

## Book Review: Introducing James H. Cone: A Personal Exploration<sup>1</sup>

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*Introducing James H. Cone: A Personal Exploration* by Dr. Anthony G. Reddie is a recent publication from SCM Press written about and in honor of Cone and is Reddie's "contribution to the quest for a more diverse and inclusive world of scholarship."<sup>2</sup> According to Reddie, this book is not a biography but, as the title states, an introduction to Cone's "no-holds-barred, liberationist approach to Christianity,"<sup>3</sup> as well as to a selection of Cone's writings on Black Liberation Theology.

Anthony G. Reddie is a respected British scholar, theologian, and author who has made significant contributions to the fields of Black theology. Reddie has held academic positions at several institutions and is currently Director of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture (Regent's Park College, University of Oxford) and an Extraordinary Professor of Theological Ethics (University of South Africa). He is also a prominent speaker and public intellectual, frequently invited to lecture and participate in discussions on various topics related to Black theology and the Black experience. Reddie has published numerous books and articles on these and other topics and is the editor of *Black Theology: An Intercultural Journal*.

For me, two aspects of this book stand out, both of which come from the title: *Introducing* and *Personal*. In this work, Reddie seeks to introduce Cone to those who are not yet familiar with Cone or his work. In section one of the book, he does this by focusing on James Cone himself and the different aspects of his Black theology. In the second and final section, Reddie introduces readers to

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<sup>1</sup> Reddie, Anthony, *Introducing James H. Cone: A personal exploration* (SCM Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Reddie, ix.

<sup>3</sup> Reddie, 6.

six of Cone's books, which Reddie chose due to their importance in his theological development.<sup>4</sup> Those coming to this book with little to no knowledge of Cone will come away with a clear introductory understanding of who Cone was as a Black person and Black theologian in America. This introduction provides newcomers with a great entryway into the writings of James Cone. For those wanting a summary of each chapter, Reddie provides this in the introduction, which is easily accessible for free via the "Look Inside" feature on Amazon.

The true strength of Reddie's work, in my opinion, is the *personal* side of this book. Reddie is upfront and honest about his love and admiration for Cone, referring to himself as a "Cone-head."<sup>5</sup> He does not attempt to make his relationship with Cone more than it was. He was not one of Cone's students or friends but an acquaintance who loved Cone, considering him his hero.

Reddie shares a number of personal stories of times when he encountered Cone throughout his life. One such story that was personally transformative for me was Reddie's retelling of how Cone answered a "non-legitimate question" at a conference Reddie was attending as a student. Reddie says that non-legitimate questions first butter up the Black speaker, then, "after a somewhat tortuous detour of affirming their agreement with the thrust of what he or she has said, comes the 'sucker punch'. What emerges is the real intent of the question," which begins with what Reddie calls the "magic but."<sup>6</sup> These types of questions are intended to show that the questioner is superior to the speaker and to remind the audience that a Black person cannot be equated with an expert. Reddie goes on to tell how Cone responded to such a question with a harsh, combative response of a true prophet. What made this story powerful for me was that through Reddie's story about Cone, I learned something important about Jesus, who also faced unending "non-legitimate questions" throughout his ministry.

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<sup>4</sup> Reddie, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Reddie, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Reddie, 19.

Reddie not only shares personal stories of his interactions with Cone, but he also shares his own experiences as a Black man and Black theologian in Britain today. Reddie tells of turning down a speaking opportunity, at the advice of Cone, since all the keynote speakers were white and had shown no signs of being interested in race or white supremacy.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the book, Reddie applies Cone's theology to current issues, such as the murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the racial inequality of the distribution of COVID vaccines around the world. In other words, this book is not just about the past but also has a message to speak about our modern context.

I consider *Introducing James H. Cone: A Personal Exploration* a must-read for those interested in Cone and Black Theology but have yet to engage with either. I especially recommend Reddie's book to those like me, white American Christians, who want and need to confront their Whiteness by listening to the voices of the Black Church. Be forewarned: at points, Cone, Reddie, and Black theology will probably make you uncomfortable. But do not let those uncomfortable moments reflexively cause you to dismiss the man or the theology, but instead allow them to expose areas of your life that have not yet been liberated from Whiteness.

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<sup>7</sup> Reddie, 28.