

## **“Wicked Crises” and “Complicated Wickedness”: Towards a Contemporary Methodist Theology of Sin in Dialogue with John Wesley and James Cone**

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Human societies at a local, regional, and international level are confronted with a multiplicity of dynamic, interrelated and interdependent crises – war, terror, ecological exploitation and degradation, the exploitation of the powerless, mass migration, spiralling cost of living, increasing wealth gap, political intolerance, authoritarian governments and political parties, scapegoating of minorities, the concentration of wealth and power beyond democratic control, and climate change. It is a “wicked crisis” in that its sheer complexity and dynamism resists solutions. Single dynamics of the intersecting crises cannot be addressed without addressing other dynamics, attempts to address some dynamics alone creates further complexities and problems. Yet it is also a “wicked crisis” in the more traditional use of the term wicked – many of the intersecting dynamics are expressions of or consequences of what Christian theology has traditionally designated as “sin”. In the terminology of John Wesley, it is the intersecting of “complicated wickedness” with “complicated misery”<sup>1</sup> which, for Wesley, was the expression and consequence of original sin.<sup>2</sup>

While the theology of (original) sin was revived to interpret the crises of the first half the twentieth century, it is now widely regarded as oppressive dehumanizing and degrading, particularly amongst “progressive” Christians. Wesley, in an intellectual context in which the doctrine of original sin was often rejected in favour of an emphasis on the goodness of humanity, insisted it was a doctrinal essential on which genuine Christianity stood or fell. A theological response to the crises and the retrieval of Wesley’s original sin cannot simply repeat Wesley’s theology. His interpretation of sin and original sin is not without significant problems but there are aspects of it that can be critically retrieved to address the contemporary wicked crisis. These aspects will then be brought into dialogue with the theology of a later Methodist theologian James Cone. Cone rejected both the attempt to minimise the radical nature of sin in liberal theologies and the universalising and flattening approaches of twentieth century “neo-orthodoxy”. Affirming the pervasive but contextual character of sin, Cone argued that while all sin involves an alienation from our created identity and purpose it is manifested in different ways depending upon one’s social and communal context. This pervasive reality of sin was profoundly expressed in the ubiquity of “whiteness” in North American and European theologies.

### **John Wesley on Complicated Wickedness and Complicated Misery**

A detailed exposition of Wesley’s understanding of sin is beyond the scope of this paper, rather we will seek to retrieve particularly helpful dimensions noting some problematic features. What then did Wesley mean by “complicated” as applied to: “misery”, “wickedness”, “villainy”, “evils”, and “mischief” (in the 18<sup>th</sup> century meaning of harmful, hurtful, or injurious consequences of actions)? In his *Complete English Dictionary*<sup>3</sup> he defines complicated as: “Consisting of many parts”, his contemporary Samuel Johnson defined complicated as: “To entangle one with another, to join, to involve mutually, ... “To unite by involution of parts in one in another .... “To form by complication; to

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<sup>1</sup> See John Wesley, Sermon 67, “On Divine Providence” § 13, *Works of Wesley* 2:540.

<sup>2</sup> See John Wesley Sermon 44, “Original Sin” *Works of Wesley* 2:172-185, Sermon 57, “On the Fall of Man” *Works of Wesley* 2:400-412, and *The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience* in *Works of Wesley* 12:156-481

<sup>3</sup> *The Complete English Dictionary, Explaining Most of those Hard Words which are found in the Best English Writers*, (London: 1753).

form the union of several parts integral”<sup>4</sup> Wesley’s use of the term “complicated” in these contexts thus expresses the complex interrelationship of diverse forms of evil, sin, harm, injury, and suffering that pervades human life and, which Wesley recognized, resist logical analysis<sup>5</sup> - in contemporary terminology “complicated” designates a “wicked” problem.

### **The importance of Original Sin in Wesley’s Theology**

As we noted above, Wesley regarded the doctrine of original sin as an essential not merely of Methodism but of Christianity – arguing that it distinguishes genuine Christianity from “heathenism”. It performs three important functions in his theology.

