile, Alabama. When I was growing up in Mobile there were separate bathrooms for whites and blacks (who were politely referred to as "negroes" in the South at that time). Blacks and whites had to drink from different water fountains. As a white person, I could ride in the front of the

American includes both North and South America. However, the term North American would not accurately describe the theology that I am concerned with, since I am only speaking about theology in the United States and not Canada. Also, James Cone uses the term American to describe the U.S. white theology of revelation which he criticizes.

[3] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 3.

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bus, while blacks were restricted to the back. Blacks were not allowed to go to school with whites, not even in the Catholic schools. There were also separate churches for blacks. As a white Catholic I never worshiped with my black fellow Catholics.

My family had a black maid. Her name was Marylam. She bathed and clothed us, cooked for us, cleaned the house, did all the ironing, and looked after us when our parents were away. At the time it seemed to me that we treated Marylam nicely and that we loved and respected her. My parents paid her fairly well, at least I thought so at the time. She ate well when she was at our house. We gave her food and clothes to take home, as well as presents at Christmas and Easter, and other holidays. It seemed as though she was a part of our family. But it was clear she was not considered an equal member. She never ate at the same table with us and, when we gave her a ride home, she sat in the back of the car.

Our whole family was raised as Catholics. My mother and father were brought up in Catholic homes, went to Mass on Sunday, and followed the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church as best they could. All ten of their children went to Catholic schools and received the sacraments at the appointed time. I was an altar boy in the cathedral parish and sometimes served Mass for the archbishop. We all considered ourselves to be good Catholics and this was confirmed by the religious sisters who taught us in the cathedral school, the priests in the parish, and the archbishop as well.

Reflecting upon this experience in light of Cone's passage in *God of the Oppressed*, my presumption of my family's moral virtue was shattered. How could we have believed that as segregationists we were nonetheless good Catholics? What type of gospel was preached to us which allowed us to condone and support a situation that oppressed millions of black people? Was there something wrong with our theology? Was Cone right? Could our theological understanding of revelation have in any way influenced our acceptance of the oppressive situation of segregation?

I also realized that my theological perspective was being challenged by Cone's criticism. My own theological understanding of revelation has been heavily influenced by the work of Avery Dulles. Dulles' various works on revelation have been quite significant in determining the direction of the theology of revelation in contemporary American Catholic systematic theology. In fact, Dulles' notion of revelation is widely regarded as one of the most developed expressions of the contemporary American Catholic theology of revelation. It is not surprising, therefore, that Dulles was asked to write the section on revelation in the two-volume work, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, edited by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin.

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In a chapter in this book Dulles presents a summary of his understanding of revelation as symbolic communication.[4]

There is, however, an interesting omission in Dulles' analysis of revelation in this work. Nowhere in this summary does he include the category of liberation from oppression as an element in his definition of revelation. Dulles writes this section on revelation without any reference to the theology of liberation and without any mention of the ethical and social implications of revelation as symbolic communication. What makes this omission more noticeable is that the context of the book provided Dulles with the opportunity to address these issues. The understanding of systematic theology as "paradigmatic reconstruction," which is the approach presented by Fiorenza in the book, challenges contemporary American Catholic theology to consider the category of liberation from oppression when reconstructing theological concepts for today.

For Fiorenza, the process of "paradigmatic reconstruction" goes beyond correlation (correlating contemporary questions with traditional answers and symbols) and makes judgments about what constitutes the integrity of the tradition and what is paradigmatic about the tradition.[5] He urges contemporary Catholic theologians to consider the "hermeneutical role of the oppressed" in their paradigmatic reconstruction of the Christian tradition for today.[6] Furthermore, when discussing the challenge which the ambiguity of power and its oppressiveness presents to contemporary theology, Fiorenza describes the significance of liberation theology for systematic theology today.[7]

Reflecting upon this omission of Dulles, my personal questions were translated into theological questions. Is a definition of revelation that does not include the category of liberation from oppression adequate to meet the challenges which racism presents to Christian faith today? It appeared that my American Catholic understanding of revelation, an understanding akin to the theology which Dulles articulates, might actually be an obstacle to overcoming racism in the United States. Even more seriously, it occurred to me that this theology might function as a contributory cause of the racism that exists among U.S. Catholics. Is it possible for the American Catholic theology of revelation to include the category of liberation from oppression in its definition

[4] Avery Dulles, "Faith and Revelation" in Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1: 91–128.

[5] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Tasks and Methods" in Fiorenza and Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology*, 1: 74, 84.

[6] *Ibid.*, 79.

[7] *Ibid.*, 70.

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of revelation in a way that would address the oppression of blacks and other subjugated groups in the United States? How would such a suggestion be received from the perspective of Dulles' theology of revelation as God's symbolic self-disclosure? What would be some of the elements that would have to be included in such a revised view of revelation? In order to address these questions, a more explicit analysis of James Cone's notion of revelation and the nature of the challenge it presents to American Catholic theology is necessary.

