



An Educational Approach to Intercultural Teaching and Learning: Some Preliminary Reflections

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Setting the scene

The author of this piece is a Black theologian and Christian educator born in Britain. I was born in Bradford, West Yorkshire to Jamaican parents who came to this country from the Caribbean in the late 1950s. As such, I am a second generation Black Caribbean British subject. I was born into and nurtured into the Christian faith from within the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. My development, as a Black religious scholar, has been influenced by a number of factors and concerns. Many of the enduring values in my life can be traced back to my formative years growing up in a Christian home but living within a predominantly White working, trade union and Independent Labour Party stronghold of East Bowling. In this context, non-conformism, trade unions and labour party politics went hand-in-hand.

Whilst my formative years were largely pleasant and affirming, what could not be disguised about our existence was the persistent reality of racism that affected the existence of all non-White people in the city of Bradford. To

understand my subsequent development as Black British Liberation theologian and educator, one needs to be cognisant of the wider socio-cultural and political context that has exerted a pronounced influence upon my life. As Robert Beckford has highlighted in his seminal *God Of The Rahtid: Redeeming Rage*, Black people in post colonial Britain are struggling to exist in an environment that sanctions the casual disregard of non-White people.¹

The Black response to racism in Britain

The majority of Black people living in Britain can trace their roots to the mass migration movement of peoples from the Caribbean and Africa in the years immediately following the Second World War. The story of how Black people came to Britain, many as communicant members of historic churches of the Protestant tradition, and were summarily rejected by their White brothers and sisters in Christ has been documented by scholars such as Wilkinson.² The challenge to maintain a critical voice against the racism of White Christians was undertaken by a number of pioneering Black ministers, throughout the 1970s. One can cite the work of the Revd Hewlette (Hewie) Andrew, a Black British Methodist minister like Milwood, who in arguing for Black self-determination and empowerment states:

If it were not for Black churches that are able to hold the people together, to give some sense of value at work, and to make them feel that God is on our side, they (Black people) would all be in mental institutions. And when I myself as a Methodist minister feel very low, and I mean really low, I do not go to a Methodist church to uplift me. I go for spiritual upliftment to what I know I will never get from any white preacher.³

What is striking about Andrews' address is that he is clearly articulating an alternative, African-centred interpretation of Christianity that is wholly at variance with that propagated by the White hegemony. Andrews is clear that for Black people to achieve their existential liberation within a White dominated and White controlled context they must begin to create their own ecclesial and educational spaces in which to work out this innate quest for freedom.⁴

Throughout the 1980s, Black Christian mobilisation was supplemented by the presence of distinguished African American scholars. One such example can be seen in the presence of James Washington of Union Theological Seminary. Washington offers a detailed, Black Atlantic perspective on the need for collective, self-determined action by Black people, drawing upon the work of the Black Church in the U.S.⁵ Washington draws upon the multi-dimensional qualities of Black churches in the U.S.⁶ in the areas of education, economic empowerment, civil rights, and of course, spiritual renewal. Washington challenges Black people in Britain to gain strength from the multi-dimensional nature of faith in order to empower and radically transform Black communities in this British context. Washington, and his fellow U.S. compatriots, Dr Iva Carruthers and the Revd John Mendez, offer the outsiders' contribution to this British conference, drawing on their own experiences as a means of speaking to this radically different situation.

The development of an indigenous Black theology in Britain began to take shape in the early 1990s. An important ecumenical, interracial approach to challenging racism can be seen in the work of Raj Patel with Maurice Hobbs and Greg Smith, who co-authored a report entitled *Equal Partners: Theological Training and Racial Justice*.⁷ The report is an empirical analysis of the state of theological education in Britain. In the foreword it states:

Some have short courses in 'Liberation theology' or 'Black theology'. The great majority, however, it seems from the survey, do not benefit from the kind of teaching about racism which enables them to see it as a profound social, cultural and economic influence in Western society which, invading the institutions of the church, is able, only too easily, to render the Gospel of little effect.⁸

Within the report, the most clear clarion call for the development of a Black theology of liberation comes from the

Revd Wesley Daniel, another Black Methodist minister in Britain (now living and working within the UMC in New York).
9 Daniel states:

I want to suggest that a serious look be given to what it means to be minister of and in a multiracial church. The area of preaching the Black tradition is important, pastoral care, music in the Black tradition, the importance of prayers in the Black tradition, Black people's social conditions and the relevance of that in relation to their approach to religion and religious practice.¹⁰

What is instructive about *Equal Partners* is that it begins to sketch out a role for Black theology within British theological education. Whilst it does not offer any formative content for this nascent theological enterprise (indeed, none of the aforementioned texts have done so, thus far), it does provide a much needed situational analysis of the White, Eurocentric complexion of the theological education system in Britain.

