

Reconciliation in Christian theology – A radical alternative

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Anthony Reddie throws down a challenge to abstract and pietistic concepts of reconciliation, which refuse to deal with the needs of, and justice for, Black people.

As a contextual theologian my own life experiences have always been central in the process of ‘doing theology’. In order to talk about God in a constructive manner I first need to locate my own starting point and ideological presuppositions. I am a Black male of African Caribbean descent. I was born in Yorkshire to Black parents who came to the United Kingdom from the Caribbean island of Jamaica. My parents were born into the endemic poverty of the poor agrarian working class of Jamaica. The might of British imperial rule was in the twilight of its political dominance and the visible signs of decline and demise¹ that were

to occur two generations on from their birth were already clearly discernible.² Jamaica, along with the many other islands that make up the Caribbean had long been a historic colonial experiment in subjugation, oppression and economic exploitation.³

My parents were part of an underclass that was poor, deprived and disparaged.⁴ For them, redemption and amelioration from the ills of being Black, poor and uneducated came from the Church and the teachings of Christianity.⁵ Anne and Anthony Pinn in their book on Black Church history chart the development of the relationship between Black people of the African Diaspora and the Christian faith that was brought from Europe.⁶

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people for profit. Whilst slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807, the continued effects of that era remain with us.

Given that the slave trade ended 200 years ago, the question that faces us all is, namely, what are we to make of that evil institution in our present time? How do we move forward as a nation, as a world, in the knowledge that the legacies of slavery have not gone away, nor indeed, have the realities of human trafficking and exploitation?

One way of dealing with the past is to effect some form of reconciliation between Black and White as a means of ensuring that the past is dealt with and that its impact does not infiltrate or infect our future. In this brief article, I was asked to suggest a way of handling the notion of reconciliation that moves beyond the classical approach often seen within Christian theology, to one that explores the radical model to be found within Black theology. This latter model is one that takes the social and systemic realities of sin seriously and does not fall into abstract, spiritual ideas that often end up sanctioning the *status quo*, thereby leaving White people in the 'box-seat' as the masters.

I make no apologies for offering this alternative approach to reconciliation, for I feel that the classic model given us

by Christendom to be naïve and best suited to the cause of placating White people rather than dealing with the need for justice, repentance, penitence and reparations.

Exploring the tradition

In traditional terms, Christian theology has sought to locate notions of reconciliation within the restorative work of Jesus' passion and subsequent death on the cross. The sinful nature of humankind led to a breach between the holiness that is God and the 'fallen' state in which men and women exist. Jesus' death on the cross serves as the link between a holy God and sinful humanity.

One can trace a trajectory from Paul, through to St Anselm and then Martin Luther for the development of a form of atonement theory in which the central importance in the formula for effecting reconciliation is Jesus' saving work on the cross.⁷ Paul's writings, which form the earliest documented texts in the New Testament canon, are replete with references to God's reconciling work in Christ on the cross. One can point to such texts as Romans 5.10, 2 Corinthians 5.18-20 and Colossians 1.18-23.

For Paul the love of God in Christ demonstrated on the cross not only reconciles us to God, but additionally love, transmitted through the

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transforming work of the Holy Spirit, reconciles us to one another. In the classic imagery of Christian theology, reconciliation within the purposes of God is represented in the shape of the cross. The vertical axis represents the reconciliation between God and humans and the horizontal between humans and the ‘other’ – those who are not us, that is, other human beings. The image of the united body of Christ (*1 Corinthians 12.12-31*) is one in which all are unified through the one baptism to live a life worthy of our calling as the saints of God (*Ephesians 4.1-7*).

A theology of homogeneity and unity

One of the things you may have noticed from the outset in the brief, cursory summary of the classical doctrinal position regarding reconciliation in Christian theology is the wholesale lack of specificity or particularity in its formulations. The theology of homogeneity runs deep within Christianity. The injunction of the writer to the Galatians (3.28) that

in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, or slave or free, remains a powerful theological and societal ideal for which we all dare to dream. Biblical scholars such as Philip Esler have investigated the attempts to surmount the seemingly endemic differences of ethnic and cultural particularity that would have faced the author of the letter to the Galatians.⁸

Inderjit Bhogal, the first Black President of the British Methodist Conference, drawing upon the work of Balasuriya,⁹ constructs an inclusive ideal for human interdependence based upon the notion of a ‘table for all’ that is embodied ideal of the Eucharist or The Lord’s Supper.¹⁰ Bhogal sees within Christ’s invitation to come to his table to be fed a model for a radical form of inclusivity that transcends all ethnic, religious, cultural, ideological, gender and class based differences.

It is my suspicion that many White, largely evangelical theologians have drawn, albeit in a sub-conscious, pragmatic way, upon the language and

theology of homogeneity in Christ in order to do their theology in a somewhat abstract and context-less manner.

By sublimating the reality of contextual particularity, whether in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, class or economics, the various scholars are able to address seemingly more generic, spiritual and theological concerns that would appear to transcend the differences I cited a few moments previously.¹¹

This form of sublimation is not new of course. Despite the deeply conscious embodied and contextual reality that was and is the incarnation, Christianity quickly jettisoned the desire to locate its concerns amongst the material and physical in favour of the abstract and the spiritual.¹² The Church has learned to ignore the material needs and the embodied nature of human subjectivity, particularly if those human subjects are Black or people of colour.¹³

An alternative approach to reconciliation?