II. James Cone's Theology of Revelation

Not only is liberation from oppression a category in Cone's definition of revelation, he actually identifies God's revelation with the black struggle for liberation from racial oppression. In developing this understanding of revelation Cone begins by accepting the contemporary theological view that God's self-disclosure is the distinctive characteristic of divine revelation. Revelation, Cone contends, is not the rational discovery of God's attributes, nor the assent to infallible biblical propositions, nor an aspect of human self-consciousness. Rather, in revelation God is involved in a personal relationship with humankind, effecting God's will in human history.[8] The central moment of God's self-disclosure is Jesus Christ. Speaking of the centrality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, Cone states that Jesus is the "special disclosure of God to man [the human person] revealing who God is and what his [God's] purpose for man [human beings] is."[9] Jesus is the "decisive interpretive factor in everything we say about God because he is the plenary revelation of God."[10] For Cone the fullness of God's revelation is present in Jesus in such a way that "the norm of all existence is determined exclusively by him."[11] Summarizing the role of Jesus in Christian revelation, Cone states simply that Jesus is *the* revelation of God.[12]

After agreeing with contemporary theology that revelation is God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, Cone cautions that this is not enough. Black theology cannot stop there because it envisions revelation as a divine self-disclosure that must be understood in the context of liberation.[13] According to Cone,

[8] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, twentieth anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 45.

[9] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 34.

[10] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 30.

[11] *Ibid*., 51.

[12] *Ibid*.; see also Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 34.

[13] "According to black theology, revelation must mean more than just divine self-disclosure. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*" (Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 45; italics in original).

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to know God is to know God as the One who struggles on behalf of the oppressed. "God's revelation means liberation, an emancipation from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society."[14] In fact, Cone asserts that there can be no revelation of God without a "condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation."[15] In revelation God comes to the oppressed declaring total identification with their situation and assures them that their struggle for liberation is God's own work.[16] The full extent of Cone's identification of revelation with liberation from oppression becomes evident when he applies this view of revelation to the situation of blacks in America. When this is done, Cone says we realize that the black revolution in America is the revelation of God. "Revelation means black power—that is, the 'complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.' It is blacks telling whites where to get off, and a willingness to accept the consequences."[17] Thus Christian revelation for Cone is a present reality, not something that happened in the first century. He writes: "As a black theologian, I want to know what God's revelation means right now as the black community participates in the struggle for liberation."[18] Today, Cone says, God's revelation is found in the black struggle for liberation. Revelation is a black event.[19] As if to make sure that one does not misunderstand this point he states that black theology "makes an unqualified identification of God's revelation with black liberation. There can be no other medium for encountering the contemporary revelatory event of God in this society."[20]

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*, 45–46.

[17] *Ibid.*, 46; the quotation within the quotation is from *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6.

[18] Cone, Black Theology of Liberation, 30.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*, 31. In *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), Cone says that he is aware of the ideological danger of identifying the gospel with a historical-political movement. At first, his Barthian understanding of revelation prevented him from identifying revelation with the black struggle for liberation. But eventually, he says, he purposely decided to be provocative, that he would turn Barth "right-side-up" just as Barth himself had turned liberal theology "up-side-down." No longer, Cone writes, would he allow "an appeal to divine revelation to camouflage God's identification with the human fight for justice" (45). In more recent statements Cone has modified his unqualified identification of revelation and black liberation. In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, he says that this identification overlooked the provisional identity of God's revelation with any political movement (James H. Cone, "Introduction," Part 3, "Black Theology and the Response of White Theologians" in Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979], 140). In *Black Theology of Liberation* Cone admits that, in his earlier writings, he tended to focus exclusively on the oppression of blacks in the United States and had not incorporated a global analysis of oppression into his theology (xvi-xvii).

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Summarizing his understanding of revelation Cone asserts, "God's revelation means *liberation*—nothing more, nothing less."[21]

III. Cone's Challenge to American Theology

Although he does not explicitly discuss Dulles or the Catholic understanding of revelation, Cone does strongly criticize what he refers to as the American theology of revelation. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone begins the chapter on revelation by contrasting the understanding of revelation in American theology with the European notion of revelation.[22] Cone's model for the European notion is neoorthodox theology, particularly the theology of Karl Barth.[23] According to Cone, this European theology of revelation has been open to connecting revelation with the task of liberation from oppression. Cone cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth as examples of theologians who spoke out against the oppression perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazis. For them, Cone says, "Revelation meant that no human order is synonymous with God's order, and that it is better to choose death than assent to the evils of the state."[24] According to Cone, Bultmann spoke about the significance of reflecting upon the political situation when doing theology in Germany and emphasized that obedience to God took priority over obedience to the state.[25]

American theology, on the other hand, has not learned from European theology on this point and thus does not include concern for the oppressed in its understanding of revelation. Cone writes, "What is strange, though perhaps understandable, is the silence of American theology regarding God's revelation and the oppressed of the land."[26] While Cone applauds American theology for having accepted the European notion of revelation as God's self-disclosure, he finds it inadequate because it has not incorporated the idea of liberation from oppression into its understanding of revelation.[27] More specifically, Cone points out that no American theologian has attempted to apply the contemporary manifestation of God's revelation to the situation of the oppression of blacks in the United States. Cone adds that it is sad that the most

[21] *Ibid*., 46 (Cone's italics).

[22] *Ibid*., 42–45.

[23] *Ibid*., 43; Cone also mentions Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, and Rudolph Bultmann as proponents of this approach to revelation.

[24] *Ibid*., 43–44.

[25] *Ibid*., 44. Yet, later in the same chapter, Cone criticizes Bultmann for failing to include explicitly the idea of liberation in his understanding of revelation. With the exception of Bonhoeffer, Cone appears to be granting European theology more than it deserves.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] *Ibid*.

