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CHRISTIANITY TU'N MI FOOL: DECONSTRUCTING CONFESSIONAL BLACK CHRISTIAN FAITH IN POSTCOLONIAL BRITAIN

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to re-think confessional Black Christian faith, in the British context, through the use of such refining optics as Black liberation theology and religious, postcolonial discourse. I argue that Black Christian faith in Britain is a product of empire and colonialism and so has been infected by the "viral strain" of neo-colonialist religio-cultural epistemological frameworks. This, as a corollary, has limited and stifled the praxiological effect of Black Christian faith in Britain. In seeking to combine postcolonial discourse with the more traditional attention to liberative praxis found within Black theology, this essay seeks to chart a new intent and future for Black Christian faith in Britain.

Keywords: Black theology in Britain; postcolonial discourse; Black Christian faith; cultural dissonance.

The Prologue to This Study

I am a British-born participative[2] Black liberation theologian. As a British person of African roots and a Caribbean heritage, I want to locate this work in

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2. Use of the term "participative" in my self-naming is to speak to the methodological point of departure in my work as a Black theologian. Participation for me is the attempt to make my engagement with ordinary people of faith the central methodological framework for

terms of my own transglobal, postcolonial, hybridized subjectivity. I am a British subject at the heart of the "mother country" that at the birth of the twentieth century ruled approximately 25 per cent of the world.

I was born into and socialized within a diasporan Caribbean family. My family home was one characterized by the liminality of migrants. While the family home was that of an expatriate Jamaican family, I was at one and the same time, a quintessential Yorkshire child, whose embodied self and that of my three siblings all carried the multiple influences of Caribbean plantocracy and Yorkshire White working-class cultures. The Christianity I imbibed was again a complex amalgam of multiple sources; in this case, classical Methodism, linked with religio-cultural practices from Africa and the Caribbean.

Growing up in this religio-cultural milieu was a fascinating experience. The world that was inhabited by my parents was one that was separated from the wider arena of White working class life in Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK. My parents, in order to shield themselves and their children from the ongoing shadow of racism that seemed to stalk the lives of Black migrants living in Yorkshire, constructed an elaborate internal universe of ritual that was to be our bulwark against the harshness of the outside world.

At the centre of our household was the Bible, as the unimpeachable depositor of the Christian faith. In more recent times, the unswerving fidelity to the Bible of my youth has been replaced with a more critical striving and restlessness of spirit, and intellectual struggle, as the nagging questions regarding the relationship of the Bible to my life and that of other postcolonial Black people have refused to dissipate.[3] As a postcolonial subject, I have continued to wrestle with the challenges posed by the colonially influenced, often anti-Black Christian faith I imbibed as a child, and have often wondered why Black people continue to show their allegiance to this faith after so many years of Christian-inspired violence (physical and psychological) perpetrated against them?[4]

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attempting to undertake constructive Black theological work. This approach to Black theology sits at the nexus of Christian education (with the expressed aim of conscientizing poor, marginalized, and oppressed peoples) and Black theology, which provides the theological content for the former. This work is the juxtaposition of practical and constructive approaches to theological reflection. For examples of this work, see Anthony G. Reddie, *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005); idem, *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God-Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006); and idem, *Working against the Grain: Re-imaging Black Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Equinox, 2008).

3. This question has been raised in a number of my publications, most recently in *Is God Colour Blind? Insights from Black Theology for Christian Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2009), 53–57.

4. This question has been raised by African American womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas. See her *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), ix–xix.

I have repeated this often-asked question in the context of this article because at the heart of the postcolonial enterprise is the ongoing dialectic between internalized indigenization and externalized imposition. The critical question for me is "can Christianity be remade so as to shed its collusive relationship with oppression, domination, and exploitation?" This work seeks to locate some kind of mediation between these dialectical modes of constructed truth. In the postcolonial context that is Britain, perhaps the sharpest subtext is the sense that the alleged exclusivity of the Christian faith[5] sits in negotiative tension with indigenous religious traditions and spiritualities, and that this ongoing nexus for mutuality and cooperation remains a live issue in many religio-cultural milieus across the UK and across the world.

Namely, that in my own family, and that of many of other Black and minority ethnic peoples, through any cursory investigation into the narrative frameworks of our genealogies it will become readily apparent that not all of us have always been Christians. So what of our forebears who had never heard or indeed, in some cases, decided to resist the so-called claims of Christ, as propagated by an imperial church? Comparatively recent work from "The International Association for Black Religions and Spiritualities"[6] has sought to illuminate how one can juxtapose post-imperial Christian faith alongside other forms of religious expression and spiritualities, when the former has been the less than benign harbinger for the veracity of the latter.[7]

I know that my own religiously orientated subjective agency continues to oscillate between the primal Baptist-inspired Christian faith of my mother that dominated my formative years and the transgressive theological musings of my onset middle age. The essay is underpinned by the sharp reminder that any incipient guilt regarding the unresolved tensions between formative faithfulness and reconstructive rejection that is often lodged deep within the subterranean framework of many postcolonial scholars should be ignored in favour of a "limbo space" third way.[8] The latter phrase, borrowed from my friend and

5. This has been addressed by my colleague in the Black theology in Britain movement Michael Jagessar who asks "Is Jesus the only way?" The seemingly didactic absolutism of Jn 14:6 has often been used as a kind of one-verse-microcosm for the seemingly inviolate meaning for the whole Christian tradition. Jagessar has argued that Jesus cannot be the only way for postcolonial subjects in Britain. See Michael N. Jagessar, "Is Jesus the Only Way? Doing Black Christian God-Talk in a Multi-Religious City (Birmingham, UK)," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 7, no. 2 (2009): 200–25.

6. Details about this organization can be found by going to http://www.iabrs.org/.

7. See Dwight N. Hopkins and Marjorie Lewis, eds, *Another World Is Possible: Spiritualities and Religions of Global Darker Peoples* (London: Equinox, 2009).