The importance of inter-culturality

Whilst the principle response to racism in Britain has emanated from Black activism, important contributions have been made by many White Christians, working in partnership with their Black brothers and sisters in Christ. Whilst I have highlighted the often neglected voice and presence of Black Christian activists in the development of antiracist, counter-hegemonic practices, it would be wrong of me to imply this has been the only contribution. As I will demonstrate shortly, there has been a fine tradition of White clergy challenging racism within the body politic of British Christianity. Nor do I want to suggest that those from outside of the Black experience cannot be in solidarity with Black people. Such a contention, although espoused by some commentators,¹¹ is not one I wish to pursue at this juncture. The discourse concerning 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the representation and analysis of any experience is not a simplistic or straightforward affair. It is made complicated by issues such as context, the ontology of the people under discussion, and the positionality of the scholar and activists attempting to document and partake in that particular phenomenon.

I want to eschew any seemingly simplistic notion of 'outsiders' and 'insiders', which carries the restrictive refrain of essentialism and the notion of hard and fast boundaries that seem to 'police' cultural experiences and their accompanying production. As Lartey reminds us, culture is a dynamic, human construction, which rejects any sense of fixity.¹² In some respects, human beings are very different from one another, in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, geographical location or historical experience. Yet in other ways, the common experience of being human remains the ultimate unifying concept for all people. Lartey sums this up beautifully when he writes:

Every human person is in certain respects:

- Like all others
- Like some others
- Like no other.

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Clearly, it is both difficult and, in some respects, dangerous to create fixed lines detailing who belongs to (and presumably can speak for) a particular group or community and who does not belong, with the opposite being the case. When I speak of people being in solidarity with those on the margins, I am conscious of the complexities, philosophical and cultural, that exist in this form of discourse. How can we bring our shared experiences and notions of humanity together in critical partnership, in order to engage with the self and the other?

White scholars who have 'bucked the trend'

In the development of inter-ethnic and anti-racist approaches to Christian theological reflections, one has to bear witness to the pioneering work of Roswith Gerloff. Gerloff, a German Lutheran minister, was appointed the first executive director of the 'Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership'. The centre was based for many years in Selly Oak area of Birmingham, and was an independent Para-Church organisation with links to the Mission department of the Selly Oak Colleges and the theology department of the University of Birmingham.

Working under the renowned Professor of Mission, Walter Hollenweger, Gerloff researched the growing movement of Black-Led Churches in Britain, the majority of which were closely associated with the influx of Caribbean migrants to Britain in the post Second World War period, between 1948 and 1965. Her monumental thesis (in two volumes) became for many years one of the standard texts detailing the development of Black majority church traditions in Britain.¹⁴

The second scholar is the Revd John L. Wilkinson, presently an Anglican priest at Kings Heath Parish Church, in the Diocese of Birmingham, in the West Midlands area of Britain. Wilkinson is one of the 'forgotten heroes' of the developmental process in the emergence of Black theology in Britain.

Wilkinson served for many years in Black majority Anglican churches in Birmingham. He was instrumental in helping to form a Black grassroots ecumenical church movement entitled 'Claiming the Inheritance'.¹⁵ The fruits of his involvement in this multi-ethnic group of Black and White Christians can be seen in a number of ways. First, he initiated the very first Black Christian Studies course in the British theological education system at the Queens College back in the early 1990s. This course was a forerunner to the later module in Black Theology, developed initially by Wilkinson and his later colleague, Robert Beckford.¹⁶

Second, his post-graduate research, which arose from his grassroots engagement with 'Claiming The Inheritance' was one of the first such academic pieces of work, seeking to recognise and affirm the Black presence in White majority British churches.¹⁷ This thesis was later 'converted' into a book.¹⁸

Third, and finally, I would like to mention briefly, Kenneth Leech. Kenneth Leech is an Anglican priest who has spent most of his working life in inner city contexts in London. In addition to being a pioneering youth worker, involved in a radical ministry amongst those suffering with drug addiction in the 1960s and early 70s, he has developed an ongoing ministry as one of the leading urban theologians in Britain.