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blatant expressions of human oppression, including the enslavement of black Americans, have been overlooked by American theologians.[28] Some of the American theologians whom Cone lists as omitting the category of liberation from oppression in their theologies are Paul Tillich, Harold De Wolf, Jonathan Edwards, and Langdon Gilkey.[29] Reinhold Niebuhr and Frederick Herzog are mentioned as possible exceptions.[30] Even though there might be a few exceptions, American theology, according to Cone, is characterized by it exclusion of the category of liberation from oppression.

By its silence on the issue of black liberation from oppression, Cone says, American theology actually tends to condone racism. Cone points out that even a racist can accept American theology's understanding of revelation. "Racists will accept the view of revelation which stresses the self-disclosure of God as long as the interpretation. . .does not challenge their right to define the limits of black humanity."[31] The fact that a racist can accept this view means that there is something lacking in this definition of revelation.[32] In criticizing American theology Cone says that his intention is not to question the personal, ethical integrity of white theologians. His concern, rather, is "with the essence of Christian theology and the influence of culture on a theologian's understanding of the theological task."[33]

According to Cone, American theology's exclusion of liberation from oppression in its definition of revelation can be traced to two main factors. The first is the social situation of American theology. By and large American theologians have been white and, therefore, the oppression of black people has not been an important item on their theological agenda.[34] According to Cone, the social situation of whites as oppressors has excluded the "possibility of their hearing and seeing the truth of divine presence, because the conceptual universe of their thought contradicts the story of divine liberation."[35] In his autobiographical work, *My Soul Looks Back*, Cone says that he now understands that, as long as theology was defined by whites, the connection of theology with the black experience of oppression could never be made, because "Racists do not define theology in a way that challenges their

[28] *Ibid.*, 44–45.
[29] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 51, 97.
[30] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 44.
[31] *Ibid.*, 46.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 51.
[34] *Ibid.*, 52. Cone gives examples of how white theology, because of its "social a priori," fails to ask questions important for the liberation of blacks.
[35] *Ibid.*, 94.

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racism."[36] As a result, Cone says, American white theologians have simply ignored the problem of color in America.[37]

The second factor is that American theology has failed to base its definition of revelation on the biblical understanding of revelation as liberation from oppression. Instead, American theologians have based their views of revelation on philosophy and cultural values rather than on the biblical theme of God as the liberator of the oppressed.[38] Cone adds, American white theologians will inevitably "interpret the biblical story according to their racial interests."[39] Thus their understanding of revelation is basically antibiblical.[40]

In the final analysis American theology's omission of the category of liberation from oppression from its definition of revelation is not just a minor theological flaw but a serious threat to the very essence of the Christian message. As Cone expresses it: "Theology is always a word about the liberation of the oppressed and the humiliated. It is a word of judgment for the oppressors and the rulers."[41] He further claims that black theology believes that all Christian doctrines must be interpreted in such a way that they unreservedly address the unbearable oppression of black people.[42] Whenever theologians neglect to include the notion of liberation from oppression in their theologies, not only do they fail to do Christian theology, but they are doing the work of the antichrist.[43]

IV. Responding to the Challenge of Cone's Criticism

Even though Cone does not explicitly discuss the American Catholic theology of revelation, his criticism that theologies of revelation which omit the category of liberation from oppression are inadequate expressions of Christian revelation is one that American Catholic theology needs to take seriously. A response by American white Catholic theology is certainly in order. Yet, it is not easy for a white theologian to find an appropriate way to respond to black theology.

[36] Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 48. Cone adds that expecting white theologians to voluntarily make theology relevant to black people's struggle for justice is like expecting Pharaoh to voluntarily free the Israelites.

[37] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 83.

[38] *Ibid*., 199-200. Cone makes this comment in the context of explaining how the exclusion of the theme of liberation from oppression in American theology has adversely affected Christian ethics.

[39] *Ibid*., 205.

[40] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 45.

[41] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 83.

[42] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 121.

[43] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 83.

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As a white living in the United States I have been identified by black theology as an oppressor. Black theology has a tendency to universally classify all whites in the United States as oppressors. Patrick Bascio writes, "Because the privileged position of the white community is inevitably related to the suppression of civil rights in the black community, every white person born in this country is caught in a web of his/her ancestors' making, from which there appears, as yet, no way to exit."[44] Even though James Cone sometimes speaks of "blackness" and "whiteness" as ontological symbols,[45] he seems to think that it is almost impossible for whites to overcome their "whiteness," their situation as oppressors of blacks.[46] White theology has been criticized as being anti biblical, unchristian, and the work of the antichrist.[47]

Whites have also been told that they should not try to respond to black theology. Cone has told whites that they should keep their mouths shut. According to him, whites have nothing to say about the situation of blacks. Only blacks can speak theologically about their liberation from oppression. Whites should keep silent and take instructions from blacks.[48] Cone says that he now understands why white theologians were reluctant to speak up in the face of this militant statement. Yet, he does not apologize for making it. He goes on to say that he does not think that his militancy was the chief reason why whites did not respond to black theology, because whites did not respond to less militant black theologians either like J. Deotis Roberts, Major Jones, or Gayraud Wilmore.[49]

Yet, while Cone has told whites to shut up, he has also criticized whites for not speaking out and, on occasion, has even urged whites to speak out on the oppression of blacks in the United States. We have seen how Cone criticizes white American theologians for not including liberation from oppression in their theologies of revelation and how he charges them with condoning racism.[50] In his analysis of the American theology of revelation, Cone actually

[44] Patrick Bascio, *The Failure of White Theology: A Black Theological Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 1–2.

