



?If Heaven is Such a Wonderful Place,Then Why Would White People Tell Black People About It??: Problematizing Black Christian Confessional Belief in Postcolonial Britain

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Introduction

I had the privilege of being invited to attend and indeed sit on one of the panels at the first 'State of Black Britain Symposium' held at the Commonwealth Club in London on the 17th October 2009. The event brought together a number of prominent Black British spokespersons, personalities, politicians, entrepreneurs and educators to discuss the current state of Black people in Britain. At an earlier juncture in the meeting, as the conversation addressed the issue of the rise of the BNP and the implications of this apparent growth in support for Black people in Britain, a leading Black Christian minister rose to his feet and declared that 'Black people should join the BNP and so attempt to undermine them from within'. There was a moment of silence, followed by a ripple of applause and some general nods of agreement. Several minutes later, I overheard two older Black people observing that whilst they might not go

as far as attempting to join the BNP, they would certainly vote for them as they were, and I quote one of them directly at this point, 'They are at least standing up for Christian Britain'.

Suffice it to say that I was stunned at what I had just heard. Voting for the BNP as a Black person is akin to turkeys looking forward to Christmas. A fascist party whose stated *raison d'être* is the removal of all non-Anglo-Saxon people from country is not one that seems to even want Black support let alone the absurd idea that Black people should vote for them and possibly even join the party to undermine them from within.

What intrigued most, however, as a Black religious scholar, was the notion that voting for this party was a means of defending Christian Britain. The fact that the BNP cannot be said to represent Christian anything, is clearly, the first obvious point to be made. I was stunned that the BNP would even countenance trying to defend a religious faith, whose sacred figure at the heart of it was a Palestinian Jew. But whatever the logic, or otherwise, of the BNP seeking to defend Christian Britain, it is perhaps the even more critical question as whether 'Christian Britain' is something worth saving by Black Christians that is exercising my thoughts in this lecture. This is the same Christian Britain of empire that gave us Transatlantic, chattel slavery of African people; the same Christian Britain of Empire and of colonialism; and the same Christian Britain of the mass exploitation of subjugated peoples, appropriating their lands, their bodies and their very selves. Is this the construct these individuals were hoping to defend by voting for a fascist political party?

In this paper, it is my intention to demonstrate how my scholarship and teaching has sought to address the often inhibited and internalised colonisation of the mind that has bedevilled and continues to impact on Black people in postcolonial Britain. I am interested in how a participative model of Black Theology, influenced by notions of transformative pedagogy, can be the means by which ordinary Black people of faith can be enabled to reflect more critically on the implication of the underlying theological constructs they hold. In what ways do the confessional belief structures that arise from particular theological themes become harmful and even detrimental to the Black self? How can these elements be challenged, resisted and even overcome? Clearly, in the scope of one lecture, I will not accomplish all of the aforementioned, but at least, in the words of a now a famous Russian meerkat, 'You know where I am coming from.'

Before I commence with this paper, let me offer a few caveats in advance of the remainder of the paper. First, while there is no doubting the arresting nature of the title of this address, drawn from the words of Roy Sawh, I will not be exploring the efficacies or truth claims of the substantive belief in heaven, either as a concept, or as a psycho-social construct for human meaning-making. Rather, I want to use Sawh's comments as a rhetorical device to explore aspects of a seeming naiveté amongst some Black Christians in Britain regarding the relationship between the material, historical reality of their Blackness and the superstructure of the Christian faith, which sits in dialectical tension with the former as a means of connoting identity and subjectivity in Britain. I think it is also important that I make it clear that my work offers only a small snap shot, a microcosm if you will, of what is undoubtedly, a large and significant social phenomenon. I am not writing about or speaking for or against all or every Black Christian in Britain. I write as someone who is himself a confessional believer within the very code I am critiquing. My insider status is not meant to offer me any sense of being 'authentic' or providing greater veracity for my account than that provided by many others.¹ Rather, this work is based on two personal, experiential encounters, which are then juxtaposed with wider theoretical material drawn from the literature in order to provide a richly textured account of how and in what ways is the critical consciousness of Black Christians in Britain impacted by the false consciousness provided by Imperial Missionary Christianity.

The other caveat I think I need to make is that my polemical attack on Imperial Missionary Christianity does acknowledge that there were many good, decent and kind White Christians whose individual works of grace and kindness acted as a clear antithesis to the often brutal outworking of colonialism and empire. Clearly, it would be wrong to traduce every White Christian missionary, minister or colonial apparatchik and tar them all with the same anti-imperial polemical brush. My work seeks to attack the overarching phenomenon of imperial, empire based Christianity and to work within the weight of the numerical probability, which reminds us that 'the goods', whether in terms of

mission schools and hospitals; or in individual works of piety, were very much in the minority. To cite the words of a Black South African friend talking about the number of so-called 'liberal White people who always opposed apartheid', he says, 'If there were so many of them against apartheid, and if they were all actively on the side of us, the oppressed Black people, then why did it last for so long and why did so many of have to die or live such miserable lives?'

I do not doubt that some evidentially good things emerged from colonialism and empire and that some good people were involved within it, but this should not deflect us from the overarching misery, suffering and oppression that was the life and death experience for millions of people across an extended period of time, across the many 'pink bits' of the globe.