Prior to his later development as an influential scholar, Leech worked as a field officer for 'The British Council of Churches'. His involvement with urban issues has found expression in his reflections upon the corrosive role of racism in the life experiences of Black and White people with reference to the body politic of White majority churches and the British state. Among his most important books are *Struggle in Babylon*¹⁹ and *The Sky Is Red*.²⁰

The role of Black Christian education for encountering self and the 'other'

I write as a Black theologian and educator based within a theological institution whose primary activity is training men and women for ordained, authorised ministry in one of our three²¹ sponsoring institutions. It is important that I declare this fact for it shapes my subsequent understanding of the role of religious education, within a confessional context of Christian faith and practice. The bulk of my research and published work to date has been concerned with combining the insights of Black Liberation theology with the pedagogical concerns of Christian religious education. I have described the fruits of this nexus as 'Black Christian Education'. Black Christian education is the practical, educational outworking of Black Liberation theology, and seeks to distil the central ideas of this liberative movement into teaching and learning strategies for the emancipation of all Black people. Black Christian education arises from the development of Black theology. Black in this context does not refer simply to the racial origins or skin colour of particular peoples, but rather, it denotes in symbolic terms, the sense of solidarity and connectedness between

oppressed peoples in the world.

Many Black theologians have asserted that Jesus is Black. This statement should not be taken, necessarily, to mean that Jesus is literally Black. What writers such as James Cone,²² Jacquelyn Grant²³ and Robert Beckford²⁴ are stating is that God's preferential option is for the empowerment and affirmation of oppressed peoples, the majority of whom are Black. If Black people were enslaved and continue to be oppressed solely on the grounds of the colour of their skin (the mythical 'Curse of Ham'? Gen. 9:18-28? was used to justify the enslavement of Black people), then God in Christ took the form of these exploited people in order to show God's total identification with their plight.

Black religious education as encounter is predicated on the notion of Christian believers engaging in what I call 'performative action'. Performative action requires that we creatively engage with the 'other' in a specified space in which the rules of engagement are constantly being defined and re-defined.²⁵ In order to provide an embodied reality for the practice of performative action, I have created an experiential exercise in which adult participants can explore the dynamics of encounter within a safe learning environment. The thrust for this work has emerged from a previous piece of research.²⁶

This process of performative action operates within a mythical space in which religious participants are invited to imagine themselves sitting on a bus. The accompanying exercise, which is entitled 'Get on the Bus',²⁷ invites participants to decide where they are going to sit on a mythical bus journey. The bus journey represents the collective journey of the Christian Church towards the 'promised land' of racial justice. This is a mythical place, which Martin Luther King once described as the 'Beloved Community'.²⁸

The journey towards the beloved community is one in which the process is as important as the destination that is reached. By this I mean, the challenge to engage with one another across our tangled and complicated lines of ethnic and racial differences is one that is essential if the arrival at the destination is to make any kind of sense.

In the exercise, the different participants are challenged to determine their individual agency and positionality in this process. Where will they sit on the bus? Is it important that they sit near the front and direct the driver and as a corollary, dictate the route the bus should take? Traditionally, this has been the role paternalistic White people have played in their efforts to engage with Black people. Alternatively, are the Black people going to opt out of the journey, on the basis that they will refuse to engage with a White paternalist construct? Conversely, will they seek alternative ways of engaging that do not require them to collude?

This challenge, as is sometimes stated in Jamaican speak, to 'stay and burn and not cut and run', is one that poses hard questions for many Black theologians and religious educators such as myself. The development of the Black Church in the U.S. for example, as a repository and incubator for the creation and development of Black theology, came into being due to the decision of African Americans to leave the racialised ecclesial body of White America.²⁹

Is that the best means of operating for Black people in Britain? It is worth noting that within the British context, racism and White hegemony have not led to complete separation. Rather difference and (in some cases) downright enmity has been contained by the use of parallel realities.³⁰ In effect, Black people and White people have separated into tribal territories, in which demographics and geography account for separation, but both remain housed within the one ecclesial body.

Despite the challenges of history and the nuances of differing contexts, the goal of existing and remaining within the same paradigm remains an important challenge for all Christian communities. This exercise highlights the very real challenges that are in evidence when one attempts to exist within a shared context, where all, if only notionally, are engaged in a shared and similar task.

Black Christian education for racial and ethnic reconciliation

The work of Black theologians may prove helpful, I believe, in enabling us to find a way of 'being one' which takes us beyond the unhelpful binaries of 'race', ethnicity and difference. This approach is not one that borrows the old colour blind adage of steadfastly refusing to see 'race' and difference,³¹ nor does it essentialise these notions into unhelpful and restrictive boundaries and borders.³²