- It is fundamental to his theodicy. Wesley’s theodicy argued that God created a good world and all suffering and evil in the world arises from the fall of Adam as a punishment; as the natural consequences of the disruption in the relation between humanity and God, and therefore between human beings, and between human beings and the rest of creation; and as the suffering inflicted by sinful human beings on each other and on the rest of creation. Suffering and death are universal and therefore sin must be universal and original.
- It is the presupposition of his understanding of salvation as the renewal of the image of God in the human person. He argues that that the corruption of human nature by sin is the logical presupposition of the doctrine of salvation. If human beings are not corrupted by sin, then there is no need for salvation and Christianity is untrue.
- It is the presupposition of the universality of the gospel offer of salvation. All human beings, regardless of ethnicity, social class, education, or status, need to be saved. This meant that social respectability did not exclude one from the necessity of the new birth. It also was the basis of Wesley’s rejection of claims for the “innocence” of ethnic groups that had not been exposed to Western European Culture.

While Wesley in specific contexts emphasised the pervasive corrupting effects of original sin in other contexts he qualified it in the following ways:

- Despite original sin, God loves all human beings as God’s children and desires there spiritual, mental, and bodily well-being.
- He emphasised that while the moral image of God had been destroyed by original sin, this did not mean that the natural image of God or other aspects of God’s good creation were completely destroyed in human beings. Educational and cultural development are possibly to be understood in part as the expression of this.
- The pervasiveness of human sin is countered by the pervasive working of prevenient grace restoring aspects of the moral image of God. While prevenient grace is universal its effectiveness is dependent upon human response and its impact is therefore varied.
- God providentially works, in specific cases, to curtail the outworkings of original sin and its consequences.

Wesley does not provide a systematic account of how these different dynamics relate to each other and argues that it is humanly impossible to comprehend this mystery.<sup>6</sup> What he does do is that in different contexts he emphasises one or more of the dynamics for particular theological and rhetorical

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (Dublin. Thomas Ewing: 1768)

<sup>5</sup> See Sermon 69, “On the Imperfection of Human Knowledge” *Works of Wesley* 2: 568-586

<sup>6</sup> See Sermon 69, “On the Imperfection of Human Knowledge” *Works of Wesley* 2: 568-586

purposes. Thus, in his discussions of slavery he places the stress on God's love for African people, their morality, and their cultural development, and he ignores original sin. In his discussions of original sin, he emphasises the depravity of African people in order to argue for the universality of sin.<sup>7</sup> Despite the deeply problematic way that Wesley uses these qualifications, they are important for a critical retrieval of Wesley's theology of sin.

### **The Root of Complicated Wickedness**

For Wesley the root of complicated wickedness lies in the corruption of the human heart, more than that the heart of the sinful human person is itself characterised by complicated wickedness with diverse sinful motivations and desires interacting with each other. Wesley describes the corruption of the heart that resulted from the fall:

Here was the true origin of evil. Hence came the inexhaustible flood of evils upon the lower world. When Satan had once transfused his own self-will and pride into the parents of mankind, together with a new species of sin, -- love of the world, the loving the creature above the Creator, -- all manner of wickedness soon rushed in; all ungodliness and unrighteousness; shooting out into crimes of every kind; soon covering the whole face of the earth with all manner of abominations. It would be an endless task to enumerate all the enormities that broke out. Now the fountains of the great deep were broken up. The earth soon became a field of blood: Revenge, cruelty, ambition, with all sorts of injustice, every species of public and private wrongs, were diffused through every part of the earth. Injustice, in ten thousand forms, hatred, envy, malice, blood-thirstiness, with every species of falsehood, rode triumphant; till the Creator, looking down from heaven, would be no more entreated for an incorrigible race, but swept them off from the face of the earth.<sup>8</sup>

The corruption of the human heart is complicated by two other dimensions that Wesley notes. The first is that that even amongst those who have experiences the new birth that "in spite of all our endeavours, cleaves both to our words and actions".<sup>9</sup> The second is that as a consequence of the fall human knowledge is now characterised by ignorance, error, and mistakes.<sup>10</sup> We are unable to understand the complexity of the world and of our own actions and their consequences in the world.