[45] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7–8.

[46] *Ibid.*, 20, 97, 122. Cone is a little ambiguous on this point in this work. At times he seems to suggest that whites can overcome their "whiteness." At other times, he says that it is almost impossible for whites to overcome their "whiteness." But then he adds that if it can be accomplished at all, it will be the work of God's grace, and not the result of human effort alone (*ibid.*, 64, 65–66).

[47] The antibiblical and unchristian charges are found in *Black Theology of Liberation*, 45 and 9 respectively. The antichrist criticism is found in *God of the Oppressed*, 83.

[48] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 62–63.

[49] Cone, "Introduction," Part 3, 137.

[50] See above, 238–39.

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challenges white theologians to respond. Cone asks if perhaps white American theologians might join blacks in their theological enterprise and include liberation from oppression in their definitions of theological concepts like God, revelation, Christ, grace, faith, church, etc. If white theology refuses to respond, Cone says this means that white theology and the white church are dead. Cone adds that, so far, the white response in and out of the church has been "Not yet" which really means "Never." Cone concludes this reflection by asking if the white American church will continue its "chaplaincy to the forces of oppression" or will it eventually embrace the cause of liberation?[51] In a letter to Jeffrey Siker, Cone makes the following suggestion to American white theologians, "I think your role is to take sides with the voiceless people of the world. It is time for all scholars in religion to expose the conservative nature of their disciplines and the roles they play in reinforcing the status quo that oppresses the poor."[52] In urging white theologians to speak out, Cone challenges them to rethink their theology in light of the challenge presented by black theology.[53]

This is the challenge to which this article attempts to respond. Accepting the validity of Cone's criticism that the American theology of revelation is inadequate because it does not include the category of liberation from oppression, I will reflect upon the possibility of rethinking the American Catholic understanding of revelation in light of this criticism. In doing so, I will take David Bosch's advice and attempt to speak in "subdued terms" viewing black theology as a point of departure for a "sincere self-examination" of the white American Catholic understanding of revelation.[54] Also, it is important to state that these reflections are intended primarily for the white American Catholic community of believers and theologians. I am not intending to speak to or for blacks. I am not presenting a new form of black theology, but a revision of the white American Catholic theology of revelation.

V. Reflection on Dulles in Light of This Challenge

We have already seen that the American Catholic theologian Avery Dulles does not include the category of liberation from oppression in his definition of revelation in the 1991 chapter on revelation in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*. However, in exploring the possibility of rethinking the American Catholic notion of revelation, the first place to begin would

[51] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 89-90.

[52] Letter of December 13, 1993, private correspondence between Jeffrey Siker and James Cone shared by Siker with the writer.

[53] Cone, "Introduction," 135–36.

[54] David J. Bosch, "Currents and Crosscurrents in South African Black Theology" in Wilmore and Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 235.

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be with an examination of Dulles' other writings on revelation to see if he addresses the issue of liberation from oppression in these works.

Written during the time of the birth of Latin American liberation theology (1968), it is not surprising that Dulles' *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* does not specifically treat the category of liberation from oppression. The context of this book is ecumenism. With the Second Vatican Council as his starting point Dulles states his hope that this book will contribute to the development of an ecumenical theology of revelation.[55] However, in the chapter on the "Death of God Theologies" Dulles briefly addresses the issue of the social implications of the Christian understanding of revelation. He speaks of the struggle for truth and human values (a passionate concern for civil rights and peace) by conscientious people, even atheists, as possibly a "new focus of God's self-manifestation in history."[56] When responding to the death of God theologies' charge that God is detrimental to human progress, Dulles states that "God demands that we should actively set about organizing social structures consonant with the dignity of man [the human person)."[57] Furthermore, he adds, "The love of God is the most liberating of all experiences."[58] In this chapter Dulles does admit that it is appropriate to refashion our understanding of the theology of God in response to the death of God theology.[59] However, he never mentions specifically how this response might contribute to refashion the notion of revelation.

Dulles' classic text on the subject is his 1983 *Models of Revelation*. In this work he presents what he calls a constructive theory of revelation as symbolic communication.[60] Although Dulles does not attempt to incorporate the category of liberation from oppression into his understanding of revelation as symbolic communication in this book, he does mention liberation theology. He affirms that liberation theology shows the promise of "being able to articulate a distinctive theology of revelation."[61] Dulles states:

> They [liberation theologies] seem to assume that God preeminently reveals himself [God's self] when believers enter into solidarity with the victims of

[55] Avery Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968). 16. My impression is that the essays in this book are not all well focused on this theme, and, in the book, Dulles never really presents a systematic treatment of an ecumenical theology of revelation.

[56] *Ibid*., 178.

[57] *Ibid*., 279.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] *Ibid*., 275–76.

[60] Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 114, 128–41.

[61] *Ibid*., 29.