8. This term emanates from my colleague in the Black theology in Britain movement, Michael Jagessar, who argues that hybridized Black and Asian Christian subjects in Britain should embrace the "limbo spaces" in which they can "play" and manoeuvre between varying

colleague, Michael Jagessar, draws on the metaphor of Caribbean cultural space in which plural and heterodox notions of identities and religio-cultural subjectivities eschew the fixed binaries often imposed on colonial subjects by imperial Christendom.

In analysing my own subjective self as a point of departure in assessing how Black Christians in Britain negotiate religio-cultural ecclesial space and the imperial, mission theologies that abound in such contexts, I have been struck by the modernistic binaries in which I have been trapped.

Postcolonial Britain

In using the term "postcolonial Britain," in the context of this article, I am seeking to problematize the overarching political, economic, and cultural frameworks that have circumscribed and constrained Black subjectivity and life in this country since the eighteenth century.

In a previous piece of work my colleague, Michael Jagessar, and I argue that postcolonialism 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."[9] 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 worth quoting R. S. Sugirtharajah at this juncture. Sugirtharajah, reflecting on the nature and purpose of postcolonialism as a counter-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

forms of religious identities. This form of movement is one that rejects fixed notions of religious identity that often speak to the totalizing camp mentality of modernity. See Jagessar, "Is Jesus the Only Way?," 221.

9. Michael N. Jagessar and Anthony G. Reddie, eds, *Postcolonial Black British Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006), xvii.

> endeavours to read the text from such postcolonial concerns as identity, hybridity and diaspora.[10]

Black Christianity in its various guises has been "infected" by the viral strain of imperial mission Christianity that has exerted a form of cultural dissonance on the neo-colonial 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-contextualized faith, which incorporates at a subterranean level all the traits and hallmarks of a form of self-negation 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 theologizing as opposed to any contextual analysis of colonial, mission-imparted Christianity.

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 politicized conception of Christianity for the expressed purposes of Black existential liberation.[11]

The Imperial Legacy of Britain and the Church

My assessment vis-à-vis the colonial context in which Christianity in Britain is located can be witnessed, in part, in two dialogically marching responses to this phenomenon. The very fact that I write this article as a Black, African Caribbean male whose parents come from the Caribbean island of Jamaica tells you a great deal about the positionality of Britain with a part of the world several thousand miles from these shores. In the words of as poster beloved of the anti-racist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, "We Are Here Because You Were There."[12] It should be axiomatic that one cannot talk about Christianity in

10. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 4.

11. This work is exemplified in a number of the significant texts in the British context. See Robert Beckford, *Jesus Is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London: DLT, 1998); idem, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000); idem, *God of the Rahtid* (London: DLT, 2001); Anthony G. Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2003); idem, *Dramatizing Theologies*; idem, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); idem, *Working against the Grain*; Jagessar and Reddie, eds, *Postcolonial Black British Theology*; and Michael N. Jagessar and Anthony G. Reddie, eds, *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–).

12. This phrase has now been developed into a multi-media educational resource for

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. Methodism found its way to the Caribbean via the missionary work of Nathaniel Gilbert, even though the indefatigable work undertaken by his two Black enslaved women has largely gone unheralded.[13] The "historic church"[14] 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.[15] 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 entitled *Respect*,[16] 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

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teaching about empire, nationality, and asylum in Britain. See www.virtualmigrants.com/we_rhere/index.htm.

13. 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 Michael N. Jagessar, "Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optics of Gilbert's Slave Women – Another Reading," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 5, no. 2 (2007): 153–70.

14. 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 article, Black Pentecostalism displays an alternative set of pathologies than that exhibited by historic church Christianity, in respect to imperial mission 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 David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones, eds, *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 99–104.

15. See Richard Reddie, *Abolition: The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Colonies* (Oxford: Lion, 2007).

16. See J. D. Aldred, *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2005).

> that their faith resembled the chalky white cliffs of Dover and the pristine un-deconstructed euro-centric theology.[17]

The 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.[18] So, in using the term "imperial mission Christianity," I am speaking of a historical phenomenon in which there existed (and continues to this day) an interpenetrating relationship between European expansionism, notions of White superiority, and the material artefact of the apparatus of empire.

In terms of the last of these, one must note the relationship between external and internal forms of socio-politio-cultural imposition upon client states who exhibit limited agency within these forms of geo-political arrangements. When speaking of external imposition, I am referring to externalized control of territory from European metropolitan centres (London, Paris, Brussels, Madrid, Berlin, Lisbon, etc.), usually via colonial apparatchiks, such as Viceroys, Governors, and more faceless bureaucrats in the civil service.

In terms of internal imposition, I am referring to the axiomatic epistemological superiority of Eurocentric socio-cultural norms, manners, aesthetics, and morality which affected the social arrangements between the colonized and the colonizer, within the body politic of those nations ruled under the aegis of empire.[19] Within the context of all of the aforementioned operated the imperial mission church. It was, undoubtedly, informed by and was nourished by the existence of Christendom and both reflected and benefited from the overarching frameworks of empire and colonialism. Hence, my use of the term "imperial mission Church."

Space prevents a detailed exploration of the relationship between imperial mission 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

17. Michael N. Jagessar, "Book Review of J. D. Aldred, *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity*," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 5, no. 2 (2007): 128–30 (130).

18. See Chigor Chike, *African Christianity in Britain: Diaspora, Doctrines and Dialogue* (Milton Keynes: Authorhouse, 2007), for an excellent appraisal of African Christianity in Britain.

19. There is a vast literature pertaining to the development, facets, and characteristics of colonialism and empire, particularly, within the purview of the Christian Church. For a selective reading of this phenomenon, particularly, from a liberationist perspective, see John Parratt, ed., *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (New York and London: Orbis/SPCK, 1995); Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds, *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

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.[20]

The relationship between empire and colonialism 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 civilized and acceptable against those of uncivilized 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![21]

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, and racism.[22] The almost complete absence of literature pertaining to the collusion between imperial mission Christianity and Black people of faith remains one of the significant challenges facing Black and Asian theologians in the British context.