### **Analysing Complicated Wickedness**

Wesley typically emphasised the root of sin in the human heart and therefore that the solution to sin lay in the transformation of the person through the new birth and sanctification that creates "a virtuous heart, producing a virtuous life: A complication of justice, mercy, and truth, of every right and amiable temper, beaming forth from the deepest recesses of the mind, in a series of wise and gracious actions."<sup>11</sup> Wesley saw this as leading to the transformation of society: As he wrote in his "Seasonable Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain":

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<sup>7</sup> See David N. Field, "Imaging the Exotic Other: John Wesley and the People of Africa" in *Wesley and Methodist Studies* vol. 15/1 (Jan. 2023) and "John Wesley's Views on Non-British Cultures" in *The Routledge Companion to John Wesley*, edited by Joseph W. Cunningham and Clive Norris (London and New York: Routledge, 2024)

<sup>8</sup> Sermon 128, "The Deceitfulness of the Human Heart" § 1.1 *Works of Wesley* 4:152-153

<sup>9</sup> Sermon 74 On the Church, § 2:21 *Works of Wesley* 3:53

<sup>10</sup> See Sermon 57, "On the Fall of Man" § 2.2 *Works of Wesley* 2:405-407.

<sup>11</sup> "A Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland" § 7 *Works of Wesley* 9:283

Much, brethren depends on you, though 'the world account your life madness, and your end without honour;' for you are the true 'salt of the earth;' you alone preserve it from general purification; and you, under God are the great means of saving a divided kingdom, 'a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers;' and had not the Lord 'left a you as a small remnant,' we should long since 'have been as Sodom and Gomorrah!'<sup>12</sup>

In many of his references to the complicated relationship between sin, human (and animal) suffering, and the transformation of the heart in his political tracts Wesley focuses on suffering as a punishment from God and thus the solution is national repentance. Interestingly he often focuses on perjury, sabbath breaking, profanity, and lack of devotion to God as the typical sins of the nation. In a few places he refers to suffering as a consequence of evil actions and but again the emphasis falls on individual repentance and transformation leading to changes in behavior in society – what he often referred to as “holiness of conversation”. In specific cases he acknowledges that addressing some issues are not easy,<sup>13</sup> but there are a few occasions where he attempts to address the complexity of “complicated wickedness” and “complicated misery”.

Wesley's “Thoughts upon the Present Scarcity of Provisions”<sup>14</sup> is his most detailed attempt to analyze a case of complicated misery, this compliments his other writings on wealth and poverty, taken together we can note the following:

- Wesley emphasizes that poverty is not a consequence of idleness and that in most cases the poor work extremely hard in comparison to many of the rich who live lives of relative ease.
- In a number of sermons dealing with money he emphasizes the importance of the wealthy using their excess wealth to provide for the needs of the poor. Their failure to this is an act of stealing from God and the poor.
- The pursuit of luxury goods is an example of wasting money that could be used for the poor.
- He recognizes in some cases poverty and want is a consequence of exploitative business and employment practices, but this is rarely a focus of his addresses to the rich.
- He also recognizes that the legal system and corrupt lawyers make it very difficult for poor people to get justice when they have been exploited and unjustly treated.
- He analyses the reasons for the increase in the cost of food which he argues are a consequence of using grain for distilling, oats to feed horses, and the enclosures of common land.
- The cost of renting land has increased because the rich are living beyond their means. The luxury of the rich is a cause of the impoverishment of the masses.
- He noted that heavy taxes on the poor increase poverty – a key factor here is the cost of servicing the national debt.
- His solutions to the problem include banning distilling, taxes on various luxury items, discharging half the national debt (effectively a massive tax on those who had invested in it), and abolishing various useless government positions.