The Imperial Legacy of Britain and the church

My assessment *vis-a-vis* the colonial context in which Christianity in Britain is located can be witnessed, in part, in two dialogically matching responses to this phenomenon. First, is the very fact that I am before you, a Black, African Caribbean male, a descendent of enslaved Africans. The second is that my parents came to this country in the late 1950s, from the Caribbean island of Jamaica. This dialogical, experiential truth reminds us of the positionality of Britain within the colonial construct of empire, which links it with a part of the world several thousand miles from these shores and which finds me standing before you, as a postcolonial subject. In the words of a poster beloved of the anti-racist movements of the left in the 1970s and 80s, 'We Are Here Because You Were There'.² It should be axiomatic that one cannot talk about Christianity in Britain without engaging with the broader thematic hinterland that is Empire and Colonialism. I write as a confessional Black Christian from within the Methodist tradition, for example. Methodism found its way to the Caribbean via the missionary enterprise of Nathaniel Gilbert, even though the indefatigable work undertaken by his Black enslaved women has largely gone unheralded.³ The 'historic church'⁴ version of Caribbean Christianity into which approximately two thirds of all Black people of Christian faith in Britain have been inducted and formed is one that echoes to the continual strains of British run slavery in the English islands of the Caribbean.⁵ Caribbean Christianity, which emerges from the comparatively more recent Pentecostal tradition, has nonetheless, been influenced to an equal extent by the blandishments of Empire and colonialism. Michael Jagessar, commenting on Caribbean British Pentecostal Christianity as it pertains to Joe Aldred's book *Respect*,⁶ writes,

Further, in spite of his discourse on the richness of Caribbean diversity (ethno-religious), what comes across from this volume is the sense that the default mode represents Caribbean folks stepping off the Windrush, so fully de-culturalized and purified of their inter-cultural ethno-religious heritage that their faith resembled the chalky white cliffs of Dover and the pristine un-deconstructed euro-centric theology.⁷

The continental African dimension of Christianity in Britain has also been informed by colonialism and empire, which continues to circumscribe the parameters of acceptability and notions of what constitutes the status-quo and normality in terms of faith adherence.⁸ In using the term 'Imperial Missionary Christianity', I'm referring to the development of the Christian faith that arose from the missionary activities, which went hand in hand with empire and colonialism. It was this version, as opposed to more indigenous movements, such as North African Orthodox Christianity,⁹ into which the bulk of colonial subjects were inducted and formed. A number of writers have spoken of the mis-education and indoctrination elements of colonial Christianity.¹⁰ Constraints of space prevent a detailed exploration of the relationship between Imperial Missionary Christianity and Black Christians in Britain? suffice it to say, that there can be no doubting that the two are inextricably linked, to a level and at a depth that scholars are only now beginning to tease out. It is worth noting that at the time of writing, there are only a handful of texts that have explored this relationship to any satisfactory degree.¹¹

The relationship between empire, colonialism and Christianity, in many respects, remains the unacknowledged

'elephant in the room'. Empire and colonialism found much of its intellectual underscoring on the basis of White, Eurocentric supremacy, which marked the clear binary between notions of civilised and acceptable against uncivilised and transgressive. There are no prizes for guessing on which side of the divide Black people found themselves relegated. The unacknowledged weight of invisible Whiteness and its damnable offspring, White supremacy has been remarked upon by the African Caribbean, Black British TV presenter and religio-cultural commentator, Robert Beckford thus:

I would say that theology is the last bastion of White supremacy in Britain. Most disciplines have woken up to the need to engage with critical theory. They've engaged with diversity at the core, thinking more critically and constructively about how they shape things. Sociology students here at Goldsmith's take courses in 'critical Whiteness'. In theology circles they'd think you were dealing with table cloths they have at different times of the year!¹²

At the time of writing it is interesting to note the paucity of theological texts written by White British authors seeking to explore the relationship between empire, colonialism, Whiteness, racism and the church in Britain.¹³ The almost complete absence of literature pertaining to the collusion between Imperial Missionary Christianity and Black people of faith remains one of the significant challenges facing Black and Asian theologians in the British context. R.S. Sugirtharajah, the doyen of Postcolonial Biblical hermeneutics writing on the development of Imperial Missionary Christianity writes:

It is no coincidence that the founding of all these missionary societies took place contemporaneously with the activities of the trading companies like the East India Company and the Dutch East India Company. The East India Company initially resisted the presence of the missionaries. It feared that the interference of missionaries in local religious customs and manners might be counterproductive to its mercantile interests. However, [with] the renewal of the Company's charter in 1833 and the abolition of its monopoly, missionary enterprise received a boost?.Once the impediment to missionary work was removed, the missionaries themselves became willing supporters of commercial expansion.¹⁴

But if the legacy of the under explored relationship between 'Christianity, Commerce, and Civilisation'¹⁵ within White British theological circles is a cause for concern, the record amongst Black Christians in Britain has, until comparatively recently, been equally lamentable. I must make the point at this juncture that the absence of writing in terms of the latter has not been an indication of the lack of ability amongst Black people of African descent to write. One can point to such landmark texts as the now iconic *The Empire Strikes Back*,¹⁶ produced by the then 'Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' at the University of Birmingham, as an example of the excellent work undertaken by Black British scholars. This work has become part of a larger tradition of cultural studies and sociological work that has made explicit the relationship between the Christian super-structure that buttressed and offered the necessary theological underscoring of the colonially- led, missionary enterprise that underpinned empire and the development of Britain's imperial might, at home and abroad.¹⁷ It should be noted that it took some twenty-five years for Black Theology in Britain to produce its equivalent text.¹⁸

It was not until the 1990s, in fact, 1990 to be precise that the development of Black, politically charged Christian writing in Britain began to emerge that would challenge the sleeping elephant in the room. *A Time to Speak*¹⁹ and its sequel, *A Time To Act*²⁰ were landmark texts that began to demonstrate the importance of linking confessional Christian faith to critical reflections on racism, White Supremacy and colonialism. These important texts were in turn, followed by the now iconic first, fully-fledged Black Theology text in Britain by Robert Beckford, entitled *Jesus Is Dread*.²¹

While Black Theology in Britain (about which I will comment more in a moment) has continued to grow and develop since the first texts were produced in the 1990s, it nevertheless remains a minority pursuit amongst most Black Christians. It is the contention of this author that greater attention to Black Theology would enable Black Christians in Britain to be better equipped to deconstruct the debilitating effects of internalised oppression and self-negation that has remained the constant legacy of Imperial Missionary Christianity in the psyche of some Black people of Christian faith in Britain.