Black People in Britain and Black Theology

For many of "us" Black British life is best understood in terms of the mass migration of Black people from the Caribbean islands of the British empire to

20. See Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostalism*. See also Reddie *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*; Jagessar and Reddie, eds, *Postcolonial Black British Theology*; and Jagessar and Reddie, eds, *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader*.

21. Interview with Robert Beckford in *Reform*, URC magazine (June 2010), 12.

22. To the best of my knowledge these texts include Kenneth Leech, *Struggle in Babylon* (London: Sheldon Press, 1988); idem, *Race: Changing Society and the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2005); David Haslam, *Race for the Millennium: A Challenge to Church and Society* (London: Church House for the Churches' Commission on Racial Justice [CCRJ], 1996); idem, *The Churches and "Race": A Pastoral Approach* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001); John L. Wilkinson, *Church in Black and White: The Black Christian Tradition in "Mainstream" Churches in England: A White Response and Testimony* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993); Timothy J. Gorringe, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

the United Kingdom of Britain between 1948 and 1965[23] and the continued existence of Black communities in the nation since that epoch.

A helpful means of deciphering this ongoing problem is to investigate the thorny question of acceptable nomenclatures for being Black in Britain. For most Black Americans, the designation *African American* is a straightforward descriptor for what it means to be a person of African descent living in the United States of America. In Britain, many Black people such as myself will describe themselves as *African Caribbean*. This descriptor is indicative of one's heritage and ethnicity, but tells us nothing about one's nationality. It may be instructive to note that as a British-born Black person *I do not support my country in any national sporting endeavour.* In none of the major sports do I ascribe allegiance to the nation of my birth! In using the term *African Caribbean* I am identifying myself with the Diasporan African "Roots" and "Routes" (in the British context, both words are pronounced the same, hence the alacrity with which we use such terms as an alliterative heuristic) of my heritage, but in socio-political terms, I remain loathe to confirm my connectionality with a context in which Black people continue to be denied the full rights of socio-cultural belonging.[24]

So what can this subjective, experiential and discursive entrée tell us about the nature and intent of Black theology in Britain? Namely, that Black theology in Britain is a heterogeneous and plural term, discipline, and form of contextual praxis. The author of this piece is a Black British-born subject of Caribbean roots. My parents were part of one of the most significant epoch-making migratory movements in contemporary British history.

The mass migratory movement of Black people from Africa and the Caribbean in the years following the end of the Second World War has often been termed "Windrush."[25] The 1945 post-war presence of Black people within inner cities in Britain and the churches to be found there is a phenomenon that

23. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001).

24. Paul Gilroy remains the main articulator of this complex dynamic of "race" culture and nationality. See his *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), and also *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). For a more recent and alternative perspective, see Anthony G. Reddie, "The Politics of Black Entry into Britain: Reflections on Being a Black British Person Returning to the UK," *Political Theology* 8, no. 1 (2007): 83–95.

25. This term emanates from a pivotal event on the 22 June 1948, when 492 people from the Caribbean arrived at Tilbury docks on the *SS Empire Windrush*. These post-war pioneers ushered in a wave of Black migration to Britain from the Caribbean, which (for the most part) forms the basis for Black African and Caribbean communities in Britain. For further information see Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

has been described by a great many sociologists and historians.[26] This influx is perceived as commencing with the arrival of 492 Caribbean people at Tilbury dock on the ship *The SS Empire Windrush*, 22 June 1948. Whilst there has been a Black presence in Britain since the times of the Romans, the birth of Britain's Black communities,[27] for the most part, dates from the influx of Caribbean migrants in the post-Second World War epoch.

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 Christ, in light of existential Black experiences of marginalization and oppression in Britain. This approach to engaging with the Christian tradition is not unlike Black theology in differing arenas, like the USA or South Africa, where one's point of departure is the existential and ontological reality of Blackness and the Black experience, in dialogue with the Bible.

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 in post-colonial Britain is one that has challenged many Black British Christians to seek in God a means of making sense of the often constructed absurdities of postmodern life in this island nation.[28]

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,[29] Dwight Hopkins,[30] Delores Williams,[31] and Jackie Grant.[32] The frameworks for re-imaging Christianity by means of an explorative

26. Selective literature includes R. B. Davidson, *Black British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); R. A. Easterlin, *Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1982); Paul Hartman and Charles Hubbard Charles, *Immigration and the Mass Media* (London: Davis–Poynter, 1974); Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1972); Ken Pryce, *Endless Pressure* (Bristol: Classical Press, 1979); Winston James and Clive Harris, *Migration, Racism and Identity* (London: Verso, 1993).

27. See Gretchin Gerzina, *Black England: Life before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995).

28. These themes are explored to great effect by Robert Beckford in the third of his groundbreaking trilogy of work *God of the Rahtid*, 1–30.

29. See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1986).

30. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

31. See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993).

32. See Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

heuristic of Black hermeneutics, drawn from Black existential experience, has been most forcibly explored from within the British context by Robert Beckford.[33]

In seeking to outline the definitional dimensions and parameters of Black theology in Britain, I am forced to acknowledge my own limited 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,[34] Hinduism,[35] and traditional African religions,[36] Black theology in Britain, like its counterparts in South Africa or the USA, has been dominated by a Christian-inspired gaze. My own gaze is indeed a limited one. And yet, in making this confession, I am also forced to acknowledge that the overwhelming bulk of Black religious expression in Britain (and associated literature and theological reflection) is Christian.

Black Theology and Black Christianity in Britain

Black Christianity in Britain provides the overarching phenomenon out of which Black theology in Britain has emerged. The development of Black theology in Britain has emerged from Black Christians seeking to develop a more politicized and liberative form of faith with which they could attempt to challenge the incessant racism that confronted all Black people in the post-Windrush epoch. Like its counterparts in many disparate parts of the world, Black theology does not exist in a vacuum. Like all such formative movements, the development of radical thinking, and of greater import, action, needs to be anchored within the confines and frameworks of communities of collective solidarity and praxis.

In many different contexts the church, particularly the "Black Church" has proved to be the most pragmatic[37] of locations from which and in which the

33. See Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal*.

34. See William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1999).

35. Michael N. Jagessar, "Liberating Cricket: Through the Optic of Ashutosh Gowariker's Lagaan," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004): 239–49.