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<sup>12</sup> “A Seasonable Address to the inhabitants of Great Britain”, *Works (Jackson)*, 11:123

<sup>13</sup> See his letter to James Lowther of July 1, 1759, in *Works of Wesley* 27:164-165; and “Free Thoughts on the Present State of Current Affairs”, *Works (Jackson)*, 11: 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions” in *Works (Jackson)* 11:53-58

In his “Word to the Smuggler”<sup>15</sup> he engages in analysis of smuggling. Two points are worth noting. The first is that he connects the loss of revenue (customs on luxury goods) through smuggling to the high taxes of the poor. Second, he criticizes not only the smugglers but also those who buy smuggled goods. In *Thoughts upon Slavery*<sup>16</sup> he traces responsibility for the horrors of slavery to captains of slave trading ships, the merchants who invest in the slave trade, and plantation owners and other enslavers regardless of how they came to “own” enslaved people. Here, as in a few other places, he recognizes the role of unjust governments and legal provisions, but these are not central concerns. Towards the end of his life the Arminian Magazine did encourage Methodists to sign the petition to parliament to end the slave trade.

By twenty first century standards Wesley’s analysis is inadequate and pays insufficient attention to social and political structures. In some cases, his solutions are superficial and reflect some of his typical moralistic concerns about luxury, smuggling, and distilling. He is however, moving beyond the intense focus on the personal that is characteristic of much of his theology. Importantly his awareness of complicated wickedness does not become a lead to paralysis but rather he encourages actions towards ending misery in accordance with the best analysis that he can give.

### **Retrieving Wesley’s Theology**

The critical and constructive retrieving of Wesley’s theology is not the simple repetition of various themes; nor is it the attempt to consciously or unconsciously reshape Wesley’s theology to make it more palatable to contemporary concerns. Rather it recognizes the socio-historical gap between Wesley and the contemporary situation, the problematic character of aspects of his theology, and the newness of contemporary challenges. It seeks insights from Wesley that can be used to develop a constructive theology for our contexts. What then can be retrieved from Wesley?

- While Wesley placed an emphasis on original sin and divine punishment in interpreting complicated wickedness and misery – this is only one aspect of his interpretation of the human condition.
- Wesley emphasized aspects of his theological framework in relation to contextual, rhetorical, and theological purposes. While this is problematic in some cases, it opens the way for a more differentiated approach to the pervasiveness of human sin.
- Theological responses to people who have been degraded, oppressed, excluded, and scapegoated should begin not with original sin but with Divine love for all, the goodness of creation, and the healing and empowering work of prevenient grace. Original sin and original blessing are not opposites but, along with renewing grace, aspects of a “complicated” portrait of the human condition.
- Wesley’s emphasis on the pervasiveness of human sin with its focus on God’s punitive justice against all human beings needs to be decentered in favor of his minor emphasis on evil brought about by unjust, indifferent, and cruel human activity and structures.
- Wesley’s assertion of the complicated character human sin, human misery, and human finitude must be brought from the circumference to the center of theological reflection on sin without neglecting his emphasis on the corruption of the human heart.

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<sup>15</sup> “Word to the Smuggler” *Works (Jackson)* 11:174-178

<sup>16</sup> *Thoughts upon Slavery, Works (Jackson)* 11:59-79

- Wesley's emphasis on sin cleaving to all human actions and intentions and human limitations, finitude, and proneness to mistakes is an important rejection of all forms of human messianism.
- Wesley's emphasis on the transforming power of grace and the ability of grace transformed and empowered people to bring about social and political renewal in the midst of complicated wickedness requires emphasizing in contemporary contexts often characterized by despair.

### **Pervasive Whiteness in the Theology of James Cone**

James Cone writes out of a very different context from John Wesley. Cone's discussions of sin arose in the dual context of living in a racist society in which racism permeated the church and was propagated by church leadership and of his experience of divine presence, comfort, and empowerment within the Black church. His focus is not an intellectual defense of original sin nor the desire to prove that all human beings are sinful and need salvation. Rather, flowing from the confession that the gospel at its core is the proclamation of God's liberation of oppressed human beings, his focus is on the question of what God is doing in a racist society to liberate the victims of racism when White Christianity is deeply racist; White Christians are advocates of racist policies, practices, and institutions, and perpetrators of racist atrocities; and when White church leaders and theologians either ignore racism or actively support it. For Cone the question of the pervasiveness of sin is the reality of the pervasiveness of whiteness in society, in the church, and in theology.

