

Abstract

The emergence of James Cone's black liberation theology in the late-1960s and early 1970s marked both a radical challenge to and a historical transformation of the fields of religious and theological studies. Building on Cone's work, black theological discourse has developed a rich tradition of religious and academic inquiry characterized by its commitment to interpreting Christianity in particular, and religious experience more broadly, from the vantage point of oppressed black people. This dissertation shows that James Cone developed a particular understanding of black identity in his early works and, furthermore, that various scholars have critically engaged this conception of black identity in both explicit and implicit ways. I argue that retaining and developing black theology's commitment to the lived experiences of oppressed black people requires clarifying the meaning of black identity in light of the complex socio-economic realities that characterize black life in the 21st-century. Borrowing from the work of Latin American theologian Orlando Espin, this dissertation identifies and interprets outstanding examples of critical engagement with Cone's conception of blackness as moments of "traditioning." Traditioning marks the ongoing and inevitable process of contesting and reshaping theological realities. This dissertation, then, analyzes the ongoing contestation and reshaping—traditioning—of black identity in black theological discourse. Through this analysis, this dissertation seeks to maintain and develop black theology's revolutionary commitment to the oppressed by refracting this commitment through the lens of the historic socio-economic stratification that characterizes black life in the 21st century.