In using the term 'Postcolonial Britain', in the context of this paper, I am seeking to problematise the overarching political, economic and cultural frameworks that have circumscribed and constrained Black subjectivity and life in this country since the 18th century. In an earlier piece of work my colleague, Michael Jagessar and I introduce the notion of 'postcolonialism' by saying it:

is not about the demise of colonialism as 'post' since it embodies both 'after' and 'beyond'. It is not about historical chronologies, but more about a critical stance, oppositional tactic or subversive reading strategy.²²

Postcolonialism is a critical, intellectual and methodological approach to deconstructing and unmaking the surreptitious, hegemonic power of colonialism, which arises from the toxic residue of empire. It is worth quoting R.S. Sugirtharajah at length, at this juncture. Sugirtharajah, reflecting on the nature and purpose of postcolonialism as a counterhegemonic, anti-imperial discourse writes:

First, in a historical sense, it encapsulates the social, political and cultural conditions of the current world order, bringing to the fore the cultural, political and economic facts of colonialism, and aiding the recognition of the ambiguities of decolonialization and the ongoing recolonialization. Secondly, as a critical discursive practice, postcolonial criticism has initiated arresting analyses of texts and societies. It provides openings for oppositional readings, uncovers suppressed voices and, more pertinently, has as its foremost concern victims and their plight. It has not only interrogated colonial domination but has also offered viable critical alternatives. Thirdly, the term applies to the political and ideological stance of an interpreter who is engaged in anti-colonial and anti-globalizing theory and praxis. Applied to biblical studies, it seeks to uncover colonial designs in both biblical texts and their interpretation, and endeavours to read the text from such postcolonial concerns as identity, hybridity and diaspora.

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Black Christianity in Britain, in its various guises, has been 'infected' by the viral strain of Imperial Missionary Christianity, that has exerted a form of cultural dissonance on the colonised mind of the Black Christian subject in the UK, to such an extent, that many are unable to incorporate their own material realities and existential needs alongside that of their faith. What one often sees exemplified in some Black Christians in Britain is a de-contextualised faith, which incorporates, at a subterranean level, all the traits and hallmarks of a form of selfnegation of Blackness. This as a corollary, then, manifests itself in a form of religio-cultural 'turkeys looking forward to Christmas' type syndrome, which cares more about abstract theologising as opposed to contextual analysis of colonial, Mission-imparted Christianity.

One can witness this, for example, in the number of prominent Black Christians who chose to sign the 'Westminster Declaration',²⁴ which whilst not overly 'Party Political', nonetheless, adhered to the basic tenets of right-wing, 'family values' political rhetoric. The latter, which has remained consonant with those proponents who are more likely to want to argue for the 'decline of Christian Britain', form the high water bench mark of empire and colonialism. I am not arguing that all the signatures to the document subscribe to the rhetoric of Britain's glorious past (although several of

them do), it is that the link between this discourse and the implicit language of Britain's imperial past was not made by these Black Christians. That White conservative Christians might want to sign such a document seems axiomatic?the fact that Black Christians should do so might be construed as being psychotic.

As I hope to demonstrate in the context of this work, Black Theology in Britain can be best exemplified as the critical, intellectual and discursive practice that has attempted to offer a more politicised conception of Christian for the expressed purposes of Black existential liberation.²⁵

Black Theology in Britain

When speaking of Black Theology in Britain, I am speaking of the specific self-named enterprise of re-interpreting the meaning of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ, in light of existential Black experience in Britain. This approach to engaging with the Christian tradition is not unlike Black Theology in differing arenas like the U.S. or South Africa, where one's point of departure is the existential and ontological reality of Blackness and the Black experience, in dialogue with 'Holy Scripture'.

Black Theology in Britain, like all theologies of liberation, is governed by the necessity of ortho-praxis rather than orthodoxy. In using this statement, what I mean to suggest is that one's starting point in talking about God is governed by the necessity to find a basis for acting in response to the existential struggles and vicissitudes of life, which impinge upon one's daily operations in the attempt to be a human being. The need to respond to the realities of life as it is lived in postcolonial Britain is one that has challenged many Black British Christians to seek, in God, a means of making sense of situations that seem inherently senseless.²⁶

In seeking to make sense of the Black condition in Britain, Black Theology has been inspired by the work, of predominantly, North American scholars, most notably James Cone,²⁷ Delores Williams²⁸ and Jackie Grant.²⁹ The frameworks for re-imagining Christianity by means of an explorative heuristic of Black hermeneutics, drawn from Black existential experience, has been most forcibly explored from within the British context by Robert Beckford.³⁰

In seeking to outline the definitional dimensions and parameters of Black Theology in Britain, I am forced to acknowledge my own myopia at this juncture in the proceedings. For whilst there is a growing wealth of literature that has explored Black theology from within other religious paradigms, including Rastafari,³¹ Hinduism³² and traditional African religions;³³ Black Theology in Britain, like her counterparts in South Africa or the U.S., has been dominated by a Christian-inspired gaze.