### **Sin as Contextual**

Cone's concentration "is not humanity in general, not some abstract species of Platonic idealism", but "with concrete humanity, particularly oppressed humanity. In America that means Black humanity."<sup>17</sup> Hence, sin never universal it is always concrete and contextual. From a Christian perspective sin is understood in the light of the revelation of God as the liberator of the oppressed in the Exodus and in Jesus Christ.

Sin ... is a condition of human existence in which we deny the essence of God's liberating activity revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a way of life in which we cease to be fully human and we make choices according to our private interests, identifying the ultimate with an alien power. It is accepting slavery as a condition of human existence by denying the freedom grounded in God's activity. Sin is an alienation from the sources of humanity in the world, resulting in human oppression and misery.<sup>18</sup>

He asserts that "sin is alienation from God that is always connected with injustice and oppression."<sup>19</sup> He argues that this interrelationship is pervasive theme in the writings of the Hebrew prophets and in Jesus' proclamation and enacting of the kingdom of God.<sup>20</sup> This general definition of sin is inherently concrete for sin is experienced in the concreteness of oppression and liberation, it is thus experienced in the concrete differences between the oppressor and the oppressed. Sin "is the ... recognition that some have lost their *identity* for being. In as much as whites and blacks do not share a common identity, whites cannot know what sin is from a Black

<sup>17</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1986), 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Black Theology of Liberation*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1975), 237.

<sup>20</sup> See *God of the Oppressed* 62-83.

perspective.”<sup>21</sup> The perception of sin arises out of the experience of liberation from oppression, thus as long as whites remain as oppressors they are “incapable of making valid judgements on the character of sin”<sup>22</sup> and replace this with abstract discussions about the universal sinfulness of humanity. Cone thus affirms that “all people are sinners” but argues that “[o]nly blacks can speak about the sin in a Black perspective and apply it to Black and White persons.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Wickedness and Whiteness**

As the articulation of experience racist oppression and liberation in Christ, Cone argues that in the context racist America sin can only be genuinely perceived from a Black perspective. Cone argues:

But through sin man rejects his proper activity and destiny. He wants to be God, the creator of his destiny. This is the essence of sin, every man's desire to become 'like God.' But in his passion to become super-human, man becomes subhuman, estranged from the source of his being, threatening and threatened by his neighbor transforming a situation destined for intimate fellowship into a spider web of conspiracy and violence.<sup>24</sup>

In the history of the United States and more generally in the context of European colonial and neo-colonial domination, sin is particularly manifested in whiteness. Cone thus asserts “Whiteness as revealed in the history of America, is the expression of what is wrong with man. It is the symbol of man's depravity.”<sup>25</sup> Whiteness is the way of being in the world that is determined by White racist domination so that reality, history, society, morality, and the divine are perceived and experienced from within this way of being. Whiteness becomes the all-embracing world in which White people live preventing them from understanding the world from the perspective of the oppressed.

The White structure of this American society, personified in every racist, must be at least part of what the New Testament meant by the demonic forces. According to the New Testament, these powers can get hold of a man's total being and can control his life to such a degree that he is incapable of distinguishing himself from the alien power. This seems to be what has happened to White racism in America. It is a part of the spirit of the age, the ethos of the culture, so embedded in the social, economic, and political structure that White society is incapable of knowing its destructive nature.<sup>26</sup>

Whites are not only entrapped within pervasive whiteness but whiteness blinds people to their own racism, their assumption of the normality of the White status quo, and of the way in which they benefit from racism. To use Wesley's terminology for White people “complicated wickedness” is expressed in “complicated whiteness”. Whiteness shapes the theology and practice of the White church blinding them to realities of racism in church and society, motivating them to defend the racist status quo, leading them to abstract universal theologizing, and when they do address racism, it shapes there analysis of and responses resulting in a failure

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<sup>21</sup> *Black Theology of Liberation*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> *Black Theology of Liberation* 106

<sup>23</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1986), 51.

<sup>24</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll; Orbis, 2018) Kindle edition, 71 of 172.

<sup>25</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 170 of 172.