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> "racism, sexism, classism, militarism, and ecological pollution" and engage in the struggle to transform the social structures responsible for these evils.[62]

However, Dulles goes on to say that he does not think that liberation theology has as yet developed an elaborate theology of revelation.[63]

In his 1988 book, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, Dulles accepts the work of liberation from oppression as an integral part of the mission of the church today, although with some cautions. Even though not specifically addressing the issue of revelation in this book, he does elaborate on the importance of the social dimensions of the church's mission.[64] In fact, he views the social mission of the church as one of the "ten principles" which he regards as being "unquestionably endorsed by the Second Vatican Council."[65] Due to the influence of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, Dulles maintains that the struggle for peace and social justice have come to be seen as a "requirement of the church's mission to carry on the work of Christ, who had compassion on the poor and the oppressed."[66] According to Dulles, it would be impossible for the church to avoid speaking on social and public policy issues because the world expects church leaders to give advice that will help reshape society according to "a God-centered value system."[67]

It is interesting that, in the context of this positive acceptance of the church's social dimension, Dulles speaks somewhat critically about liberation theology's interpretation of the Second Vatican Council's understanding of the church's mission. According to him, liberation theology, and other forms of theology like secular and political theology tend to reread the documents of the Second Vatican Council from the perspective of their own postconciliar concerns. As a result, liberation theology endorses those statements in the conciliar documents that support its cause while ignoring or dismissing other conciliar passages. Because of this, Dulles says, liberation theology comes up with a "deliberately slanted interpretation of Vatican II."[68] Dulles maintains

[62] *Ibid*., 30.

[63] *Ibid*. But, Dulles adds, liberation theology has made major contributions to the theology of faith and hermeneutics.

[64] Avery Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 31–32.

[65] *Ibid*., 20. Dulles also states on the same page, "Whoever does not accept all ten of these principles, I contend, cannot honestly claim to have accepted the results of Vatican II."

[66] *Ibid*., 32.

[67] *Ibid*. Dulles attributes the phrase, "a God-centered value system," to Bishop James Malone.

[68] *Ibid*., 135.

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that in his own analysis of the church's mission he returns to the documents themselves and attempts "to reconstruct, as objectively as possible, what they actually do say about the purposes of the church."[69] In spite of this caution regarding liberation theology, Dulles goes on to affirm that "social and political liberation pertains integrally to the process of redemption and hence is not foreign to the mission of the church."[70]

Adding to his endorsement of liberation from oppression as a significant component of the church's mission, Dulles affirms that he still subscribes to the following two statements in the Hartford "Appeal for Theological Affirmation."[71] The first is found in Theme 10: "the Church must denounce oppressors, help to liberate the oppressed and seek to heal human misery."[72] The second is found in the explanation of Theme 11: "because of the confidence in God's reign. . .Christians must participate fully in the struggle against oppressive and dehumanizing structures and their manifestation in racism, war and economic exploitation."[73] Despite this seemingly overwhelming endorsement, Dulles ends with a caution. The church must learn to participate in social and political matters without becoming embroiled in partisan politics. In order to make its contribution, the church must remind the world that there is more to life than politics. Dulles concludes this discussion by saying, "As a general rule faithfulness to Jesus will incline the ecclesiastical authorities to avoid entanglement in economic and political struggles."[74]

In his book, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (1992), Dulles accepts the principle that the church must struggle to overcome "sinful social structures" and that these structures must be replaced with "structures of grace." Although he admits that this ideal will never be realized in history, it does remain the norm and guide "for all those who have been touched by

[69] *Ibid.*, 136.

[70] *Ibid.*, 167. Dulles quotes *Gaudium et Spes*, 4 as support for this statement. He also quotes the following statement from the 1971 Synod of Bishops as support for this position, "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." The original source for this quotation is "Justice in the World" in Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, Documents of the Synod of Bishops, 1971 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 513–29, paragraph #6.

[71] Dulles, *Reshaping of Catholicism*, 182.

[72] The text of the Hartford Appeal cited here is taken from Richard John Neuhaus, William Sloane Coffin Jr., and Harvey Cox, "The Hartford Debate," *Christianity and Crisis* 35/12 (July 21, 1975): 169.

[73] *Ibid.*

[74] Dulles, *Reshaping of Catholicism*, 183.

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the gospel."[75] Dulles applauds Latin American liberation theologians for their retrieval of neglected biblical symbols which have given "hope and motivation to Christians seeking to reconstruct the social order."[76]

In this same work, however, Dulles severely criticizes Latin American liberation theology's use of Scripture. The list of criticisms is extensive. Latin American liberation theologians have adopted a kind of hermeneutical circle which begins and ends with the existing social reality. They "contest all readings of Scripture that do not favor their own orientation."[77] Furthermore, they select biblical passages that confirm their own preferences and announce that a commitment to liberation is the only context in which the gospel can be understood. As examples of theologians who interpret Scripture in this way, Dulles mentions Juan Luis Segundo, James Cone, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. According to Dulles, this selective approach to Scripture can blind these theologians from seeing other lessons that ought to be learned from the biblical text. Jesus and Paul, according to Dulles, "seem to be almost unconcerned with, if not opposed to, liberation from political oppression."[78] Finally, Dulles presents, seemingly with approval, a criticism of the 1984 Instruction of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on liberation theology which maintains that it falls into the "danger of radically politicizing the affirmation of faith and thus reading the Bible in too narrow a framework"[79]

In *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (1994), Dulles discusses liberation theology's understanding of faith. Although he admits that an active faith "displays itself in works on behalf of a better social order,"[80] he seems to view liberation theology's approach to faith as being too narrow. In evaluating Gustavo Gutierrez' understanding of faith, Dulles writes:

> If faith is praxis, then, it appears to follow that only social activists can be Christian believers. The new system gives no scope for contemplatives unless they are "comtemplatives in action." It also makes no place, it would seem, for people who are content to work within the existing social framework.[81]

According to Dulles, many theologians, and he seems to include himself in this, would prefer to define faith more specifically as an "interior adherence

[75] Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, new exp. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 32–33.