What is most notable about Black theologians in their approach to reconciliation is that it is grounded in Jesus' life not his death. It is the Jesus of History, the person depicted in the gospels, who challenges us to deal with one another in terms of justice and equity. It is the Jesus who does take



The 'set all free' campaign will mark the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807

sides who will challenge the unjust to repent and change their ways.

Many Black theologians have asserted that Jesus is Black. This statement should not be taken to necessarily mean that Jesus is literally Black. What writers such as James Cone¹⁴, Jacquelyn Grant¹⁵ and Robert Beckford are stating is that God's preferential option is for empowerment and affirmation of oppressed Black people. If Black people were enslaved and oppressed solely on the grounds of the colour of their skin (the mythical 'Curse of Ham' – Genesis 9.18-28 – was used to justify to enslavement of Black people), then God in Christ took the form of these exploited people in order to show God's total identification with their plight.

Black theologians continue to argue that in a world where White privilege and advantage is the norm and Blacks continue to die from starvation and economic exploitation, God has sided with these marginalised people through Jesus, who lived his



Codrington College, Barbados, the site where SPG once owned a slave plantation

life on earth as a colonised and oppressed Jew. i.e. Jesus' humanity, concrete life, example and his identity (Jewish in the first century and Black now) become the basis for a new form of concrete reconciliation.

This form of reconciliation is one that demands reparation as seen in Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus (*Luke 19.1-11*) or the demand that Christ's presence be seen in those on the margins (*Matthew 25.31-46*). By concentrating on the liberation Jesus offers those who are marginalised and the challenge he throws out to those who have gained through the exploitation of others (see Luke's

Gospel, chapters 16-18, for Jesus' many injunctions against riches and people who are rich), reconciliation becomes more than just a spiritual idea.

This is not to suggest that spirituality or salvation should be conceived solely in monetary or material terms. But if we look at the world as it exists at the present, can we honestly say that the plight of Africa is due to their lack of spirituality? After all, Christianity's future in terms of numerical growth is a Black one. Following the legacy of slavery, Black people don't need more spirituality. The growth of Black Christianity all the over world, especially in Africa, is testament

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to the arid nature of White Western Christian faith and the dynamism and growth of African spirituality. Traditionally, spiritualised notions of atonement, based largely, if not exclusively, on Jesus’ death, will no longer cut it for us. Instead, a Black theological perspective that takes the radical Black Jesus who sides with the poor and the oppressed and asks rich, exploiters to repent for the Kingdom is close at hand, becomes the model for a new form of reconciliation.

This form of reconciliation is one that makes justice and equity the central themes for life in the Kingdom, and is not a perspective that is based solely on Jesus’ death and individual professions of ‘being saved’.

The legacy of the epoch of slavery still exerts a profound impact upon the collective psyche of all people; both Black and White. From our vantage point of 200 years since the abolition of slavery in Britain, very little has changed in structural and systemic terms.

For many White people there has been a collective sense of ‘cheap grace’.

The price paid by many Black people for the transformation and reconciliation between Black and White has been immense, and has neither been appreciated nor matched in any reciprocal sense by many White people. There is a huge amount of good will between the various communities in Britain, but more work needs to be done to reconcile the privilege of White people with psychological and societal denial of Blacks. The resistance to slavery from the churches was very mixed. One needs to differentiate between (often) institutional ambivalence and individual activism.

The re-writing of history has seen many churches quick to take credit for individual (often unsupported by their churches) initiative and action.¹⁶ The reconciliation between slave owner and slave, between rich and poor, between Black and White came via the reforming efforts of individuals, and not by means of the institution. Jesus’ saving work in both his life and his death can become the means by which a new form of

reconciliation will be affected between all persons. The Kingdom of God is at

hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel (*Mark 1.15*).

Notes:

¹Robert Beckford *Dread and Pentecostal* (London: SPCK, 2000). pp.106-112.

²Barry Chevannes *Rastafari: Roots, and Ideology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

³Lewin L. Williams *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Peter Laing: 1994), pp.5-50.

⁴Kortright Davis *Emancipation Still Comin': Explorations in Caribbean Emancipatory Theology* (New York: Orbis books, 1990). pp.12-49.

⁵Devon Dick *Rebellion to Riot: The Jamaican Church in Nation Building* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2003). See also Noel L. Erskine *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1981).

⁶Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn *Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

⁷John W. De Gruchy *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM press, 2002), pp.44-76.

⁸Philip F. Esler *Galatians* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁹Tissa Balasuriya *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (London: SCM press, 1979).

¹⁰Inderjit S. Bhogal *A Table For All* (Sheffield: Penistone Publications, 2000). pp.11-34.

¹¹A noted exception within these pieces under investigation are the works of Bell and Maule (see their 'Jesus and Peter' series of sketches) and the Christian Aid material.

¹²Tissa Balasuriya 'Liberation of the Affluent'. *Black Theology: An International Journal* Vol. 1, No.1, Nov. 2002. pp.83-113.

¹³James H. Cone *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

¹⁴James H. Cone *God Of The Oppressed*, 1975.

¹⁵Jacquelyn Grant *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989).

¹⁶Anthony G Reddie *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005) pp.38-45.