<sup>26</sup> Cone, James H., *Black Theology and Black Power* 46-47 of 172.

to recognize the depth of oppression, injustice, and hurt resulting in superficial solutions that do not threaten White power and privilege. Cone argues that whiteness pervades both conservative and liberal/progressive theologies in the USA. For the dominant theologies in the history of America, slavery, racism, and lynching if they were addressed at all they were relegated to a side issue. Whiteness blinded theologians from seeing the pervasiveness of racist and oppression and of God's liberation of the oppressed. Ethically the pervasive whiteness result in an ethical reversal of the biblical traditions. White morality and ethics affirm and defend whiteness, justifying or ignoring racism, and judging and condemning the Black struggle for justice. From the perspective of God's liberating action White morality is inherently immoral. The pervasive influence of whiteness on the White church and theology has fundamentally corrupted the White church so that its communal life denies the gospel and its preaching and theology is heresy.

The pervasiveness of whiteness and its shaping of society and the church not only shapes the White people and the White church, it also has an impact on Black people and the Black church. Cone thus critiques the theology and preaching of the Black Church where it conforms to whiteness through a spiritualized other worldly interpretation of the, a moralistic focus on personal sin, a simplistic understanding of reconciliation, and the critical attitude to the struggle for liberation.

### **Intersecting Systems of Oppression**

The focus of Cone's initial work is on racism with a particular emphasis on the historic and continuing oppression of Black people in America. He does on occasion make references to other forms of oppression including the genocide of Native Americans, the Vietnam war, and capitalism. His interaction with other theologies of liberation expands his understanding of the dynamics of colonial, neo-colonial, and capitalist oppression. In his later work he recognizes his own blindness to his patriarchy and affirms the need to broaden his understanding of oppression and liberation to include patriarchy and sexism which is present not only in broader society but also the church. Discrimination against LGBTQ people and the exploitation of the earth. These diverse forms of injustice and their ideological justification display similar characteristics to whiteness in that pervade societies, shape people's actions, and blind oppressors and beneficiaries to the oppression, exploitation, and suffering that they cause. Racism and the struggle for Black liberation remained the center of his work he explores the connections and intersections of other forms of oppression with racism. God's liberatory action is comprehensive addressing the complicated oppression and injustice.

In *God of the Oppressed* Cone's analysis of whiteness and other intersecting forms of injustice by his drawing on the sociology of knowledge to explain how ideas, particularly theologies are shaped by social location and interests. It is the embeddedness of whiteness and other forms of oppression in society that shapes people's knowledge of humanity, the world, history, and the divine. Thus, all claims to universal or presuppositionless knowledge are invalid. It is by recognizing the limitations of one's knowledge and the encounter with realities beyond one's own social location – in this case diverse locations of oppression and injustice that enable one to come to a more comprehensive understanding and experience of reality. Thus, for example, for Cone it was through listening to the voice of Black women that he discovered his own entrapment in patriarchy.

For Cone this contextual understanding of the pervasiveness of sin, embodied in the social structures and expressed in diverse but intersecting forms of oppression and injustice provides



the crucial interpretative tool for equipping the Christians and the church to engage in the struggle for liberation. The pervasiveness of sin is not an oppressive and dehumanizing concept but rather a significant contribution to the liberation of dehumanized and oppressed people.

### **Liberation is Possible**

The center of Cones theology is not whiteness or oppression but the conviction that the gospel is the announcement that of God's action in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit to liberate the oppressed. This is not the reduction of the gospel to politics – Cone emphasizes the spiritual dimensions, that salvation is rooted in a living relationship with God who is encountered in the life and worship of the church – particularly the Black church. It is however a rejection of an understanding of the gospel that focusses exclusively or even primarily on the personal. Thus while Cone acknowledges Wesley's critique of slavery, he is critical of Wesley's focus on individual heart religion.

The emphasis on liberation is not form of political Pelagianism – rather it is the announcement of what God is doing in the world through human actions to bring about liberation – in the 1960s and 70s this was through the Black Power Movement. Cone, in good Wesleyan fashion, emphasizes the priority of grace and the imperative of grace enabled human action. It is God who acts to bring liberation, but God acts by including the responsible human action to overcome injustice. In particular it is in the church that people are experience transformation, healing, and empowerment for engaging in the struggle for liberation.