[76] *Ibid*., 33.

[77] *Ibid*., 84.

[78] *Ibid*.

[79] *Ibid*., 85.

[80] Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179.

[81] *Ibid*., 158.

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to the word of God."[82] Those who hold this view would say that "it is possible to be a true believer, a person of faith, without having any particular commitment to changing the social order.[83] Dulles also thinks that interpreting social engagement from the perspective of Marxist social analysis is too one-sided.[84] He concludes this discussion with the following statement: "The concept of faith must be broad enough to include Christians who have different social philosophies."[85] At the same time, and Dulles would certainly agree, it has to be admitted that there are some social philosophies, like racism, sexism, classism, etc., that are incompatible with Christian faith.

From this examination of Dulles's works, we can find no evidence that, up to this point in his writings has ever explicitly incorporated the category of liberation from oppression into his definition of revelation. Based upon his writings before 1991, however, it seems that such an inclusion would not be incompatible with his overall approach to theology. In these works Dulles accepts liberation from oppression as an integral part of the church's mission in the world today. In fact, Dulles views the social mission of the church as one of the "ten principles" endorsed by the Second Vatican Council. Also, with some cautions, Dulles does hold that Christians and the church have a responsibility to participate in the struggle against unjust and oppressive structures. Yet, in his writings after 1991, Dulles appears to have become more suspicious of liberation theology, even though he continues to grant it some positive points. Although he still appears to see the struggle against sinful social structures as part of the mission of the church and maintains that an active faith manifests itself by working for a better social order, Dulles also suggests that it is possible to be a true believer without having a commitment to changing the social order. As a result, based upon these most recent writings, it seems unlikely that Dulles himself will ever attempt to incorporate the category of liberation from oppression into his theology of revelation.

VI. Rethinking the American Catholic Theology of Revelation

Up to this point Dulles has not accepted the challenge presented by James Cone's criticism of the American theology of revelation. Yet, even though he has not explicitly incorporated the category of liberation from oppression into his definition of revelation, it seems that, based upon Dulles'

[82] *Ibid.*, 179.

[83] *Ibid.*

[84] Dulles writes: "Christian believers can disagree among themselves about whether capitalism, as portrayed form a Latin American liberationist perspective, is the cause of poverty and misery" (*ibid.*).

[85] *Ibid.*

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positive statements about liberation and the role it plays in the mission of the church, that such an inclusion would be compatible with an American Catholic understanding of revelation. With this in mind, it seems plausible to consider the possibility of developing an American Catholic theology of revelation which would include the category of liberation from oppression in its definition of revelation. In order to illicit further theological reflection on the possibility of moving American Catholic theology of revelation in this direction, I would like to offer the following suggestions.

The first I would make is that American Catholic theology of revelation should continue to stress that revelation is primarily personal, God's self-disclosure, and not primarily intellectual, the manifestation of divinely revealed truths. This would mean that Dulles' understanding of revelation as symbolic communication could be a significant element in the American Catholic theology of revelation, as long as the transformative (personal and social) value of symbols is given equal significance with the cognitive meaning of symbols. This qualification is important because, although Dulles makes reference to such transformative power in *Models of Revelation*,[86] in the more recent book, *The Craft of Theology*, he does not mention this aspect of symbols.[87]

Working within this framework, a Catholic understanding of revelation might be defined in the following manner. Revelation is "God's symbolic communication of liberating and reconciling love which rejects all forms of oppression." Contained in this definition would be a condemnation of spiritual, psychological, political, and all other forms of oppression, as well as a condemnation of the situation of oppressors. On the positive side, this would mean that God sides with the poor and the oppressed and identifies with their struggle for liberation. God's revelation and oppression will be seen to be incompatible. This means that God's revelation will come to the oppressor as a judgment. Yet, it will not be a condemnation of the oppressor as a person because it will offer the oppressor liberation from the situation of being an oppressor. At the same time, God's revelation will offer the oppressor reconciliation with self, with others, including the oppressed, and with God if, cooperating with God's grace, oppressors struggle to overcome their situation. In such an understanding of revelation it will not be possible to view racism as being compatible with the Christian message. Yet, the racist will hear the hope of the promise of the gospel that overcoming one's situation as an oppressor brings liberation and true reconciliation with God.

[86] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 267, 269.

[87] Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 23.

