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Three Phases in the Writings of James Cone: Resistance, Affirmation, and Dialectics

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In the spring of 1985, James H. Cone addressed the Lutheran Theological Seminary Study Conference in Saskatoon, an appearance made in honor of his retiring former professor, critic, correspondent, and advocate, William E. Hordern. Besides providing a platform to express his gratitude to Hordern, the event afforded the legendary “godfather of the development of black liberation theology in its systematic form”¹ the opportunity to share his passionate and liberative vision of freedom for African-Americans and other oppressed peoples, a vision rooted in scripture and the black church. During his opening lecture on “Black Theology and American Religion,” Cone laid bare what arguably constitutes the bedrock for his theological program, namely the “radical incompatibility of Christianity and slavery” in American history and in the African-American experience.²

Cone confronts this “radical incompatibility” in two ways, first by rejecting the form of Christianity imposed upon African-American slaves by their white slave masters, a brand of hegemonic Christianity that continues down through today wherever the liberation of the oppressed does not take priority in the church; Cone describes this liberation as “the essence of God’s revelation in history.”³ Secondly, he affirms what Dwight Hopkins calls the “slave religion of freedom” that emerged as African slaves radically (and covertly) adapted the aforementioned hegemonic Christianity, combined with their memories of religious practices in Africa and knowledge gleaned from day-to-day life.⁴ This slave religion eventually developed from a clandestine ‘invisible institution’ into the officially tolerated African-American church,⁵ a church that produced a black theology of liberation in the 1960s.⁶

The “radical incompatibility” of America’s racist legacy of slavery and later segregation, at odds with both the principles of its Christian religious heritage and its professed democratic ideals, has produced what Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized as the “double contradiction” at the heart of American life, and provides the basis for James Cone’s body of work.⁷ Indeed, Cone identifies “a general comprehension of nearly four hundred years of slavery and segregation in North America, both of which were enacted into law by government and openly defended as ordained of God by most white churches and their theologians,” as indispensable to understanding his writing, specifically his classic 1970 systematic study *A Black Theology of Liberation*.⁸ In the following pages, I argue that as Cone confronts American racism and affirms African-American freedom, he moves through three related but distinct phases, going from the contra-theology that largely characterizes

his first two books (*Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*) stressing the 'freedom from' dimension vis-à-vis white hegemony; to the subsequent 'freedom for' period beginning with 1972's *The Spirituals and the Blues*, where Cone mines African-American history to affirm a rich and binary musical heritage, before entering a third phase that more evenly balances the 'freedom from' and 'freedom for' dimensions, expressed in 1991's *Martin & Malcolm & America*, a historical study of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, mutually corrective figures whose legacies offer grist for the interpretive mill of understanding African-American history and pursuing the ongoing cause of African-American liberation.

Phase One: Contra-Theology

The Black Power movement emerged in the mid-1960s in the wake of growing disillusionment over the civil rights movement's strategy of integration by African-Americans into American society. "The goal of black people must not be to assimilate into middle-class America, for that class – as a whole – is without a viable conscience as regards humanity," assert Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in 1967's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. Instead, "Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from the depredation of self-justifying white guilt."⁹

On July 31, 1966, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, a small group of African-American church leaders, had thrown their qualified support behind the nascent Black Power movement in a statement that ran as a full-page ad in the *New York Times*. The statement showed that Black Power was not necessarily incompatible with the African-American church, even though the movement criticized the integrationist and irenic tactics espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr., who had enjoyed official backing for his civil rights program from most of the African-American church constituencies. However, the NCNC statement's overall integrationist tone owed more to King's mainline civil rights rhetoric than to Black Power pride and vitriol,¹⁰ and it would fall to James Cone to connect the dots between Black Power and the Christian faith, which he did with his first book, 1969's *Black Theology and Black Power*.