36. Kampta Karran, "Changing Kali: From India to Guyana to Britain," *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis* 4, no. 1 (2001): 90–102.

37. Note my use of the word "pragmatic," meaning that I am not arguing that the church is the "best" or the only location in which the liberative praxis of Black theology can be expressed and undertaken. I use the term "pragmatic" because insofar as the church exists and significant numbers of Black people in Britain attend it on a weekly basis, then it provides the contextual basis for the possible emergence of the radical praxis of faith for the purposes of systemic and systematic, transformative change and the promotion of social justice.

nascent practices of Black theology in Britain has flourished. Black theology in Britain is often characterized by its commitment to liberative praxis. The ongoing development of Black theology in Britain has operated largely within the parameters of the Black Church as opposed to the formal structures and scholarly hinterland of the academy. At that time of writing, only three academic institutions presently teach Black theology in the curriculum.[38]

In using the term "Black Church," I want to suggest two differing foci for locating an operative centre for the practice and theorizing of Black theology in Britain. The first category and by far the most visible is Black-led Pentecostal churches. These churches owe their origins to Black migrants travelling from the Caribbean in the post-Second World War mass movement of the last century. The first churches were offshoots of predominantly White Pentecostal denominations in the Southern states of the USA. These churches were first planted in the UK in the early 1950s. The largest and most established of these churches are the New Testament Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy.[39] The second strand is Black majority churches in White historic denominations.[40] These churches are demographically determined, as their Black majority membership has grown out of Black migrants moving into inner-city, urban contexts, coupled with the White flight of the middle-class.[41]

Within the literature of Black religious studies particular emphasis is placed on the role of the Black Church as the major (in some respects, the only) institution that has affirmed and conferred dignity upon the inhibited and assaulted personhood of Black people.[42] To put it quite simply, Black folk in the African diaspora may not have survived up to this point had it not been for their God-inspired genius for creating safe ecclesial spaces in which they could seek refuge from the ravages of racism and White supremacy.

38. At the time of writing the only location in which Black theology is taught is the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham in the West Midlands of Britain.

39. For further details see Aldred, *Respect*.

40. These denominations include the Church of England (the Anglican Church), the Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church and the United Reformed Church.

41. For further information see Wilkinson, *Church in Black and White*.

42. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), and Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985). See also Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn, *Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), for a brief selection of an extensive literature in this area of Black theological work.

Classical Black British Pentecostalism as an Expression of Black Theology in Britain

Whilst some adherents of these churches came as communicant members of historic (White) denominations,[43] many of these individuals arrived as members of established Pentecostal denominations in the Caribbean. For many, their arrival in the UK was born of an intense missionary desire to plant and establish their own churches in this new cultural and social context. A detailed history of this largely untold narrative can be found in the work of Black British scholars such as Joe Aldred,[44] Mark Sturge,[45] and Doreen McCalla.[46]

There is no doubting the important contribution Black British Pentecostalism has made to the development of Black theology in Britain. In the work of Robert Beckford, Black British Pentecostalism has been able to assert the importance of religio-cultural aesthetics and codified forms of sanctified worship, highlighting the emotive power of Black worship as a counter-cultural phenomenon in order to counter the worst excesses of patrician forms of cultural racism.[47]

The weakness in Black British Pentecostalism as a conduit for the development and sustenance of Black Christianity in Britain can be detected in their seeming inability to engage explicitly with the central tenets of Black hermeneutical thought, particularly in terms of interrogating the Bible. This weakness has been highlighted in a comparatively recent piece of work.[48]

The perceived weaknesses of Black majority Pentecostal churches in Britain rest upon its historic relationship with White southern American fundamentalist Christianity. The two leading Pentecostal churches in Britain, the New Testament Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy, both have their roots and formative development in the southern states of the United States of America, in the heartland of the Confederacy. It is the collusion between religio-Caribbean cultural practices and unreconstructed White Euro-American

43. See Wilkinson, *Church in Black and White.*

44. See also Joe D. Aldred, "Respect: A Caribbean British Theology," PhD dissertation (Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, 2004).

45. See Aldred *Respect*, and Mark Sturge, *Look What the Lord Has Done! An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain* (London: Scripture Union, 2005).

46. See also Doreen McCalla, "Black Churches and Voluntary Action: Their Social Engagement with the Wider Society," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 3, no. 2 (2004): 137–75.

47. See Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal.* See also Aldred, *Respect.*

48. See Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*, 67–70.

fundamentalism, which has given Black British Pentecostalism a form of theo-psycho schizophrenia that has been an asset and a liability to the development of Black theology in Britain.

One of the defining characteristics of Black Pentecostal churches is their worship style, which draws upon a range of Black diasporan (and continental) African traditions, some of which are African American in style. The invocation of the spirit within Black Pentecostal worship, for example, is fused with an expressive, informal liturgy that has been one of the defining hallmarks of Black religiosity. Robert Beckford offers a carefully constructed Black British Pentecostal perspective on this creative dynamic in which participation and movement is an important means by which the liberative impulse of Black life is expressed.[49]

Black Christianity in White Majority Churches in Britain

The second broad typology is that of Black churches in White majority historic churches in Britain. The majority of the Black members in White majority historic churches in Britain can trace their roots to Africa and the Caribbean. The majority of these church adherents attend Black majority churches in predominantly inner-city urban contexts.[50] These churches operate in effect as Black enclaves within the overall White majority structure and membership of the church as a whole.

The development of Black theology within these White majority Historic bodies has emerged due to demographic changes in inner-city areas within the larger cities and towns in Britain, and not through a self-conscious separation along the lines of "race," as has been the case in the USA. Research recent by Peter Brierley has shown that the majority of Black Christians in Britain belong to White majority historic churches (by a ratio of almost two to one).[51]

Black theology in Britain that has emerged from White historic churches is notable for its commitment to challenging racism and White ethnocentric socio-cultural norms. Whether in Barton's work on critiquing Anglican ecclesiological practices[52] or in Reddie's challenging of Eurocentric epistemological

49. Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal*, 176–82.

