

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James H. Cone

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Cone, James H.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 24, 2006 and May 10, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:15:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Theologian James H. Cone (1938 - 2018 ) was an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a faculty member of the Union Theological Seminary. Rev. Cone was also the author of 'Black Theology and Black Power,' 'A Black Theology of Liberation,' and 'Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology.' Cone was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 24, 2006 and May 10, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_004
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Theologian James Hal Cone was born on August 5, 1938 in Fordyce, Arkansas. With his parents' teachings on faith and his strong understanding of the value of an education, Cone began his formal training with a diploma from Ouachita County Training High School in 1954. That same year, he received his call to the ministry and became a pastor at age sixteen. After receiving his B.A. degree from Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1958, he attended Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois where he received his B.D. degree in 1961. Continuing his studies, Cone received both his M.A. degree in 1963 and his Ph.D. in systematic theology in 1965 from Northwestern University.

Armed with a strong divinity education and serving as an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Cone began his professional career as a professor at Philander Smith College, in 1966. He then taught at Adrian College in Michigan. Beginning in 1970, Cone joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, where in 1977, he was awarded the distinguished Charles A. Briggs Chair in Systematic Theology. Cone also created a systematic Black theology. Cone created a Christian theology that was based on African American experience, history, and culture.

Among his numerous books are *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (1984), *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or Nightmare* (1992), and *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology* (1999).

Cone passed away on April 28, 2018.

---

# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James H. Cone was conducted by Shawn Wilson on January 24, 2006 and May 10, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Theologian James H. Cone (1938 - 2018 ) was an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a faculty member of the Union Theological Seminary. Rev. Cone was also the author of 'Black Theology and Black Power,' 'A Black Theology of Liberation,' and 'Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology.'

---

# Restrictions

## Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

## Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

---

# Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

---

# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

Cone, James H.

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cone, James H.--Interviews

---

# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

### Occupations:

Theologian

---

### HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

---

## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, January 24, 2006 and May 10, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

---

## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

---

## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

James H. Cone was born on August 5, 1938 in Fordyce, Arkansas to Lucy Frost Cone and Charles Cone. Cone's mother was one of the fourteen children born to sharecropper, James Frost, in Fordyce. She worked in the fields and achieved an eighth grade education. Her brother, Charles Frost, later earned a master's degree at City College of New York and became a businessman in Harlem. Cone's mother taught him and his brothers, Charles Cone and Cecil Cone, the

value of education, and to heed Jim Crow laws. Cone's father refused to work for a white employer, so he worked independently as a woodcutter. He also sued the Ouchita County Training School for racial discrimination, which was rampant in other parts of town as well. Cone's father built the family's home in Bearden, Arkansas, which was the first in the area to have indoor plumbing. Cone grew up in a close-knit black community, where the ministers were the leaders. Home, school and church were influential in the development of Cone's spirituality.

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:29 ?

James H. Cone began the first grade at five years old. While his uncles served in World War II, his father was not drafted due to a foot injury. Cone was drawn to the ministry as a means of protest when he considered interrupting a white Methodist church service as a teenager. Influenced by NAACP lawyer Wiley A. Branton, Sr., his father filed a discrimination lawsuit against Ouchita County Training School prior to the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling in 1954. That year, Cone graduated from the school, and enrolled at Shorter College and later Philander Smith College, where he witnessed the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1958, he began graduate school at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Chicago, where he was influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King's philosophy. Cone reflects upon the purpose of non-violent direct action; Emmett Till's murder; attitudes towards segregation among whites and blacks; and the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal church.

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

James H. Cone earned a Ph.D. degree at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois in 1965. While living in Chicago, Illinois, he experienced racial discrimination, contrary to his expectations of the integrated North. In the aftermath of the Watts riots, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Chicago, but Mayor Richard Daley prevented him from organizing a march. King's philosophy was aimed at religious, southern blacks, but also appealed to the white clergy while Malcolm X's African-centered philosophy targeted the growing unrest among urban African Americans. Cone was influenced by the black power movement that emerged in 1966, Malcolm X's teachings, and his growing realization of the exclusion of blacks from traditional white theology. He was also guided by the Nation of Islam's critiques of the whiteness of Christianity and the writings of Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass. In 1968, Cone published his concept of black theology in his book 'Black Theology and Black Power.'

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

James H. Cone was influenced by the black power movement established by civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael in 1966 following his rejection of SNCC's white leadership. Cone was also impacted by the riots in Detroit in 1967, and the assassination of his role model, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. That year, Cone published his ideas on black theology to reveal the gospel's relevance to the African American community. His work was initially denounced by the theological community, especially his assertion that the Palestinian-born Jesus Christ was a person of color. He talks about the normalized representation of Jesus Christ's race as white, and its impact upon different church groups and children. In this part of the interview, Cone reflects upon the segregation of churches from a cultural and social perspective; the demographics of the Catholic church, and its subservience to majority white cardinals; and the differences between Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan.

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_002\_005, TRT: 0:30:11 ?

James H. Cone first taught religion and philosophy at Philander Smith College in 1964, before graduating with his Ph.D. degree in theology from Northwestern University's Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. In the wake of incidents following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, like the riots in Watts, Los Angeles, California, SNCC Chairman Stokeley Carmichael urged African Americans to take control of their future by any means necessary, thus founding the black power movement. In 1966, Cone resigned from Philander Smith College after the president and board of directors tried to inhibit his radical theological ideas. He then began teaching at Adrian College in Michigan, where he was deeply impacted by the Detroit riots of 1967. Also influenced by the black power movement and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968, Cone founded black theology to address the injustices faced by the black community. He also narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_002\_006, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

James H. Cone's theology was shaped by the teachings of both Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, who denounced Christianity as a white religion. To reconcile his own spirituality, his role as a theologian, and his black identity, Cone developed the perspective of black theology in 1968. Cone theorized that there was a correlation between the struggles of Jesus Christ and of African Americans, and claimed that Jesus Christ was a person of color. His ideas were met with fierce opposition from his white counterparts and skepticism from the black clergy. In 1969, following the publication of 'Black Theology and Black Power,' Cone accepted a teaching position at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where his ideas were well received. Cone reflects upon the role of the white church in slavery, slaves' interpretations of religion in comparison to their white owners and the need for the church to stand up against the continued oppression of the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with James H. Cone, Section A2006\_004\_002\_007, TRT: 0:14:02 ?

James H. Cone talks about the relevance of black theology; the incompatibility of the ministry and politics; and contemporary religious incidents such as Pope John Paul II's apology for the Catholic Church's involvement in the African slave trade and Minister Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March. Cone also reflects upon his career; and his hopes for the African American community, its greatest achievement and the role of religion in keeping hope alive.