Reflecting in 1982 on writing the book in a breakneck six weeks following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968, Cone recalls,

I had so much anger pent up in me that I had to let it out or be destroyed by it ... My anger stretched back to the slave ships, the auction block, and the lynchings. But even more important were my personal encounters with racism ... Because of these experiences, I promised myself that I would never again make a political or theological compromise with racism. Racism is a deadly disease that must be resisted by any means necessary.¹¹

The theme of “by any means necessary” runs throughout the book, as Cone channels the visceral spirit of the Black Power movement while articulating its theological rationale. Black Power, Cone writes, “means *complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary*.”¹²

This statement brings to mind the ‘by any means necessary’ philosophy of Malcolm X, who in the year before his assassination had declared, “[T]he time has come for the American Negro to fight back in self-defense whenever and wherever he (*sic*) is being unjustly attacked.”¹³ However, it is when Cone connects this undiluted strain of Black Power with Christian theology that the rubber truly hits the road. “What does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless black men (*sic*) whose existence is threatened daily by the tentacles of white power?” Cone asks, finding his answer in Jesus’ appropriation of the Isaianic program from Lk 4:18-19. Using this for his scriptural hermeneutic key, Cone declares, “Jesus’ work is essentially one of liberation.” Cone’s distilled Christology of Christ as Liberator, coupled with his conviction (via Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann) that the ‘changeless gospel’ must be brought to bear on the new problems arising in every generation,¹⁴ leads him to make the bold theological statement, “If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there,” and therefore, “Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it *is* Black Power.”¹⁵

Cone does not stop here. Besides identifying the oppressed community as the locus for Jesus’ salvific presence, he states, “In Christ, God enters human affairs and *takes sides* with the oppressed.” This partiality brings with it a radical opportunity for the benefactor of this divine support: “Through Christ the poor man (*sic*) is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human.”¹⁶ Now moving well beyond the exegetical ramifications of Jesus’ Isaianic mission statement, Cone again enlists Moltmann (“the cross of the Resurrected One is...the ferment of new freedom. It leads to the awakening of that revolt which...follows the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man (*sic*) is a being who labors and is heavy laden”¹⁷), as well as Paul Tillich (“It is the strange work of love to destroy what is against love”¹⁸), to make his case.

Clearly, Cone does not place exegetical even-handedness high on his list of priorities. Instead, citing both the urgency of a crisis situation (“There is no time for talk when men (*sic*) suffering”¹⁹) and the risk of theological escapism (“it seems that much of this abstract theological disputation and speculation...serves as a substitute for relevant involvement in a world where men (*sic*) die for lack of political justice”²⁰), in true Barthian fashion he constructs a highly polemical argument (“There is no neutral position in a war”²¹) that emphasizes the ‘No!’ of resistance to white power, over against the ‘Yes!’ of African-American affirmation, an element so key to the Black Power movement.²² This contra-theology, as I have termed it, manifests in Cone’s definition of the Black Power adherent as

one who “fights back with the whole of his (*sic*) being”; and the statement that “Black Power is the power to say No; it is the power of blacks to refuse to cooperate in their own dehumanization,” specifically that “black people must say No to all do-gooders who insist that they need more time.”²³

As mentioned above, Cone wrote *Black Theology & Black Power* in the wake of King’s assassination, sounding a primal scream of resistance to white power. The following year, he addressed the task of presenting his emergent vision of black theology in systematic form. *A Black Theology of Liberation* does just that, tracking black theology through the traditional theological loci of revelation, God’s immanence and transcendence, sin, Christology, and eschatology. This more regimented format does little to temper Cone’s anger, as he again invokes the theme of ‘by any means necessary’ (“The role of black theology is to tell blacks to focus on their own self-determination as a community by preparing to do anything the community believes necessary for its existence”²⁴), while expanding his investigation of God’s nature, including the statement of I John 4:8 that “God is love”: “Is it possible to understand what God’s love means for the oppressed without making *wrath* an essential ingredient of that love? What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist?”²⁵ As with *Black Theology & Black Power*, Cone looked back from the vantage point of the 1980s to the writing of *A Black Theology of Liberation* as a time rife with anger:

To understand the content and style of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, one must have empathy for the depth of my anger regarding the presence of racism in theology, with white theologians trying first to deny it and then to justify it. I could barely contain my rage whenever I read their books or found myself in their presence. They were so condescending and arrogant in the way they talked about black theology, always communicating the impression that it was not genuine theology, because it was too emotional and anti-intellectual.²⁶

While *A Black Theology of Liberation* may seem on one level a capitulation to the systematic tradition inherited from such “white theologians,” Cone’s rigorously existential approach, in making the theological categories of revelation, scripture, and tradition answerable to the insights of black experience, black history, and black culture, distinguishes itself from the aegis of white theological scholarship at the level of content, if not at the level of its Bultmann-inspired approach.

In fact, Cone’s frequent recourse to the methods and arguments of white European theologians incurred a battery of criticism from critics in the African-American community, both inside and outside of the church. “If theology is black, [the critics] asked, must not the sources used for its articulation also be black? Where are the black sources in James Cone?”²⁷ Their challenge largely inspired the second phase of Cone’s writings.