50. See M. Byron, *Post War Caribbean Migration to Britain: The Unfinished Cycle* (Aldershot: Averbury, 1994). See also R. B. Davidson, *West Indian Migrants* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), and R. Glass (assisted by Harold Pollins), *Newcomers: The West Indians in London* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), for a historical analysis of the presence of disproportionate numbers of Black people living in inner urban conurbations in Britain.

51. Peter Brierley, *The Tide Is Running Out: What The English Church Attendance Survey Reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2000), 136.

52. See Mukti Barton, *Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection* (London: DLT, 2005).

frameworks for Christian learning,[53] Black theologians whose work arises from within the White historic tradition have operated as critical change-agents from within the construct of ecclesiological, White privilege.

The weakness of the historic churches as a site for the development of Black theology rests on its ongoing relationship to the hinterland of postcolonial cultural norms. In short, Black people in these Christian traditions have to negotiate with an alternative form of religio-cultural theological dissonance, as operating as Black enclaves within White-dominated contexts necessitates a form of double vision that can be psychologically destructive.

Whilst British Pentecostalism provides the emotional and liturgically cathartic space in which the Black self can seek repose in experiential worship and African Caribbean religio-cultural aesthetics;[54] the theological underpinning in such settings remains studiously wedded to White Euro-American fundamentalism. Conversely, Black Christianity that emerges from within White historic churches such as the Anglican Church, Methodists, or United Reformed Church, possesses a greater alacrity to engage with deconstructive and radically prophetic models of hermeneutics. The gains of these traditions, however, sit in dialectical tension with the unreconstructed Whiteness and colonially informed norms of their ecclesial practices and liturgical formations.

In terms of the latter, one only has to witness the formal operations of premodern White European worship traditions and the sense of cultural dissonance felt by Black people in these settings to gain some sense of the weakness of these ecclesial paradigms in offering an effective repository for the development and practice of Black Christian faith in Britain.[55]

Black Religio-Cultural-Theo-Dissonance—the Roots of This Phenomenon

The often unstated subtext of Black Christianity in Britain has been in the prevailing influence of imperial mission Christianity. The pervasive influence of this phenomenon can be detected in two ways: in the practical expression of Christianity amongst Black people in Britain, and in the impact it exerts on the theological positionality with which Blackness is understood as a site for hermeneutical resource for defining notions of revelatory truth.

The malaise that afflicts Black Christians in Britain can be described as "Religio-cultural-theological-dissonance." In using this term, I am pointing to a

53. See Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies*.

54. See Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub* (London: Routledge, 2006), for an excellent theo-cultural treatment of Black Pentecostalism as a conduit for the aesthetics of Black Caribbean religious resistance in Britain.

55. See Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, 105–06.

historic phenomenon where Black Christians have imbibed the blandishments of imperial mission Christianity to such an extent that the operative basis of their Christian faith proceeds as a form of negated Blackness or even anti-Blackness.

I have written about the impact of cultural dissonance on the lives of Black people of faith in a previous publication. Here, I describe cultural dissonance in the following terms:

> Cultural dissonance manifests itself in a wide variety of social settings. Cultural dissonance is felt when one feels out of place in a cultural setting that is different from one's own. For instance, a Black person feels at home where Black traditions, values, belief systems and practices are the norm, and feels cultural dissonance in the wider socio-political environment where White, Eurocentric norms hold sway. Where cultural dissonance is masked there is bound to be intellectual and emotional discord.[56]

In this work, I want to revisit some of my earlier thoughts, but refine them in light of further reflections, particularly those provided by the frameworks provided by postcolonial theory. In the previous definition, I made the mistake of viewing cultural dissonance in perhaps too binary a fashion. In this previous work, my research was very concerned with Black Christians in White majority ecclesial settings, such as the Church of England and its free-church siblings, like the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church and the United Reformed Church. My research was concerned with the ways in which the constrictions of White majority ecclesial settings and their resultant religio-cultural norms where inhibiting the formal, religious operations of Black people.[57]

At the time of this research I had not sufficiently engaged with the critical perspectives provided by postcolonial theory and the sense in which this intellectual movement very much eschews the kind of rigid binaries that seemed so normative within this earlier work.

Central to developing theories of postcolonial discourse is the notion of hybridity. Hybridity is the realization that at the heart of all colonial and postcolonial epochs and religio-cultural milieus is the sense of an ongoing dialectical contestation between notions of insider–outsider, centre versus the margins, pure versus miscegenation and perhaps, most crucially of all, the struggle for the meaning of so-called authentic language.[58]

56. Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, 97–98.

57. See Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies*.

58. There is a wealth of literature pertaining to postcolonial theory—the material that has most influenced this study are the following: R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations* (London: SCM, 2004); idem, *The Bible and Empire* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David C. I. Joy, *Mark and Its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008); Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Fernando S. Segovia

Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera in their co-edited text on postcolonial theologies (a specific, disciplinary sub-set of postcolonial theory) state that this

> Labyrinth of identities winds through an intriguing space: the space of post-colonial theory, an "in between space" in which the boundaries between identity and difference, between cultures, nationalities, and subjects, are called into question...postcolonial theory offers guiding insights into the mazes: zones of mixture and confusion, threat and discovery.[59]

In this most helpful text, Keller et al. argue that one of the compelling strengths of postcolonial theory is its ability to engage with the sheer messiness of postmodern life. It can challenge, head on, the reality that such binaries as oppressed and oppressors, Black and White, believer and non-believer, insider and outsider, are too monolithic constructs with which to battle against the challenges presented by multiplicity and hybridization.[60]

What does it mean, in my case, to be a Black subject in postcolonial Britain who is at once an outsider in terms of ethnicity and the social constructs of "race," in terms of my Blackness, and yet is a privileged subject in terms of my gender, as a male; in more specific terms of sexuality, a heterosexual male?[61] And to be more precise, a middle-class, postgraduate-educated Christian male at that! While all theologies of liberation have provided us with much needed models of situational analysis,[62] often grounded in the apparent essentialism of identity-politics, they have, nevertheless, been less successful at engaging with the contested, multiple subjectivities of postcolonial subjects in the heart of the former British empire. This can be seen in my critique of the imperial mission Christianity many Black Christians in Britain have imbibed, which also provides the subtextual underscoring of their religious subjectivities in this country.