### **Learning from Cone**

Cone is one the most significant Methodist theologians of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries. While his theology is often categorized as a special interest theology in comparison to the dominant traditions his significance is lies precisely in his critique of the dominant universalizing theologies as expressions of whiteness. There very claim to be dealing with universal perspectives on God and humanity and thus ignoring or marginalizing the concrete realities of oppression is a manifestation of the special interest in protecting white privilege and interests. Dialoguing with Cone raises the question as to what extent is Wesley to be understood as a white theologian entrapped in the incipient whiteness of the eighteenth century. For our purposes how can dialoguing with Cone enrich contemporary Methodist theology and enable it to equip the church to address the contemporary wicked crisis.

- Cone's emphasis on the concreteness and contextuality of pervasive sin is an important corrective to the universalizing and flattening tendencies of Wesley's theology of original sin. Whereas Wesley wanted to emphasize that all human beings are sinners who are subject to the punitive judgement of God and thus need the new birth; Cone emphasized the concrete reality of particular forms of injustice and oppression against particular groups of people, God's justice is not punitive but liberative acting to liberate people from concrete injustice.
- Cones emphasis on injustice and oppression as the major expression of alienation from God is an important corrective to the focus on individual moralistic interpretations of sin.
- Cone's emphasis on whiteness as a concrete form or pervasive sin compliments and corrects Wesley's emphasis on the corruption of the human heart. Sin pervades societies and social structures in particular forms (whiteness, patriarchy, capitalism) or

in a network of forms shaping peoples experience, knowledge, and action. Even people of deep personal piety are influenced and shaped by pervasive social sin.

- Cone's emphasis on the pervasiveness and power of whiteness in the church and theology is a call for significant self-critique that compliments and deepens Wesley's emphasis on the fallibility of all theology. The question becomes not merely where a particular theology is open to critique but in what ways does a particular theology explicitly or implicitly legitimate and support the oppression of particular groups in society.
- Cone's emphasis on God's liberating action in the world expands, compliments, and critiques Wesley's intense focus on the individual. God's work liberative grace at work in society that stimulates, empowers, and includes human action provides the hope for liberative transformation within the context of pervasive sin and complex social realities.

### **John Wesley, James Cone, and the Contemporary Wicked Crisis**

The critique of the dehumanizing potential of theologies of original sin needs to be taken with utmost seriousness. The doctrine of original sin shaped by whiteness has, for example, often been used as a tool to dehumanize Black people. Wesley is not free of such tendencies. Given the realities of suffering and evil which both Wesley and Cone emphasize the response is not to reject the theology of sin but to rather reinterpret it as a tool for understanding the contemporary network of crises. Both Wesley and Cone in different ways emphasize the value and dignity of all people and at the same time emphasize the reality of the pervasiveness of human sin. These should not be perceived as contradictory but rather as complimentary aspects of the gospel message.

Wesley and Cone together provide helpful contributions to a theological interpretation of the present crises.

- A contemporary theology of sin must emphasize both the reality of personal sin – Wesley's corruption of the heart – and the embeddedness of sin in social, cultural, and religious structures – Cones emphasis on whiteness.
- A contemporary theology of pervasive sin must affirm the contextual particularity and concreteness of sin. Sin does not exist in the abstract but in concrete particular realities of oppression, exploitation, and injustice.
- The use of a theology of sin to interpret the present crises needs to include a careful analysis of the complexity of the crises in order to name the concrete unjust and oppressive realities.
- A contemporary theology of sin must critically examine the role of the church and theologies in legitimating injustice, oppression, exploitation, and exclusion.
- A contemporary theology of sin needs to be self critically aware of its own embeddedness in society and therefor its fallibility and potential for promoting harm.
- A contemporary theology of sin must be articulated in the overarching context of God's gracious action to bring holistic salvation to humanity. Thus, it must become a means of concrete action to bring about transformation and tool to equip Christians and the church to act.