Combining Black Theology with transformative, experiential knowledge

The bulk of my scholarly work has been concerned with exploring the relationship between Black theological reflection and differing forms of Christian education. In this work I am interested in how the latter?by means of transformative, experiential learning can be achieved through the framework provided by the central tenets of Black Theology. My own engagement with transformative learning has its roots in my engagement with Paulo Freire, Ira Shor and James A. Banks. The latter describes transformative knowledge as that which challenges the dominant theories and paradigms that constitute the normative frames of epistemology.³⁴ Transformative knowledge proceeds from a critical, dialectical inquiry into the very basis of what constitutes knowledge and truth.³⁵ Central to the epistemological framing of transformative knowledge is the challenging of the alleged objectivity of western scholasticism. Banks asserts that 'The assumption within the Western empirical paradigm is that knowledge produced within it is neutral and objective and that its principles are universal'.³⁶

Banks' challenge to the seemingly axiomatic centrality of the western empirical tradition is central to this work. In this method for engaging with controversial subject matter in the teaching-learning process, I am inviting adult learners to reflect in a critical, dialectical manner on what constitutes truth, using Black Theology as a normative theological paradigm through which this process of transformative knowledge takes place. It is the dominant, captive possession

of knowledge and truth arising from the western empirical tradition that has provided the vital underscoring of the construction of White Eurocentric hegemony, in which Christian theology and the church has been a convenient handmaiden. Emmanuel Eze has demonstrated the potent and corrosive relationship between Enlightenment thought and White Eurocentric knowledge construction and the hierarchical claims for White superiority and supremacy.³⁷

Perhaps the central task of this work is that of using the frameworks of transformative knowledge, coupled with Black Theology, in order to critically re-evaluate the essential meaning of Blackness and the ontological value of Black people. Perhaps the centrality and import of this task can be perceived in the following quotation from Gayraud Wilmore, who writes:

'If I had a choice before I was born to be one color or the other, which would I prefer and why?' The pejorative connotations continued in the English vocabulary where we continue to speak of 'blackmail', 'blackguards', 'black sheep of the family', or of having one's reputation 'blackened'. All these and many more found in the dictionaries, are negative images that reflect on Africans and Diasporic descendents. On the other hand, whiteness has been consistently presented to the world as something positive?something connoting goodness, cleanliness, beauty, holiness, and purity. It would be much fairer to make the case that we are all somehow 'obsessed' with color than to single out the psychology of black people as unfortunate. As much as we may deplore it, the color symbolism of our language in Great Britain and North America gives the whiteness/blackness dichotomy ontological significance?at least, up to the end of the twentieth century. We must wait and see what happens now in the twenty-first, but not look for any startling changes. 38

Transformative knowledge in the context of this work alludes to a critical process of reflection and action on how oppressive epistemologies are constructed and enacted. It is an invitation to ordinary learners (of all ethnicities) to critically assess the veracity of particular truth claims and the processes that produce hegemonic, interlocking systems and structures that constrict and inhibit the God-given selfhood of Black peoples.

Using Black Theology as a heuristic device for illustrating the illusory dimensions of the White, Euro-American western world order, this work seeks to enable ordinary people to pose critical questions and to gain important insights on truth and knowledge, in the hope that what accrues from this educative process is a form of learning that is transformative. As bell hooks has observed, transformative knowledge can give rise to new, distinctive forms of thinking, which as a corollary, can assist in re-shaping one's perception of reality that is not conditioned or silenced by the hegemonic, patriarchal constructs of imperialism and androcentric totalism.³⁹

What does this look like in practice?

The theoretical paradigms provided by Transformative knowledge and learning clearly inform this approach to Black theological reflection. The use of experiential models of learning, in which the adult learner is immersed within a constructed exercise, game or drama, becomes a means by which they are enabled to reflect critically on the immediate experiences and feelings that have accrued from the activity itself. Participants are invited to reflect on what they have felt and learnt whilst being immersed within the embodied, metaphorical activity that forms the active element in the Practical theological process that has emerged from what I have now termed as 'Participative Black Theology'.⁴⁰

Immediately following the performance of the exercise, roleplay/ game, I usually spend several minutes with the participants helping them to reflect upon the events in which they have just taken part. Participants are encouraged to connect with their feelings for a few moments as they reflect on the implications of the embodied metaphorical exercise for the faith positions and theology they presently hold. Oftentimes, within the central activity, there will be

inbuilt dynamics that seek to represent the issues of contestation and argument that are often commonplace in all philosophical and religious frameworks that give substance to and which act as meaning-making operations in life. This opportunity for reflection is essential because it provides the necessary bridge between previous beliefs and attitudes, and the possibility of critical, reflective change that sometimes accrues from the performative activity.

Central to the working of the exercise/game or role-play is the sense that at the heart of this approach to theological reflection is the demand, indeed the expectation that participants are willing to enter into the 'internal logic' of the activity. By internal logic, I am referring to a process in which the participant takes seriously the perspective of the performative activity itself?that is, they are acted upon and are active subjective selves within the activity in which they are a part. It is essential that each participant imbues their role within the activity with a degree of seriousness. This does not mean that the activity is one replete with solemnity and sententiousness. On the contrary, I would argue that comedy and laughter have been central ingredients in all my participative Black Theology work since its earliest conception in the mid 1990s.⁴¹ This mode of behaviour is not unlike that demanded of participants in Groome's⁴² or Berryman's⁴³ respective educational approaches to Practical theology.

This approach to undertaking educational, transformative Black Theology-related teaching is one that challenges Black Christian learners to suspend reality as they have experienced it and to enter into the basic logic of a 'simple game', in which they are invited to engage and interact with others. The premise of the game or exercise may appear absurd or ridiculous, but participants are challenged to take the game seriously, in terms of their participation in it.