First, it should be noted that Christianity is itself a hybridized, colonial phenomenon. As Keller et al. write,

> Christianity, after all, offers as its central doctrine the symbol of a divine/human hybrid, at once mimicking and scandalizing the operative metaphysical

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and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007); and Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds, *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004).

59. Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, eds, *Postcolonial Theologies*, 3.

60. Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, eds, *Postcolonial Theologies*, 1–19.

61. I address the issue of interlocking systems of oppression, power, privilege and normativity in one of my more recent books. See Reddie, *Is God Colour Blind?*, 37–52.

62. Emmanuel Lartey offers a most helpful dissection of the methodological heart of theologies of liberation through the prism of "practical theology." See Emmanuel Lartey, "Practical Theology as a Theological Form," in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, eds, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 128–34.

> binaries of the time. And what is Christianity but a great hybrid, comprised at the urban crossroads of the Roman empire? It cannot be understood apart from the extraordinary creativity of its high-risk hybridities—for instance its "neither Greek nor Jew"—that is, *both* Greek *and* Jewish, which let it spread like wildfire.
>
> Yet neither can it be understood apart from its early acquiescence in empire, discernible according to postcolonial hermeneutics already in the gospels, a mimicry that prepares the way for its imperial—and monolingual—appropriation of multiple cultures after Constantine.[63]

The religio-cultural and political struggles within Christianity as a whole, around what were the essential markers defining normative postures regarding faith, faithfulness, and cultural expression, were often exemplified in the struggles of the early church. In the Acts of the Apostles, they become refracted in a more acute form, particularly when we apply this form of contestation and dialectical struggle with the relationship of this Jewish–Greek–Gentile hybridized accommodation to that of Black bodies, already degraded and traduced during the epoch of slavery.

Anthony Pinn, perhaps more so than any other contemporary scholar, has charted the contested relationship that exists between the existential, material realities of Black bodies and the overarching construction of Christianity into which so many of the former were both herded and socialized of their own volition.[64] In *Terror and Triumph*, Pinn outlines the long hinterland of demonization and virulent denigration that provided the essential backdrop to transatlantic chattel slavery.[65] Outlining the apparent ease and complicity with which Christianity colluded with epistemological frameworks that underpinned the machinery of slavery, Pinn writes,

> In short, Scripture required that English Christians begin their thinking on Africans with an understanding that Africans had the same creator. Yet they were at least physically and culturally different, and this difference had to be accounted for. As we shall see, a sense of shared creation did not prohibit a ranking within the created order, one in which Africans were much lower than Europeans.[66]

63. Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, eds, *Postcolonial Theologies*, 13–14.

64. See Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). See also Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

65. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 1–80.

66. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 6.

The sense of a deep prevailing anti-Black sentiment replete within notions of Greek antiquity[67] and practiced within English, imperial mission Christianity, was given added piquancy in the deliberate attempt to use the developments of early Christian theology as a means of reinforcing the essentially depraved and base status of the Black body.[68] Kelly Brown Douglas demonstrates how a particular outworking of Pauline, Platonized influenced theology (one that downplays the concrete materiality of the body in favour of the abstract and the spirit) was used as a means of demonizing Black bodies.[69] Douglas writes,

> Accordingly, it is platonized Christianity that gives rise to Christian participation in contemptible acts and attacks against human bodies, like those against Black bodies. Not only does platonized Christianity provide a foundation for easily disregarding certain bodies, but it also allows for the demonization of those persons who have been sexualized.[70]

One can amplify the prevailing sense of an incipient anti-Black strain within the corporate edifice of imperial mission Christianity when one considers the ways in which Black Christianity itself has imbibed the strictures against the Black body in their own corporate operations of religiosity. Anthony Pinn, drawing on a similar analysis of platonized, Pauline theology, argues that Black Christianity has imbibed the prevalent suspicion surrounding the Black body. It has taught many Black Christians to remain at best indifferent to the material needs of the Black body or to seek to transcend the despised nature of the Black body as depicted in all its demonized and based images of European demagoguery.[71]

Is it any wonder, then, that I should have found myself at a Black church in London in Birmingham, just prior to the last general election in Britain and overheard two Black Christian women, approximately in their mid-forties, talking about their voting intentions at the forthcoming elections? Both claimed that they planned to vote for the far-right, fascist British National Party because "They would defend Christian Britain against all the foreigners and immigrants coming into the country." These women were themselves most likely descendants of such foreigners and immigrants!

67. This phenomenon and theme has been explored by Robert E. Hood, *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

68. This idea is taken from Kelly Brown Douglas's excellent study on Black bodies and how they have been policed and controlled within the religious framework of Christianity. See her *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*

69. Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 3–38.

70. Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 37.

71. Anthony B. Pinn, "Introduction," in Pinn and Hopkins, eds, *Loving the Body*, 1–8.

Black Religio-Cultural-Theo-Dissonance—Contemporary Examples of This Phenomenon

I am aware that some will argue with the basis on which I am premising my arguments. Surely, the snatched overheard conversation at a church service is not sufficient grounds on which to launch such a polemical attack on Black Christianity in Britain.[72] In reply, I would point to the following incidents, all of which have been documented in my previous work:

1. I am taking part in a Christian radio Gospel show in 2007 talking about Black theology. During the radio phone-in section of the show, I am responding to the question posed by the host; namely, which comes first, being "Black" or being "Christian." My response is to say the former. The first three replies from Black Christian respondents are acerbic attacks on my "unchristian" and "aberrant response."[73]
2. I am speaking at a major event in London to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. One of the speakers, a major Black Christian spokesperson in Britain suggests that as descendants of enslaved Africans living in Britain, we have to engage with the "Joseph Paradigm"—the account in the Hebrew Scriptures[74] of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. He argued that this event should be seen in "providential" ways, as it provided the means by which God was able to accomplish the deliverance of Joseph's family. The speaker, a well-known Black Evangelical church spokesperson, opined that "perhaps" the transatlantic chattel slavery of Africans might be understood as part of God's providential way of working in the lives of Black people in history. The question I posed in my original analysis of this story was "The horror for me...is that this theological account is prepared to countenance God as a Divine sadist in order to preserve the sanctity of our inherited theological systems."[75]
3. While leading a workshop on Black theology for a group of Black

72. It is important that I reiterate that I am not seeking to attack every facet of Black Christianity in Britain, but as I will show, the basis of this religio-cultural-theo-cultural dissonance is premised on a number of closely observed examples and is also drawn from the prolegomenon that has its roots in British colonial history, particularly the epoch of slavery, empire, and colonialism.