Phase Two: Freedom For

James Cone acknowledged his critics' misgivings and set out to give a greater place to the people and the stuff of black history and culture in his black theology. In phase one of his written work, James Cone had focused his intellectual, rhetorical, theological, and visceral capacities at condemning American racism, affirming African-American *resistance* more than African-American *identity* per se. Now, as he endeavored to "rethink the content and shape of black theology" by bringing African-American sources to the center of his theological enterprise,²⁸ his overt emphasis on 'freedom *from*' white racism gave way to a 'freedom *for*' vision stressing the inherent and internal qualities and dynamics of the African-American community.

The first fruits of this new emphasis came in 1972 with *The Spirituals and the Blues*, where Cone makes his new focus clear: "I want to examine the spirituals and the blues as cultural expressions of black people, having prime significance for their community,"²⁹ a far cry from the pronouncement at the beginning of *Black Theology and Black Power*: "This is a word to the oppressor, a word to Whitey."³⁰ If Cone's first two books had been light on straight-up affirmation, his historical exploration of the power and energy of African-American music uncovers plenty in his people's heritage to celebrate. When considering the spirituals created during the antebellum period of black religion, he distinguishes this era by its "emphasis on the *somebodiness* of black slaves,"³¹ a foreshadowing of Black Power over a century later. Cone's appraisal of the blues form also leads to an affirming message: "That black people could sing the blues, describing their sorrows and joys, meant that they were able to affirm an authentic hope in the essential worth of black humanity."³²

To be sure, the note of resistance has not disappeared from Cone's perspective in *The Spirituals and the Blues*; indeed, both forms of music constitute survival strategies to endure in the face of the "double contradiction" underlying American life. And while the twisted legacy of "double contradiction" and "radical incompatibility" lies rotting at the core of white America's 'best' efforts and ambitions, the African-American community, by contrast, has fostered a remarkable spirit of unity at the heart of its musical heritage: "Black music is unity music. It unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people ... It shapes and defines black being and creates cultural structures for black expression."³³ Cone hereby both celebrates African-American culture, with its capacity for achieving unity, while also subtly (yet damningly) condemning a white society that has fostered "a world of uncertainties, contradictions, and death."³⁴

By 1975's *God of the Oppressed*, the cast of white European theologians who had largely exited the stage for *The Spirituals and the Blues* had returned, but now as a counterpoint to African-American sources, and the thrust of a 'freedom for' theology of African-American affirmation continued. This second phase of Cone's work culminates with 1984's *For My*

People, with its title emphasizing the ‘freedom for’ dimension, and its contents exacting a sweeping historical and theological interpretation of black theology and the African-American church.³⁵ However, *For My People* is most significant in how the ‘freedom for’ direction has taken Cone’s analysis beyond African-American and white America, to consider the voices of other minorities in the United States, as well as perspectives from the so-called Third World. “No theology should remain enclosed in its own culture and history,” Cone writes as part of his indictment of dominant European and North American theologies.³⁶ Others, however, had earlier levied this same criticism against *his* work,³⁷ and *For My People*, as with *The Spirituals and the Blues* twelve years earlier, finds Cone again constructively incorporating insights from his critics into his body of work.

Some of Cone’s most vociferous critics during this second phase of his writing came from the community of African-American women. Indeed, as “black Christian women’s demands for visibility, inclusion, and equality”³⁸ rubbed up against not only Cone’s sexist language, but also his blanket statements on African-American ‘reality’ which gave no account for the specific experience of African-American women, he began to identify his own blind spot of sexism, and work to name it in himself and in the African-American church. “There is no place for male dominance of females,” Cone had written in 1975,³⁹ but his own unpacking of this truth remains a work in progress,⁴⁰ including an entire chapter devoted to “Black Theology, Black Churches and Black Women” in *For My People*,⁴¹ and his recognition in the preface to the 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation* that the book’s “most glaring limitation” was his “failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole.”⁴² Cone’s growing awareness of the complexity of perspectives *within* the African-American community would lead him out of the ‘freedom for’ phase of his writing, and into a third stage that incorporated this awareness with insights gleaned from the ‘contra’ and ‘freedom for’ stages of his writings.