This sense of asking participants to suspend their critical, realist judgements, in order to enter into the internal logic and dynamic of a piece of activity, is one that lies at the centre of this approach to the teaching and learning of so-called controversial topics. This approach is one that seeks to engage with the emotional or the affective repertoire of adult learners and not just the cognitive domains of the human self. The process is also critical because in the final analysis, it is with the emotional or the affective self that profound changes in religious consciousness are most likely to accrue. The best theology is never just a cognitive affair. It is one that engages not only the emotions, but perhaps, most crucially, it stimulates the imagination. What would happen if one were enabled to see something completely differently? How might one's perception of God be changed, if through an exercise, one were able to witness, if only a glimpse, of another way of knowing, or an alternative mode of being?

As an educator, using this method of teaching and learning, perhaps the greatest challenge that confronts me is the need to ensure that I seek to create an environment in which participants can be enabled to ask critical questions of the Christianity and some of the underlying theology that underpins many of the accepted norms of the faith. In the learning environment of the classroom or the workshop, the use of such activity-based learning is to provide a cathartic space in which the participant can be enabled to see that there are differing possibilities to what we often assess as religious truth.

Re-visiting an old exercise

The exercise that follows is one I have used on many occasions to demonstrate how an imperial, Eurocentric missionary inspired interpretation of Christianity has led to many Black people interpreting the truths of the Christian faith in a manner that negates their Blackness and unwittingly supports White supremacy.

The exercise I created was entitled ***Are You in the Story?*** After further revisions and amendments it was later incorporated into the introductory material in volume two of ***Growing into Hope***.⁴⁴ This exercise was intended to help leaders understand more clearly a process that has afflicted African people for approximately five hundred years. A process of mis-education and biased, self-serving teaching strategies have led African people to develop a negative psychological condition manifested primarily as a form of self-denial. This can be seen in the inability of 'colonised' people to assert their own worth, or to see themselves reflected positively in popular stories, myths or historical events that have become central within the narratives of the metropolitan centre.

The aim of this experiential exercise is to describe clearly one of the principal sub-texts of ***Growing into Hope***, namely, the need for oppressed people to re-interpret and appropriate the defining narratives that constitute story/vision (of the Gospel) for their ultimate liberation. This work enables Black Christians to attempt to claim the Gospel of Jesus Christ as their own, through the inculturation and re-thinking of the central norms of what constitutes the Christian faith.

The exercise asks individuals to imagine a scene from the Bible. I chose John's account of the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 6, verses 1-15. All participants are asked to imagine the scene in the story in as much detail as is possible. What does Jesus look like? What are the disciples like? What is the boy wearing? How do they see the crowd? What is the cultural setting of the scene?

Having imagined the scene in great detail, individuals are then asked to reflect upon where they are in the story. If individuals see themselves as one of the disciples at the centre of the story, then they are encouraged to walk to one particular side of the room. Conversely, if they are mere bystanders, standing near the back of the crowd, then they are encouraged to walk to another side of the room. Finally, I ask some if they are even in the scene at all, or are they watching the action as if they are in a living room, far removed from the whole event, viewing everything on television?

The crucial learning that has resulted from this exercise is the sense that marginalised and oppressed Black people tend to see themselves as distant spectators in God's story, not as central players.⁴⁵ This in itself should not surprise us. If broader society largely confines Black people to subservient and demeaning roles, then why should we necessarily expect these self same people to imagine themselves in central, defining positions within biblical narratives? In the exercise, it is often the case that biblical narratives and their concomitant, underlying theological themes are re-interpreted in light of English societal manners and social mores.

In my initial doctoral research back in the mid 1990s, I was concerned to locate a mechanism that would enable Black Christians to experientially inhabit the Christian 'story' by means of a process of self-actualisation. Reflecting back on that work, I want to return to some of my words, written in the late 1990s, taken from volume two of ***Growing into Hope: Liberation and Change***. In opening that text I state that:

In much of our Biblical reflection and related materials, we present a one-dimensional image of the Bible. The Eurocentric perspective holds sway, and the stories and events become re-enactments of European culture, incorporating their values and beliefs. In such circumstances, Black children are excluded. They, coming from a variety of backgrounds and informed by different cultures, are simply observing. They are watching, but are not a part of the story, or the ongoing traditions of faith. They are observers who do not belong in the truest and fullest sense of the word.

Many studies by researchers in education have shown, clearly, that many black children, when they are asked to imagine people in their minds or to draw pictures that are visual representations of themselves or people they would like to become, these images are often of white, European models and are not accurate pictures of themselves or people recognised as members of their family. Such has been the dominance of white images and models that are always presented as being the norm, that for many black children, these white forms become more desirable than those images that represent their own cultural backgrounds and identities.

We need to find inclusive images, stories and alternative ways of reading these narratives, in order that different cultures and backgrounds are depicted and that Black children and young people can feel a part of the story. That they can believe that they belong and are not simply observing or standing aside, looking on.⁴⁶

This process of performative action operates within constructed, often contested spaces in which religious participants are invited to adopt particular roles in various exercises (such as the one I have just described) as a part of an imaginative process of role-playing. The exercise I have described has been used as a means of enabling many confessional Black Christians to reflect on their inherited belief structures in a more critical manner; but using a learning device that enables them to adopt the semantic game-playing of pretending it is 'just a game'.