73. This account is detailed in Reddie, *Working against the Grain*, 90.

74. This account is to be found in Gen. 37–50.

75. This account is detailed in Reddie, *Working against the Grain*, 172–75 (175).

> Christians, looking particularly at theological anthropology, a Black Christian in his twenties responds to the question, "What does it mean to be a Black human being?," with the words, "I stopped being Black when I was saved!" My stated response was, "What was it about being Black that necessitated being saved from it?"[76]

In each of the three examples I have cited, which supplement the anecdote I provided above, one witnesses examples of Black Christians in Britain sublimating their Blackness in order to accommodate inherited, learnt religious rhetoric that is not consonant with their existential realities as Black people. Why, for example, would you want to be saved from Blackness, unless your faith had simply reified the demagoguery of anti-Blackness previously asserted by imperial British life in the Caribbean and Africa, in addition to the racist-informed media in Britain itself?

As a Black British scholar I am aware that Black people are more than adept at signifying. Beckford describes signifying as "The ways in which African Caribbean cultures 'play,' 'manoeuvre' and 'conjure' a subject, issue or event so as to arrive at 'direction through indirection.' Signifying can be a form of trickery that enables oppressed people to negotiate or manipulate the dominant power."[77] I am willing, to an extent, to concede that the examples I have given may not necessarily represent the "whole truth" of the religio-cultural discourse of these individuals. As Beckford suggests above, they could represent the trickery and forms of the subterfuge of Black people in their semantic play with Black religious authority. What dissipates my own contested presumption around the notion of these examples being ones of collective and corporate signification lies in the context in which each event occurred. These Black Christians were not engaging with White authority figures nor were the accounts as they came to life located in social settings in which Blackness was either concealed, traduced, or rendered aberrant or transgressive. On the contrary, each of the events was predicated on an explicit evocation of Blackness in which the manifestation Black religio-cultural apparel and aesthetics was readily on display. Why would these Black people need to signify in a context when they were given licence to make manifest that which is often demonized and attacked within the broader, White-dominated spaciality of postcolonial Britain?

Whilst not dismissing the signifying thesis, it is my belief that what was taking place within the experiential framework of these Black Christians was an explicit manifestation of religio-cultural-theological-dissonance. Unlike the previous work I have undertaken on cultural dissonance, where the phenomenological basis of this socially felt facet was mainly restricted to "White majority

76. Reddie, *Is God Colour Blind?*, 43–45 (44).
77. Beckford, *God of the Rahtid*, 12.

spaces," I am now arguing that religio-cultural-theological-dissonance also finds expression in Black majority settings.

It is at this point that the utility of postcolonial theory becomes readily apparent. For while my previous work argued in favour of such binaries as "Black majority" cultural contexts and the notion of "safe space" versus those social settings that represent the antithesis of the former, I am now of the view that the relationship between these differing modes of spatial and emotional resonance are much more closely aligned. That namely, just as postcolonial theory calls for the constant renegotiation of space, power, socio-cultural norms, including notions of insider and outsider, similarly one can detect aspects of these modalities in how Black Christians engage in their particular ecclesial spaces.

Whereas a purely liberationist discourse will assert the necessity of familiarized, based communities, in which the assaulted personhood of marginalized Black postcolonial subjects find repose and sources of empowerment, there is no doubting the validity of the claim that even in these settings notions of familiarity and unfamiliarity still abound. That, namely, we are all "at home" and feel "alienated" in a variety of social settings! So even within Black majority settings, a sense of cultural dissonance may still find expression, and expressions of negation and even alienation from notions of Blackness may still come to fruition.

In a previous part of this work, I made reference to the major traditions in which Black theology in Britain had developed, namely, within classical Black Pentecostalism and in White Majority historic churches. In both perspectives, one can witness the "gains" and the "losses" as they each seek to develop a politicized and liberative conception of the Christian faith that seeks to speak to existential struggles of most Black people in Britain.

In the White majority, historic tradition, the gains of a more liberally orientated theology, underpinned by an engagement with a historical-critically based form of hermeneutics, is nevertheless lost in the struggle to engage with the "White-dominated" imagery of imperial mission Christianity on which such churches are based. Black Christianity in these ecclesial traditions continues to be hampered by the overarching blandishments of White hegemony. Black-run initiatives, for example, continue to be overseen by White control, where the budgetary power and authority reside in the hands of the White majority. Without the possibility of Black autonomy and self-determination, Black Christianity is forced operate through the prism of White paternalism and patronage, which in effect reifies the sense of an internalized negated sense of Blackness in the psycho-social processes of Black Christians.

If one knows that effective control rests (for the most part) in the hands of White Bishops, Chairs of District or Moderators, then why should we be surprised if Black Christians in White majority, historic churches manifest

examples of self-negation, in effect adopting positions that speak against their own material self-interests?

Conversely, within Black-run Pentecostal churches in Britain, Black Christians do not contend with White leadership. As I have described previously, the religio-cultural aesthetics are not dominated by, nor in fact, one may even argue, are they barely touched by, White-European aesthetic norms.