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In rethinking its approach to revelation, perhaps, American Catholic theology could incorporate something like Mark Kline Taylor's expression, "reconciliatory emancipation." He applies this term to christology in *Remembering Esperanza*.[88] Taylor defines reconciliatory emancipation as a "freedom making force that unifies," that is, an "emancipation that is reconciliatory."[89] While recognizing, as he does, that the struggle for freedom brings conflict and division, revelation as reconciliatory emancipation would include the realization that the ultimate goal of Christian revelation is the unity of all persons in Jesus Christ.[90] This definition of revelation would also, as Taylor suggests, give the primacy to freedom and emancipation over unity and reconciliation.[91] Giving primacy to emancipation is a way to counteract the fact that oppressors often give primacy to reconciliation in order to justify their injustice and oppression. From the perspective of reconciliatory emancipation American Catholic theology could incorporate liberation from oppression into its definition of revelation and also retain its concern for the reconciliatory character of God's revelation.

The reconciliatory proviso contains another feature that could be accepted as a component of an American Catholic theology of revelation. According to Taylor, the reconciliatory proviso recognizes and accepts diversity and, thereby, makes one open to consider a diversity of oppressions.[92] Such an awareness would make sure that an American Catholic theology of revelation would not be limited to concern only for the liberation of blacks from oppression but would be concerned with all forms of oppression. Also, following Taylor's suggestion, the recognition of the interconnectiveness of various forms of oppression could be done in such a way that the distinctive problematic of each form of oppression is preserved.[93]

At this point, black theology might object: "What is all this talk about reconciliation? Did not James Cone write, 'God's revelation means *Liberation*—nothing more, nothing less?'"[94] But, even though Cone makes this claim, black theology, in its quest for liberation, acknowledges that reconciliation is also an essential element of the Christian gospel. There is, however,

[88] Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 150–51. Taylor reconstructs christology according to the dynamics of "reconciliatory emancipation."

[89] *Ibid.*, 175.

[90] *Ibid.*

[91] *Ibid.*, 176–81.

[92] *Ibid.*, 190.

[93] *Ibid.*, 150–51.

[94] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 46.

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a controversy between Cone and J. Deotis Roberts as to how black theology should understand the relationship between liberation and reconciliation.

Cone emphasizes liberation over reconciliation and views liberation as a precondition for reconciliation. He is suspicious of the white man's offer of reconciliation because, based upon the history of the white oppression of blacks in the United States, this form of reconciliation expects blacks to accept their situation and play by the white man's rules.[95] What Cone rejects is what Helmut Gollwitzer refers to as "reconcilism," a distorted view of reconciliation that aims at demobilizing blacks, makes them passively accept their oppression, and eliminates their motivation and desire to participate in the revolutionary struggle for liberation.[96] Therefore, Cone says, the real question is not "whether black theology sees reconciliation as an end, but rather, on whose terms we are to be reconciled."[97]

As a result, it is Cone's view that black theology cannot really talk about reconciliation until *all* black people are liberated.[98] In fact, in *God of the Oppressed*, Cone identifies God's reconciliation with the black struggle for liberation from racial oppression.[99] Reconciliation thus means working for black liberation and for the destruction of everything that is identified with the white oppression of blacks.[100] When applied to the situation of blacks in America, Cone says that, for blacks, reconciliation means insisting on their dignity and working for their liberation. For whites reconciliation means giving up their "whiteness," their situation as oppressors, and becoming black, siding with oppressed blacks and working for their liberation.[101]

J. Deotis Roberts differs from Cone in placing more emphasis on reconciliation and stressing the importance of reconciliation between blacks and whites as a goal of black theology. Maintaining with this emphasis, Roberts insists that he is trying to achieve a balance between liberation and reconciliation.[102]

[95] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 144.

[96] Helmut Gollwitzer, "Why Black Theology?" in Wilmore and Cone, eds., B*lack Theology: A Documentary History*, 165.

[97] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 145.

[98] *Ibid*., 146. Cone thinks that for blacks to speak of reconciliation with whites before all blacks are liberated plays into the hands of white oppressors. As a result, Cone thinks that Roberts' talk about reconciliation between blacks and whites is premature and allows whites to set the agenda for both the Christian understanding of reconciliation and the strategy for the liberation of blacks (Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 240, 243).

[99] *Ibid*., 236.

[100] *Ibid*., 237.

[101] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 149–50.

[102] J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), xiv.

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He sees liberation and reconciliation as the two main poles of black theology. They are not antithetical but need to be held in a dialectical relationship. He sees the struggle to bring the two poles together as the main challenge that black theology faces today.[103] Roberts rejects black separation as the final goal of black theology.[104] For him black separation can only be accepted as a "strategic withdrawal" in order to bring about unity and empowerment for blacks. It cannot be held as a permanent objective. The goal of black theology, as of Christian gospel, is reconciliation between blacks and whites as equals. According to Roberts, this is the only way for blacks and whites to achieve authentic Christian existence.[105] Blacks and whites alike need to consider the meaning of liberation in light of this Christian understanding of reconciliation, even if they do not find it popular to do so.[106]

Although the two men differ on which pole they emphasize, they agree in some important matters in this discussion. Both maintain that, in the practical realm, blacks today need to give the priority to the task of liberation.[107] Roberts and Cone both admit that part of the reason for their different approaches is the fact that they are coming from different personal backgrounds and situations. Cone points out that he belongs to the era of "black power," whereas Roberts belongs to the "integration period." This difference in political and social backgrounds, Cone maintains, affects how they understand themes like reconciliation.[108] In *Liberation and Reconciliation*, Roberts basically makes the same observation.[109] A third similarity is that both Cone and Roberts insist that reconciliation is part of the essence of the Christian gospel. Cone states that black theology is a theology that takes "God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ" seriously. In fact, he adds, the gospel of reconciliation is the heart of the New Testament message.[110] Roberts writes: "The gospel is a reconciling as well as a liberating gospel, and Christ is at once Liberator and Reconciler."[111] According to Roberts, it is part of the nature of Christian faith to seek reconciliation.[112]