This particular approach is necessary because many confessional Black Christian believers will enter the theology class intent upon defending their inherited faith.⁴⁷ A number of Black scholars have demonstrated the extent to which Christianity as a global phenomenon has drunk deeply from the well of Eurocentric philosophical thought at the expense of African or other overarching forms of epistemology.⁴⁸ Black Christianity in Britain has imbibed these overarching Eurocentric, Greek influenced thought forms, often at their expense of their own identity and African forms of epistemology. This adherence to 19th century Biblicism has meant that the blandishments of Historical-Critical Biblical studies, for example, have barely failed to penetrate the edifice of the Black Christianity across the world. It is interesting to note that many Black evangelicals will argue vehemently against notion of syncretism (the coming together of and mixing of differing religious and philosophical frameworks as a way of understanding and talking about God). In the many workshops I have led over the years in a variety of Black Christian communities, I have lost count the number of times I have heard Black Christians rail against the incorporation of 'African Cultural practices', for example, in any understanding of the Christian faith. Even when one can point to respected scholars such as Gayraud Wilmore, one of the architects of African American Black Theology, as evidence of the legitimacy of such an approach, many ordinary Black people of faith remain steadfastly unconvinced.⁴⁹

Yet, when I have then reminded them (some at least) and told others (for the first time), that much of John's Gospel, particularly the opening sections, which describe the Cosmic Christ as the 'Logos' is in fact a Greek philosophical idea; which represents the very kind of syncretism they claim to despise, many remain silent on this matter.⁵⁰ It would seem that syncretism is not really that appalling when the dictates of orthodoxy sanction it. Perhaps, more critically, the issue may be more concerned, not with whether Christians can tolerate syncretism (for clearly all of us can, to some extent), but more pertinently, with what kind of syncretism can some of us live?⁵¹

While the inclusion of White-Euro-American religious thought forms as a means of enabling us to culturally appropriate the Christian faith seem acceptable, the inclusion of Black-African traditions seems not to be. In more recent times, one can point to the work of Michelle Gonzalez, who has undertaken considerable work looking at the relationship between Afro-Cuban religious traditions and Roman Catholicism on that particular island.⁵²

For the most part, Black Christianity in Britain is often locked into literalistic readings of the Bible, in which many adherents claim to believe the whole of the canon as being divinely inspired and the supreme authority in all matters.⁵³ My concern in assisting Black Christians in Britain to reflect on and to re-assess the implications of their Christian faith arises from the dangers of reading subliminal Whiteness into their overarching hermeneutical frameworks for interpreting truth. When some Black Christians claim to be defending 'Christian Britain' what they are in effect stating in covert ways is a desire to protect normative Whiteness. When some claim that the BNP 'may have a point', once again what such protestations illustrate is a penchant for re-scribing White supremacy, often at their own expense, which is at a variance with their experiential, social realities. White Imperial Missionary Christianity does not need Black subjugated minds and bodies to defend it. Black Theology offers a means by which this specious artefact from colonial history and empire can be resisted and hopefully, deconstructed.

Having used a number of embodied, metaphorical activities in a number of educative settings, be it formal classrooms and informal workshops in Black communities across the UK, indeed, across the world, I can attest to the ways in which they can be helpful means of creating subtle nuances, multiple meanings and new interpretations for how we understand and assess the meaning of Christian faith in the context of postcolonial Britain.

In this particular method for undertaking Black Liberation theology in the British context, I have adopted an approach that uses experiential exercises as a means enabling ordinary Black people to become part of a process that provides

them with opportunities to enter into the performance of theological activity.⁵⁴ The performance is one that encourages them to engage in a fictional game-activity that allows them to enter into the dramatic possibilities of the exercise in order that their often inhibited subjectivity can be challenged by the revealed truth arising from the game itself. That in effect, they are able to tease out or adopt provisional truth claims arising from their engagement with the exercise or game (or some cases drama sketches I have written) without any substantive commitment to that position itself. This kind of dialectical repository of truth; namely being able to hold to one's confessional belief in many of the creedal building blocks of Christian faith; while being able to juxtapose alternative belief structures is one that is central to this method of teaching and learning and theologising. It is this type of improvisation within the context of an exercise, game or piece of drama that enables ordinary Black people to become part of a process of trying to discern and create new truths, as supplement to their existing confessional belief structures. This work is built upon the active involvement of ordinary voiceless people.⁵⁵ It is an approach that enables them to engage with emotions and aspects of their lived experience and reality of Black people, in manner that brings these elements into conversation with their faith. Hopefully, by means of this kind of educative-theological work, Black participants are enabled to see the links between the constructions of social reality and revealed nature of religious faith. When one is able to combine the two, hopefully, the inane discourse of wanting to defend Imperial Missionary Christianity; the very framework that has often been the cause of one's own estrangement from oneself, will begin to dissipate. Similarly, the desire to want to defend the BNP as defenders of 'Christian Britain' will be disregarded as arrant nonsense.

This dialectical process is one that eschews the blandishments of Imperial Missionary Christianity, with its emphasis upon upholding and supporting the unreconstructed and unacknowledged pernicious normality that is Whiteness and White supremacy. This approach is one that teaches ordinary Black people to be just a tad wary of the exalted possibilities of heaven as proclaimed to them from within the dictates of White hegemony. I am not asking ordinary Black Christians in Britain not to believe in Heaven, just to be a tad more suspicious of the Imperial Missionary Christianity they have imbibed, and to ask whether the social reality of Blackness as they have experienced it is always best served adhering to a religious tradition that has often been revealed to them in the noxious and toxic fabric of empire, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Endnotes