Yet, alongside the gains that arise from Black Christian self-determination and autonomy lay the restrictive strains of Southern US Biblical literalism and even fundamentalism. It is interesting to note that the second of the three examples I cited above involved a leading Black Pentecostal church leader who possesses postgraduate qualifications in theology (so he is hardly an inconsequential figure on which to mount my polemical attack) and yet remained wedded to a form of hermeneutics that eschewed any notion of "suspicion" in his operative frameworks.

Clearly, whatever the merits or otherwise of his advanced theological study, he and many others remain unable to unite the Black religio-cultural aesthetics of their church worship practices and ecclesial life with any serious attempt to deconstruct the inherited imperial mission theology that was bequeathed to them via the southern Confederacy.[78]

In each case, whether in terms of religio-cultural practices and norms in the life of the church (in the case of White majority, historic churches) or in their underlying theological disposition (as in the case of classical Black Pentecostalism), one witnesses elements of this religio-cultural-theological-dissonance. In either case, Black Christians are unable to create a holistic religio-cultural framework that can wholeheartedly and unreservedly embrace Blackness and utilize that Blackness as the *primary* hermeneutical lens by which they reinterpret their faith. This is necessary in order to engage with the existential realities that face them in postcolonial Britain.

When one considers the flexibility and nuanced perspectives afforded by postcolonial theologies, such as those proffered in this article, one can see immediately the utility of such an approach. For while my previous work argued in favour of such binaries as "Black majority" cultural contexts and the notion of "safe space" versus those social settings that represent the antithesis of the former, I am now of the view that these differing modes of spatial and emotional resonance are much more closely aligned. Namely, just as postcolonial theory calls for the constant renegotiation of space, power, socio-cultural norms, including notions of insider and outsider; similarly, one can detect aspects of

78. Robert Beckford's work is the notable exception in the British context in terms of Black Pentecostalism. See Beckford's *Jesus Is Dread* and *Dread and Pentecostalism* for excellent examples of a Black, Pentecostal-based approach to Black theology in Britain.

these modalities in how Black Christians, such as myself, engage with their particular ecclesial spaces and the theologies that are manifested within them.

In this article I am arguing that one of the compelling strengths of postcolonial theory is its ability to engage with the sheer messiness of postmodern life and the reality that such binaries as oppressed and oppressors, Black and White, believer and non-believer, insider and outsider, are too monolithic constructs with which to battle against the challenges presented by multiplicity and hybridization.[79] To restate, what does it mean, in my case, to be a Black subject in postcolonial Britain who is at once an outsider in terms of ethnicity and constructions of "race," in terms of my Blackness, and yet is a privileged subject in terms of my gender and sexuality? How can Black theology in Britain enable postcolonial, hybridized subjects like myself, and many others, to wrestle with the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional, left-of-centre essentialism of identity-politics? Black theology has been relatively successful providing Black people in Britain with models of situational analysis in order to wrestle with the external challenges of racism, but they seemed to have been less successful at engaging with the contested, multiple subjectivities of postcolonial subjects in the heart of the former British Empire. In an epoch where increasing numbers of people in Britain will describe themselves as "mixed,"[80] how does British Black theology engage with the liminality that is experienced in the lives of these hybridized subjects?

In my critique of imperial mission Christianity, I am arguing that many Black Christians in Britain have imbibed the repressive strictures of a particular manifestation of the faith, which also provides the subtextual underscoring of their religious subjectivities in postcolonial Britain. I believe that this essay can be a helpful resource in helping us to move beyond the constrictions of either/or, as opposed to the postcolonial fluidity of both/and.

One of the unfortunate residues of colonial history has been the temptation to construct theological discourse in terms of fidelity to doctrinal absolutism. Michael Jagessar has argued that fixed notions of what constitutes religious fidelity are unhelpful because they rarely accord with the religious pluralism that abounds in the lived experiences of many postcolonial subjects.[81] Jagessar is particularly wary of the blandishments of "conversion"[82] and "baptism" as means of creating totalizing optics through which to view the "old self" and the

79. Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, eds, *Postcolonial Theologies*, 1–19.

80. See www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/jan/18/race-integration-study.

81. See Michael N. Jagessar, "A Brief Con-version: A Caribbean and Black British Postcolonial Scrutiny of Christian Conversion," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 7, no. 3 (2009): 300–24.

82. Jagessar, "A Brief Con-version," 321.

"new self" in terms of religious identity.[83] For subaltern postcolonial subjects, our religious affiliations have not always been Christian, and a postcolonial gaze should remind us that people who worship God within alternative religious frameworks are not outside the orbit of God's love and grace.

In conclusion, then, it is my hope that this work will assist in creating a theoretical framework that will enable Black people in Britain to reframe their Christian faith. I am under no illusions that this proposal represents a slow work in progress, for as one can imagine, enabling people to overturn centuries of internalized self-negation and oppression constitutes something of a mammoth task.

For many Black people, the Christian faith as represented by the creedal building blocks of the "classical tradition" as they have imbibed it, represents an immutable and inviolate epistemological truth. Namely, that any attempt to rethink the conceptual frameworks of supposedly "Christian truth" (read White, Western orthodoxy) is something that is complete anathema and often considered an aberration of colossal proportions.

This, like much of my previous work, represents an essentially pragmatic proposal. In effect, it is not concerned with trying to "throw the baby out with the bath water." Rather, it is a cautious and deeply felt attempt to generate a truer sense of liberative praxis from, what often remains, a conformist and constricting notion of religiosity. Black Christian faith in postcolonial Britain needs to change in order better to reflect the contextual challenges that confront Black people in this increasingly plural and complex postmodern epoch. I hope that this work provides a modest attempt to that greater end.

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83. Michael Jagessar writing with Stephen Burns, a former colleague from the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, provides a compelling scrutiny of Christian worship using the refracting optics of postcolonial discourse. They argue that much that is understood as Christian worship in many churches across the world often re-scribes the totalizing, hegemonic tendencies of colonially inspired theology that echoes through the epoch of Christendom. They are particularly concerned with the symbolism and patriarchal conscription of the priestly-led symbolic-liturgical models of Baptism that seek to obliterate the former "old" self at the behest of the church-legitimized notion of the "new." See Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (London: Equinox, 2011), 105–12.

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