Phase Three: Rigorous Dialectics

James Cone did not become a dialectical theologian with the writing of *Martin & Malcolm & America*. “[T]heological language must be paradoxical because of the necessity of affirming two dimensions of reality which appear to be contradictory,” he told William Hordern during their “Dialogue on Black Theology” in 1971,⁴³ a sentiment he echoed last week during an interview from his New York City home:

I’m always thinking dialectically, that ‘on the one hand’ and then ‘on the other.’ I don’t think one can understand the Christian faith without that Yes and No, and Malcolm and Martin represent that Yes and No itself; they represent two sides of the same coin. In my own thinking, I’m certainly always thinking about two sides...I’m thinking about what counts for what I’m saying and [what counts] against it, and how what I say can reflect my knowledge of both of those.⁴⁴

In the figures and legacies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, Cone discovered the canvas on which to give his proclivity for dialectical thinking a more rigorous treatment, and to attempt striking a balance between the 'freedom from' and 'freedom for' poles of his theological perspective. The "radical incongruity" and "double contradiction" of Christian and democratic America's legacy of slavery and segregation gets taken up head on, with recourse to the thought of W. E. B. Du Bois:

No one stated the dilemma that slavery and segregation created for Africans in the United States as sharply and poignantly as W. E. B. Du Bois. In his classic statement of the problem, he spoke of it as a "peculiar sensation," a "double-consciousness," "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." The "twoness" that Du Bois was describing stemmed from being an African in America. "Here, then, is the dilemma," he wrote in "The Conservation of Races." "What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both?"⁴⁵

King and the voices of integration respond with a 'Yes,' Malcolm X and black nationalists give a 'No.' In the end, Cone concludes, *both* Martin and Malcolm are indispensable "because they symbolize two necessary ingredients in the African-American struggle for justice in the United States...We need both of them and we need them *together*. Malcolm keeps Martin from being turned into a harmless American hero. Martin keeps Malcolm from being an ostracized black hero. Both leaders make important contributions to the identity of African-Americans and also, just as importantly, to white Americans and Americans in general."⁴⁶ Both leaders also make important contributions to the causes of liberation around the world, as does the writing of James Cone that helps put these contributions into contemporary perspective.

Conclusion: Cone & Canada & Beyond

At the beginning of this paper, I located the basis for James Cone's writings in the moral and political scandal of America's racist legacy of slavery and segregation. I have traced the contours of his work through three distinct phases, from the initial 'contra-theology' of his first two books, emphasizing African-American resistance to white power and hegemony; to the second phase that redressed the imbalance of phase one's focus on resistance at the expense of African-American affirmation, which Cone now sought to provide, with greater recourse to African-American sources; into the third phase that took a more rigorously dialectical approach to honor the tension between the 'Yes' and the 'No' of African-American identity and existence in the United States.

Cone's journey from resistance to affirmation, into greater dialectical complexity, parallels developments within the wider African-American theology movement, no surprise given his status as perhaps its most defining figure, and also given his willingness to listen and respond to others' perspectives, particularly those of his critics: "I think your critic is your best friend. People who don't listen to their critics end up repeating, and not realizing the limits of what they say. The critics, even the ones who are hostile to you, still are great friends because they make you think and consider things you wouldn't ordinarily consider. So for me, I keep myself alive by...always stretching myself to listen to people

who have no idea what theology is, and then listening to people who have no idea why theology should address social and political issues.”⁴⁷

Cone’s openness to those beyond his main constituency of academic American theologians is paralleled by the enthusiasm many outside this constituency have for the ideas of Cone. Paradoxically, he has struck a global chord in part because he has been able to vividly express the particularity of African-American experience from a theological perspective, even as his emphases have continued to change. As he expressed to Hordern, “*The universal has no meaning independent of the particular*. When people move too rapidly to the universal, they minimize the very experience which defines the universal.”⁴⁸ Cone did not shy away from exploring the particular meaning of his thought within a Canadian context when he told the assembled crowd at the 1985 LTS Study Conference, “If anybody in Canada writes theology without referring to ... the Indian (*sic*) people in this country, that means that you’re [doing] racist theology.”⁴⁹

Still, since 1970 Cone has toned down some of the polemics around the particularity of African-American experience vis-à-vis white hegemony, so characteristic of the first phase of his writing, to also consider oppression from a wider perspective (the title to 1975’s *God of the Oppressed*, the first Cone book title to not specifically reference African-American identity or culture, signals this shift). Cone’s last book, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, and his forthcoming work exploring the crucifixion of Jesus Christ through the lens of the lynching tree, demonstrate his attempt to reemphasize the particularity of African-American historical experience as his theological starting point, a dimension never absent from Cone, but at times more muted, especially during the aforementioned widening of his perspective to incorporate the insights from other liberation movements. Perhaps the best way to appreciate the three phases in Cone’s body of work involves seeing them as engaged in the kind of dialectical give and take that Cone has come to rigorously foster in his analysis, with each phase challenging and correcting the other, and continually raising new questions and problems for Cone and/or others to explore.