- I have sought to problematise the notion of the privileged voice as the subjective insider in theo-ethnographic work in a previous piece of work. I argue that such discourse is often nothing more than a simplistic device to attain a form of 'authentic' authorial voice that attains towards unchallenged authority in the recalling of any socio-cultural accounts of reality. I am not questioning the importance or indeed the efficacy of insider accounts in any absolutist sense; rather, I am critiquing their usage as a short hand descriptor for what which is supposedly more authentic. See Reddie, Anthony G., *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006), pp. 10-25.
- This phrase has now been developed into a multi-media educational resource for teaching about empire, nationality and asylum in Britain. See http://www.virtualmigrants.com/we_rhere/index.htm.
- In more recent times, my colleague and friend Michael Jagessar has sought to both critique Gilbert's importance and give agency to the two enslaved African women in an important essay. See Jagessar, Michael N., 'Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optics of Gilbert's Slave Women ? Another Reading', *Black Theology: An International Journal* Vol.5, No.2, (2007), pp.111-153- 170.
- In using this term I am referring to those established denominations of the Protestant tradition, plus the Roman Catholic church, which account for the greater majority of the population that can be described and identified as attendees and practising Christians. The churches in question are the Anglican church (the Church of England), the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Reformed Church (the United Reformed Church in the UK) and the Roman Catholic Church. These churches account for approximately two thirds of all Black Christians in the UK. Pentecostalism, which emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century in North America accounts for the other third. As I will detail at a later juncture in this paper, Black Pentecostalism

displays an alternative set of pathologies than that exhibited by Historic church Christianity. Both branches or wings of the Christian faith have, nevertheless, been informed by the Imperial missionary strains of British Christianity via the Caribbean and the continent of Africa. See entries marked 'Christianity' and 'Churches' in Dabydeen, David, Gilmore, John and Jones, Cecily, (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), pp.99-104.

- See Reddie, Richard, *Abolition: The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Colonies* (Oxford: Lion, 2007).
- See Aldred, J.D., *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2005).
- Jagessar, Michael N., 'Book Review of J.D. Aldred, *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity*', *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Vol.5, No.2, (2007) pp.128-130 (p.130).
- See Chike, Chigor, *African Christianity in Britain: Diaspora, Doctrines and Dialogue* (Milton Keynes: Authorhouse, 2007) for an excellent appraisal of African Christianity in Britain.
- There was a long legacy of Christianity in North Africa, which existed prior to Christianity reaching Britain. This is often known as the 'Alexandrian School' and was characterised by its great learning and the contribution it made to the intellectual development of early Christianity. See Brown, Michael Joseph, *The Lords Prayer Through North African Eyes: A Window into Early Christianity* (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2004).
- See Erskine, Noel L., *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1981), Gregory, Howard, *Caribbean Theology: Preparing for the Challenges Ahead* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995), Williams, Lewin L., *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), Davis, Kortright, *Emancipation Still Comin': Explorations in Caribbean Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990). A more recent offering, which provides, perhaps, the most radical riposte for the conservative and reactionary theological motifs contained within (Caribbean) Imperial Missionary Christianity, see Thomas, Oral, *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics Within a Caribbean Context* (London: Equinox, 2010).
- See Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostalism: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000). See also Reddie, Anthony G., *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Postcolonial Black British Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2007) and Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2007).
- Interview with Robert Beckford in *Reform* ? URC magazine. (London: 86 Tavistock Place, June 2010), pp.12.
- To the best of my knowledge these texts include Leech, Kenneth, *Struggle in Babylon* (London: Sheldon press, 1988), Leech, Kenneth, *Race: Changing Society and the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2005), Haslam, David, *Race for the Millennium: a Challenge to Church and Society* (London: Church House for the Churches' Commission on Racial Justice [CCRJ], 1996), Haslam, David, *The Churches and 'Race': a Pastoral Approach* (Cambridge: Grove books, 2001), Wilkinson, John L., *Church in Black and White : the Black Christian Tradition in 'Mainstream' Churches in England: a White Response and Testimony* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993), Gorringer, Timothy J., *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004).
- Sugirtharajah, R.S., *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM, 2003) pp.24.
- Comments made by Stanley Livingstone to sum up the imperial colonial missionary enterprise in Africa. See Nkomazana, Fidelis, 'Livingstone's Ideas of Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation', *Botswana Journal of African Studies* Vol.12, Nos. 1 & 2, (1998), pp.45-57.
- See *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain* (London and New York: Routledge in

association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982).

- Within the British context, this work has, until more recent times, been undertaken with greater alacrity by sociologists and cultural theorists than theologians. Amongst the best work that has emerged from the former, see The University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, ***The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*** (London: Hutchinson, 1982). See also Sivanandan, A., ***A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*** (London: Pluto Press, 1982); Prescod, Colin and Waters, Hazel, (eds.) ***A World to Win: Essays in Honour of A. Sivanandan*** (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1999); and Kundhani, Arun, ***The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain*** (London: Pluto Press, 2007). To my mind, the best collective work from a Black theology perspective in Britain can be found in Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) ***Black Theology in Britain: A Reader*** (London: Equinox, 2007).
- Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) ***Black Theology in Britain: A Reader*** (London: Equinox, 2007).
- Grant, Paul and Patel, Raj, (eds.) ***A Time To Speak: Perspectives of Black Christians in Britain*** (Birmingham: A Joint Publication of 'Racial Justice' and the 'Black Theology Working Group', 1990).
- Grant, Paul and Patel, Raj, (eds.) ***A Time To Act: Kairos 1992*** (Birmingham: A Joint Publication of 'Racial Justice' and the 'Black and Third World Theology Working Group', 1992).
- Beckford, Robert, ***Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain*** (London: DLT, 1998).
- Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) ***Postcolonial Black British Theology*** (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2006), pp.xvii
- Sugirtharajah, R.S., ***Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology***, (London: SCM Press, 2003), p.4.
- The pre-amble to the Westminster Declaration reads thus: 'Protecting human life, protecting marriage, and protecting freedom of conscience are foundational for creating and maintaining strong families, caring communities and a just society. Our Christian faith compels us to speak and act in defence of all these.' See <http://www.westminster2010.org.uk/declaration/> for further details.
- This work is exemplified in a number of the significant texts in the British context. See Beckford, Robert, ***Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain*** (London: DLT, 1998), Beckford, Robert, ***Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain*** (London: SPCK, 2000), Beckford, Robert, ***God of the Rahtid*** (London: DLT, 2001), Reddie, Anthony G., ***Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation*** (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2003), ***Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God Talk*** (London: Equinox, 2006), ***Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*** (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), ***Working Against The Grain: Re-Imaging Black Theology in the 21st Century*** (London: Equinox, 2008), Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) ***Postcolonial Black British Theology*** (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2007) and ***Black Theology in Britain: A Reader*** (London: Equinox, 2007). See also ***Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis*** (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998-2002) and ***Black Theology: An International Journal*** (London: Equinox, 2002-).
- These themes are explored to great effect by Robert Beckford in the third of his groundbreaking trilogy of work ***God of The Rahtid*** (London: DLT, 2003), pp.1-30.
- See Cone, James H., ***A Black Theology of Liberation*** (New York: Orbis. 1986).
- See Williams, Delores, ***Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*** (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1993).
- See Grant, Jacqueline, ***White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*** (Atlanta: Scholar's press, 1989).
- See Beckford, Robert, ***Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain*** (London: SPCK, 2000).