This form of Black Christian education is based upon a liberative Black theological ethic that calls upon White people to look critically at their Whiteness and to reflect upon the ways in which White supremacist thought and action has exerted a profound and corrosive influence upon the Christian faith. The historical thought forms that have arisen from White normativity have not only advantaged White people, but also exerted unimagined pressures and negative traits upon Black people.³³ The privileges of Whiteness are called into question, both within the interpretation of the Christian faith³⁴ and also in terms of the correlation between Christianity and socio-political analysis. This form of Black Christian education also challenges Black people in their positionality and critical consciousness. Through engaging in the exercise, Black participants are challenged to reflect upon the extent to which they have engaged in essentialised discourses around issues of race. To what extent have they become hostages to the restricted notions of forced identity and homogeneity as much as the White people they often charge with forcing such dictates upon themselves?³⁵

This prophetic Black theological approach to Christian education is one that takes seriously the multi-dimensional analysis of post colonial Biblical studies. Writers such as Sugirtharajah and his seminal text *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*,³⁶ plus the likes of Musa Dube³⁷ and Justin Ukpong, et al³⁸ have much to teach us about a critical re-reading of the Bible in which the perspectives of the silent majority of the Earth are heard, with their viewpoints becoming the focal point for a shared learning and empowerment of all people.

This is a process of Christian religious education that looks at the Bible through the eyes of the poor and the marginalised, in a manner which extends beyond the parameters of simply 'race' and racism. This will enable us to learn radically new insights about what it means to be a Church and to be the people of God, instituted by the spirit, in order to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. A radical re-reading will enable us to see Paul's injunction in Galatians 3:28 no longer as a proof text to justify a homogenised notion of sameness?in effect a colour blind theology that has captured many Black evangelicals; but rather, it becomes a radical ideal in which distinctions between 'in groups' and 'out groups' are obliterated. A new reading moves us into a model that affirms difference, but outlaws preferential treatment based on ideas of election and pre-ordained acceptance for some and the exclusion of others, on grounds of 'race,' gender or sexuality.³⁹

The challenges proposed by this Black Christian education are ones that confront all participants, whether they exert power or not. This approach is one that asks all participants to re-read their own experiences and positionality within an imaginary exercise, in which questions of power, difference and notions of being religiously inspired communities are constantly challenged.

This proposal forces us all to re-frame what it means to be Black and largely disparaged or White and commonly with power. And yet the challenges of this proposal go beyond the endemic fault-lines of race between Black and White within the body politic of Christianity. Perhaps the bigger challenge that faces us as we step, tentatively, into the 21st century is the challenge between the East and the West; between so-called Christian liberal democratic traditions and Islamic theocracy.⁴⁰

Perhaps this radical model of Black Christian education can become a transformative paradigm for an inter-religious process of encountering the self and the other, not only across race or ethnic lines, but also across religions too? What would it mean to be passengers on a bus in which the participants in the mythical exercise were Islamic as well as Christian? What would it mean to be participants and passengers where Dalits sat alongside Brahmins?

Black Christian education as inter-ethnic and anti-racist discourse is a process of encountering self and the 'other'. It is one that challenges in groups and the construction of the demonised 'other'; the latter often perceived as the

necessary scapegoat for the expiation of violence in order that the dis-ease of the seemingly homogenous society might be assuaged.⁴¹ This model attempts to create a process that may finally overturn what Du Bois saw as the fault line through the 20th century.⁴² Du Bois felt that 'race was the endemic problem of the last century'. Well, the 20th century came and went and race and racism remained no less potent in the new century than it did in the old, if the murder of Anthony Walker, a Black teenager in Liverpool, is anything to go by. Perhaps a Black Christian education for encountering self and the other, in which is located an experiential exercise that attempts to embody this pedagogical approach, is one that may help to finally lay to rest the haunting truth of Du Bois' prescient thoughts in 1903.