Endnotes

- 1 Dr. William W. Hannah, "Forward," in Rufus Burrow, Jr., *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., Inc., 1994), p. xiii.
- 2 James H. Cone, "Black Theology and American Religion," (lecture, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, SK, May 1, 1985).
- 3 James Cone and William Hordern, "Dialogue on Black Theology," in *The Christian Century* 88 (September 15, 1971): 1085.
- 4 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 16.
- 5 I use the term 'African-American church' in the *sensu lato* way used most often by James Cone as a multi-denominational (and non-denominational) designation for churches with a predominantly African- American clergy and membership.
- 6 The relationship between the African-American church and the black theology of liberation of the 1960s is not without its controversy, some denying and others espousing the connection. Cone himself acknowledges the debate, but concludes, "when black theology first emerged it had *no existence apart from the black church*" (emphasis mine; in *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* [Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985], p. 102).
- 7 In James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 140.
- 8 James H. Cone, "Preface to the 1986 Edition," in *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), p. xi.
- 9 Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 40, 34-5.
- 10 Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 17.
- 11 James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 47.
- 12 James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 6 (emphasis in the original).
- 13 In Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p. 195.
- 14 Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, p. 31.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 38 (emphasis added).
- 16 *Ibid.*, 35; 36.
- 17 Quoted in Cone, *ibid.*, p. 37.
- 18 Quoted in Cone, *ibid.*, p. 54.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 22 This is not to contend that moments of black affirmation do not appear, for they do, especially in the statement, "Black power is, in short, an *attitude*, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness" (emphasis in original), and also in Cone's evaluation of Camus: "The rebel says No and Yes. He (*sic*) says no to conditions considered intolerable, and Yes to that 'something within him which is worthwhile'" (*Ibid.*, 8; 6).
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 39-40, 13.
- 24 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 15.

- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 69 (emphasis in the original).
- 26 Cone, "Preface to the 1986 Edition," *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. xiv.
- 27 Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 60.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 29 James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p. 3.
- 30 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 3.
- 31 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 17.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 35 A clarification is in order: Cone's "affirmation" of African-American culture and identity does not preclude him critiquing black theology and the black church; *For My People* includes a sustained and unsparing critique of both (see esp. pp. 78-121).
- 36 Cone, *For My People*, p. 173.
- 37 Most significantly in a 1975 article by early champion and longtime supporter C. Eric Lincoln: "[B]lack theology is the inevitable answer to the theology of benign neglect – the theology which has operated on the principle that the white man's (*sic*) myths and the white man's fictions are sufficient and proper for all men and all conditions of men. But if black theology is to be anything more than a counter-myth and a more extravagant fiction, it must avoid at all costs the disparagement of principle and the notion that the whole will of God is discoverable in one momentary event or one set of relations" (C. Eric Lincoln, "A Perspective on James H. Cone's Black Theology," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31.1 [Fall 1975]: 21).
- 38 Delores S. Williams, "James Cone's Liberation: Twenty Years Later," in *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, 192.
- 39 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 214.
- 40 "I think we (*sic*) have to be willing to do as Garth Baker-Fletcher has proposed, namely, to confess that we are at best 'recovering sexists,' just as the most liberal, tolerant white person is at best a recovering racist," opines Cone biographer Rufus Burrow, Jr. (*James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology* [Jefferson: McFarland, 1994], p. 181).
- 41 Cone, *For My People*, pp. 122-139.
- 42 Cone, "Preface to the 1986 Edition," in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. xv.
- 43 Cone and Hordern: 1080.
- 44 James H. Cone, interview by Mark Kleiner, April 5, 2010.
- 45 Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p. 3.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 315-16.
- 47 Cone, interview by Kleiner, April 5, 2010.
- 48 Cone and Hordern: 1080 (emphasis in the original).
- 49 James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr." (lecture, Lutheran Theological Seminary Study Conference, Saskatoon, SK, May 3, 1985).