- See Spencer, William David, ***Dread Jesus*** (London: SPCK, 1999).
- Jagessar, Michael N., 'Liberating Cricket: Through the Optic of Ashutosh Gowariker's Lagaan', ***Black Theology: An International Journal*** (Vol.2, No.2, July 2004) pp.239-249.
- Karran, Kampta, 'Changing Kali: From India to Guyana to Britain', ***Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis*** (Vol.4, No.1., Nov. 2001) pp. 90-102.
- Banks, James A., (ed.) ***Multicultural Education, Transformative Knowledge and Action: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*** (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996) p.9
- See Habermas, Jurgen, ***Knowledge and Human Interests*** (Boston: Beacon, 1971).
- Banks, James A., ***Race, Culture and Education: The Selected Works of James A. Banks*** (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) pp.148.
- See Eze, Emmanuel C., ***Race and The Enlightenment: A Reader*** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
- Wilmore, Gayraud S., ***Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith Through an Africentric Lens*** (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp.,142-143.
- hooks, bell, ***Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*** (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.93-128.
- This work is best exemplified in two books: See Reddie, Anthony G., ***Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God Talk*** (London: Equinox, 2006) and Reddie, Anthony G., ***Working Against The Grain: Re-imagining Black Theology in the 21st century*** (London: Equinox, 2008).
- The use of comedy can be seen in several of my books. As The Revd Dr Colin Morris has been known to remark, 'The opposite of funny, is unfunny, not serious'. i.e. that there is no oxymoron in juxtaposing 'funny' and 'serious' in any approach to theological reflection. Jacqueline Bussie has written an award winning study on the relationship between laughter, oppression and resistance. The pointed use of laughter and comedy becomes a means of effecting resistance in the face of oppression and marginalisation. See Bussie, Jacqueline, ***Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance*** in Wiesel, Morrison and Endo (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006).
- See Groome, Thomas H., ***Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministries*** (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1991) and ***Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*** (San Francisco: Jossey Bass [1st published 1980] 1999).
- Berryman, Jerome W., ***Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*** (Minneapolis: Augsburg [1st published in 1991 by Harper: San Francisco] 1995).
- See Volume Two of ***Growing Into Hope: Liberation And Change***, pp. 7-8.
- See Reddie, Anthony, ***Growing into Hope: Liberation And Change***, pp. 8-9.
- See Reddie, Anthony, ***Growing into Hope: Liberation And Change***, (ibid.) p. 8.
- The renowned Euro-American religious educator, John Westerhoff identifies a four part typology in Christian faith formation and development. He argues that people move from 'Experienced' faith to 'Affiliative' faith, through to 'Searching' faith and finally 'Owned' faith. See ***Unfinished Business: Children and the Churches*** (London: The Consultative Group on Ministry among Children, CCBI publications, 1995), p.35. See also , Westerhoff, John, ***Will Our Children Have Faith?*** (New York: Sebury Press, 1973).
- See Hood, Robert E., ***Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-Cultures and God-Talk*** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). See also Byron, Gay L., ***Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*** (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- See Wilmore, Gayraud S., ***Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith Through an Africentric Lens*** (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 87-152.

- This issue is raised by Robert E. Hood in his landmark ***Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-Cultures and God-Talk*** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).
 - As Hood reminds us, it would appear that so long as 'White' European cultures and thought forms are being intertwined with so-called 'pure' Christianity, then any notion of syncretism (often rarely admitted as such, however) can be tolerated. But when Black African traditions are being utilised like Vodun in Haiti or Santeria in Cuba, then the dictates of White Euro-American hegemony are brought to bear, often at the expense of the latter. See Hood, Robert E., ***Must God Remain Greek?***, (ibid.) pp. 43-102.
 - See Gonzalez, Michelle A., ***Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture and Identity*** (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006).
 - See 'The Statement of Faith' of the influential Council for Black-Led Churches.
<http://www.cbcluc.com/membership/index.php?pageID=429> Accessed 22/3/2010.
 - Some of my initial thinking has been inspired by Jose Irizarry and his notion of theology as 'Performative Action'. Irizarry argues for a dramatic process of doing theology in which participants and the educator enter into a process of performance in which there is an inherent dialectic and from which new truths can be discerned. See Irizarry, Jose R., 'The Religious Educator as Cultural Spec-Actor: Researching Self in Intercultural Pedagogy', ***Religious Education*** Vol. 98, No. 3, (Summer 2003), pp.365-381.
 - Aspects of this theological dynamic can be found in the Black liturgical practice of the 'Call and Response' tradition of Black preaching, which exists in within numerous Black ecclesial contexts across the African Diaspora. See Fielding Stewart, III, Carlyle, ***Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness*** (Trenton, New York: Africa World Press, 1999) pp.105-120.
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