Endnotes

- See Beckford, Robert, *God Of The Rahtid: Redeeming Rage* (London: DLT, 2001).
- See Wilkinson, John L., *Church in Black and White: The Black Christian Tradition in "Mainstream" Churches in England: A White Response and Testimony* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1993).
- Andrew, Hewie, 'Developing Black Ministries', from *Account of Hope: Report of a Conference on the Economic Empowerment of the Black Community* (London: British Council of Churches, 1990) p.39.
- Ibid., p.39-40.
- 'Address by Dr. James Washington', from *ibid.*, p.14-17.
- In this regard see Paris, Peter J., *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1985) and Lincoln, C. Eric and Mamiya, Lawrence, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University press, 1990).
- Patel, Raj with Hobbs, Maurice and Smith, Greg, *Equal Partners: Theological Education and Racial Justice* (London: British Council of Churches, 1992).
- Ibid.,pt.v It is interesting to note that at the time of writing my own institution (The Queens Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education) is the only one which has Black theology as a mandatory part of the curriculum for ministerial training and formation. Most of the recommendations of the report are still not operational or discernible within the British theological educational system.
- 'Wesley Daniel?Personal Reflections', *Ibid.*, pp.63-66.
- Ibid., p.65
- See Asanta, Molefi K. and Asante,Kariam W. (eds.) *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990).
- Lartey, Emmanuel Y., In *Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling* (London: Cassell, 1997). pp.9-14.
- Ibid., p.12.
- See Gerloff, Roswith I.H., *A Plea for British Black Theologies: the Black Church Movement in Britain.Vol.1. and Vol.2* (Birmingham: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The University of Birmingham, 1991).
- 'Claiming the Inheritance' was a grassroots movement that was founded in 1986 and based in Birmingham, in the West Midlands of Britain. It brought together predominantly Black Christians to celebrate their history and heritage in order to create programmes and resources that would challenge and overcome the various ills that afflicted Black people in Britain. The movement came to an end in the late 90s, having been instrumental in mobilising and informing Black (and White) people for many years. A number of Black people who were active in the organisation in its formative years have since moved into ordained (pastoral) ministry having 'cut their teeth' in practical theological work by way of the involvement in C.T.I. See *Claiming The Inheritance: Ten Years On* (West Bromwich: Claiming The Inheritance, 1997).
- See Reddie, Anthony G., *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006),

pp.53-63 for a more in-depth assessment of the legacy of Robert Beckford.

- See Wilkinson, John L., *Church in Black and White : the Black Christian Tradition in "Mainstream" Churches*. (Unpublished M.Litt, The University of Birmingham, 1990).
- See Wilkinson, John L., *Church in Black and White: The Black Christian Tradition in "Mainstream" Churches in England: A White Response and Testimony* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1993).
- Leech, Kenneth, *Struggle in Babylon* (London: Sheldon press, 1988).
- Leech, Kenneth, *The Sky Is Red: Discerning The Sign of The Times* (London: DLT, 1997).
- The three sponsoring institutions are Anglican (The Church of England), Methodist and United Reformed.
- See Cone, James H., *God Of The Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1975)
- See Grant, Jacquelyn, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989)
- See Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostal* (London: SPCK, 2000)
- See Irizarry, Jose 'The Religious Educator as Cultural Spec-Actor: Researching Self in Intercultural Pedagogy'. *Religious Education [The Vocation of the Religious Educator]* (Vol.98, No.3, Summer 2003). pp.365-381. See also Apt, Clark C., *Serious Games* (New York: Viking press, 1970).
- See Reddie, Anthony G., *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005).
- The title is derived from a popular film by African American director Spike Lee entitled *Get on the Bus*. It uses the journey of a group of African American men travelling on a bus to hear Louis Farrakhan speak at the 'Million Man March' in Washington D.C., as a means of exploring notions of identity and positionality in Black life in the U.S. See *Get On the Bus* Directed by Spike Lee, (Forty Acres and A Mule Productions, 1996).
- See Baldwin, Lewis V., *Toward The Beloved Community* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).
- See Pinn, Anne H., and Pinn, Anthony B., (Fortress Introduction to) *Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2002).
- Black Methodists, Anglicans and those in the Baptist and Reformed traditions in the U.K. have not left to form separate churches, but have attempted to create their own self identified spaces within the corporate whole. A similar strategy has been used by Black members of White dominated churches in Southern Africa. In the British context see Walton, Heather, *A Tree God Planted: Black People in British Methodism*. (London: Ethnic Minorities In Methodism Working Group, The Methodist Church. 1984) and Wilkinson, John L., *Church in Black and White: The Black Christian Tradition in "Mainstream" Churches in England: A White Response and Testimony* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1993). In terms of the latter see Knighton-Fitt, Jean, *Beyond Fear* (Cape Town: Pretext Publishers, 2003).
- See Reddie, Anthony G., *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005), pp.98-108.
- See Anderson, Victor, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
- See Byron, Gay L., *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- Hood, Robert E., *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).
- See Anderson, Victor, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp.86-93.
- Sugirtharajah, R.S., (ed.) *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).
- See Dube, Musa W., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice press, 2000).
- Ukpong, Justin et al., *Reading The Bible in The Global Village: Cape Town* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2002).
- See Williams, Demetrius K., *An End to This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African American Churches*

(Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2004).

- See Parekh, Bhikhu, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000).
 - See Girard, Rene, *The Scapegoat*, Trans. Freccero, Yvonne, (London: Athlone, 1986). See also Girard, Rene, *Violence and the Sacred*, Trans. Gregory, Patrick, (London: Athlone, 1988).
 - Dubois, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam books, 1989), p.3.
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