[103] *Ibid.*, xvii, 8.
[104] *Ibid.*, ix.
[105] *Ibid.*, 7.
[106] *Ibid.*, 6, 9.
[107] For Roberts, see *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 11. For Cone, see James H. Cone, "Epilogue: An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians" in Wilmore and Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 613.
[108] *Ibid.*, 614.
[109] Roberts, *Reconciliation and Liberation*, xii.
[110] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 147.
[111] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, ix.
[112] *Ibid.*, 9.

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Another element that American Catholic theology might consider incorporating into its understanding of revelation is liberation theology's insistence that a living faith commitment to work to overcome oppression should precede any theological reflection. This would suggest that any rethinking of the American Catholic theology of revelation must proceed in this sequence. Liberation cannot simply be an idea added to the concept of revelation. The notion of revelation should include an active commitment to social transformation. ln this way the oppression of blacks and others would be explicitly denounced and American Catholics would thereby become involved in the work of overcoming the social, political, and economic structures of United States society that support oppression. As Cone puts it, "There is no liberation without the commitment of revolutionary action against injustice, slavery, and oppression. Liberation then is not merely a thought in my head. . .."[113]

Finally, I would suggest that any rethinking of the American Catholic theology of revelation should try to avoid presenting itself as another monolithic theology making imperialist, universal claims. An American Catholic theology of revelation cannot claim to be speaking for blacks, women, the poor, Native Americans, U.S. Hispanics, or any other oppressed peoples. It must see itself as speaking primarily to white American Catholics who find themselves on the side of the oppressor and in support of unjust and oppressive societal structures. God's revelation in Jesus Christ will be heard in such a way that racism, sexism, and the oppression of the poor will be viewed as being incompatible with the Christian message.

One of the major obstacles that stands in the way of any rethinking of an American Catholic theology of revelation is the social situation of white American Catholics. Can white American Catholics separate themselves from their own social location and perceive and accept God's self-disclosure as liberation from oppression? Can the oppressor define revelation in such a way as to effectively to condemn his or her own situation of oppression? Or, as Cone puts it, can a racist define revelation in such a way that one's own racism is condemned? Although Cone himself seems skeptical about whites being able to do this, it seems to me that it is not only possible, but absolutely necessary if the liberation of blacks in the United States is to be realized.

Mark Kline Taylor suggests that one possible way of overcoming this difficulty is not to reject one's own social situation but to broaden it by incorporating the interpretation of other contemporary readers of different social situations into one's interpretation of the text.[114] One concrete suggestion that Taylor makes is for whites to make an effort to become familiar with

[113] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 152.

[114] Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza*, 59.

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the culture of blacks.[115] One thing seems certain: it is imperative for white American Catholic theology to begin to work to overcome its social situation and to respond to the challenge presented by black theology. Is it not, as Cone suggests, a matter of the essence of the gospel?

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Recalling Black Theology's Insistent Challenge to American Catholic Theology: A Response to John Connolly's "Revelation as Liberation"

When John Connolly's "Revelation as Liberation from Oppression: Black Theology's Challenge for American Catholic Theology"[116] appeared in the pages of *Horizons*, African American clergy, scholars, and theologians, although mainly Protestant, had been formulating and explicating, disputing and debating black theology for more than three decades. In spite of the Second Vatican Council's accent on ecumenicity, black theology barely registered on the agenda of American Catholic theology.[117] Quite likely, Rosemary

[115] *Ibid.*, 225.

[116] Connolly, "Revelation as Liberation from Oppression," 232–52. Earlier critiques by Protestant theologians were published in other Catholic journals: John J. Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal of the Internal and External Issues," *Theological Studies* 33, no. 4 (December 1972): 684–97, and "What We Can Learn from Black Theology," *Theological Studies* 35, no. 3 (September 1974): 518–28; and G. Clarke Chapman Jr., "American Theology in Black: James H. Cone," *Cross Currents* 22, no 2 (Spring 1972): 139–57.

African American ethicist and Harvard professor Preston Williams was invited to speak at the 1973 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America under the rubric, "Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships," *CTSA Proceedings* 28 (1973): 15–30, https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/2756/2391. Williams spoke only sparingly of theology but concluded that "the Roman Church [must] take more seriously the black experience and culture . . . and educate more blacks to be doctors of the church," (24). In 1974, at the request of CTSA President Richard McBrien, African American Catholic biblical scholar Joseph Nearon, SSS, prepared a preliminary report to the CTSA on black theology, and followed up at the 1975 annual meeting with a detailed presentation, "Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks," *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975): 177–202.

[117] CTSA President Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, in his 1968 presidential address challenged Catholic theologians to formulate an American theology. He positioned his remarks between "two symbols of [his] discontent . . . Resurrection City and the Pentagon." For Burghardt, these were "symbols of the theological impotence of a radical failure within the CTSA—failure to produce or even initiate an American theology . . . a theology whose neuralgic problems arise from our soil and our people," Walter J. Burghardt, SJ,

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