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# HATE SPEECH AND WHITENESS

Theological Reflections on the Journey  
Toward Racial Justice

Fernando Enns  
Stephen G. Brown (Editors)



# **Hate Speech and Whiteness**

Theological Reflections on the Journey Toward Racial  
Justice

Fernando Enns

Stephen G. Brown

## HATE SPEECH AND WHITENESS

Fernando Enns and Stephen G. Brown

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## Introduction

Fernando Enns and Stephen G. Brown

During the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, initiated in 2013 at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the issue of racism has emerged as one of the pilgrimage's four common themes, alongside those of truth and trauma, land and displacement, and gender justice. Each of these four themes is relevant in a different way to all contexts and with a shared urgency. For the Reference Group of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, and its Theological Study Group, these four themes are the most immediate and pressing expressions of how communities, women and men, young and old, experience injustice and violence.

The chapters that make up this publication—*Hate Speech and Whiteness: Theological Reflections on the Journey toward Racial Justice*—represent a selection of the papers presented at a series of webinars organized in late 2020 by the Theological Study Group. The webinar series itself was a follow-up to a theological forum in Tokyo, planned by the study group in 2019, that identified global manifestations and the present-day complexities of racism.<sup>1</sup> The papers at the Tokyo symposium analyzed the ugly history and violent effects of today's racism: its impact on fellow human beings and on nature; its destructive systemic embeddedness; and its intersections with gender injustice and economic and ecological violence.

Since the Tokyo symposium, two overarching themes—hate speech and whiteness—have been identified as key areas for continuing theological reflection on racism. These two themes were at the centre of the webinar series and are the focus of this publication.

The contributions here are organized around three major themes: whiteness, including its relationship to slavery; racism; and hate speech. In the chapter that opens this publication, Jennifer Martin, from the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and co-moderator of the Pilgrimage's Reference Group, reflects on being part of the legacy of slavery as a Black, Caribbean, English-speaking Christian woman who came into young

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1. A selection of papers from the 2019 consultation was published in *Global Manifestations of Racism Today*, a thematic issue of *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 1 (2020), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/17586623/2020/72/1>.

adulthood in Jamaica in the 1970s. While the Caribbean society in which she grew up could not but recognize the mixing of the races, it was nevertheless undergirded by white institutions and traditions. For their part, Tinyiko Maluleke and Hlengani Mathebula, from South Africa, offer a theological appraisal of whiteness in Africa and its mutually reinforcing relationship with colonialism: colonialism breeds whiteness, while whiteness perpetuates colonialism in many expressions. They argue for the decolonization of the mind and the soul to expunge the “whiteness within,” the whiteness of Western education and largely Westernized Christian faith and theology.

In her contribution, Susan Durber reflects on the legacy of slavery in her white British life, and how she once regarded slavery as something that happened a long time ago, in distant places and to people she had never met. Researching her own locality, however, has brought into strong relief the realization that the legacy of slavery permeates her life far more than she had thought. Peter Cruchley, also from the UK, currently working in Singapore for the Council for World Mission, argues that hate speech is more than isolated “text”: whiteness is a system of power, prejudice, and meaning that is revealed in the many forms of expression utilized by exponents of white supremacy, including missionaries.

Several contributors reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the racist way in which Black people and other people of colour have been targeted and their situations worsened. COVID-19, underlines Iva E. Carruthers, has exposed the underbelly of systems of racism, economic greed, and denial of basic human rights to so many people, wreaking havoc on Black communities. While the virus itself does not discriminate, its propagation within a society steeped in structural racism, and the reckless and uncoordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Trump administration, led to avoidable deaths. At the same time, the increased inhumane state-sanctioned police violence against Black people in the US showed the world the deep-rooted systemic and transgenerational racism that people of African descent have had to and continue to endure.

Yolanda Pantou points to how COVID-19 has served as a justification for expressing prejudice and hate in many places in the world. People who look Chinese have been yelled at, spat upon, and even beaten. There has been a concurrent rise in racism against all East Asians, not only Chinese communities. Xenophobia and racism toward Chinese and other Asians takes place not only in the US. She cites examples of anti-Asian bigotry that has been experienced in the UK, and in Tokyo and Rome, where several eating

places put announcements on their doors stating that visitors from China were not allowed to enter. She argues that the call to fight racism is a challenge to those who are committed to follow Jesus.

Philip Peacock describes how in recent years India has seen increasing violence based on religious identity—something that in the Indian context is referred to as communalism or communal violence. Placing such violence in a broader historical perspective, he underlines how the party presently in power in India has successfully driven an agenda that has marginalized and threatened to disenfranchise religious minorities, those coming from the lower castes, and Indigenous people. He argues that it is necessary to move away from the notion that communalism is just ignorance or prejudice; instead, it needs to be understood as ideology. To combat this, civil society needs to take an anti-communal stand, including promoting interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue should involve not only the religious elite; it should invite all people to meet and interact with others of different faiths.

Guido Dotti points to the disturbing occurrences of hate speech in his home country, Italy. These represent an offence to the dignity of every human being and a deterioration of the quality of civil coexistence. He sketches out a path to combat hate speech. This involves not only advocacy, but also the vast arena of daily behaviour of individuals, communities, and social groups. Taking care of the victims of hatred, both verbal and physical, will lead to the discovery that it is wounded humanity that will heal wounds, enrich poverty, and transform hearts of stone.

Finally, Masiwa Ragies Gunda, the WCC's recently appointed programme executive for programmatic responses on overcoming racism offers theological reflections on the WCC's work i to face these challenges, drawing on the report of the WCC Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia.

The ecumenical fellowship faces the challenge of reflecting together theologically on these injustices experienced in specific contexts. Here, we need to widen our perspective. We need to shift away from the approach of advocacy and accompaniment often promoted in the ecumenical movement, and sometimes experienced as one-sided and even paternalistic. We need, instead, to adopt a definition of relationship inspired by the pilgrimage metaphor that could, as Yolanda Pantou states, be called companionship, breaking and sharing bread with one another—becoming a “com-pan-ion”—on the way.

At the institutional level, such an ecumenical theology of companionship needs to lead to a self-critical examination of how practices, orders, configurations, methodologies, and structures of the church(es) have perpetuated the discrimination, xenophobia, and racism that counter unity in Christ. The challenge facing the pilgrim ecumenical fellowship is thus to de-centre itself, including from prevalent privileges. This could lead to self-knowledge and purification from the sin of racism. Pilgrims find their authenticity not in opposition to others according to their constructed identities but in receiving and visiting others. This is a mutual gift that allows for the appreciation of very different and multiple identities precisely because all are one in Christ.

**WHITENESS**



# Whiteness as Legacy of Slavery in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean: The Case of Jamaica

Jennifer P. Martin

## Biographical Note

I cannot claim to be neutral on the subject of whiteness. I am part of the legacy of slavery. I write from the perspective of a black, Caribbean, English-speaking Christian woman who came into young adulthood in Jamaica in the 1970s. Having also lived in the diaspora, I have had the opportunity to observe whiteness in European and other settings.

I grew up in a society that could not but recognize the mixing of the races, a biological fact seated in the plantation history of the country, the Caribbean region, and beyond. Nonetheless, the same society, undergirded by white institutions and traditions, continued the established practice of automatically devaluing things and cultures which were other than white. In Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, it was seen and known that skin colour literally affected people's life chances. There has, therefore, always been some dissonance arising from the discrimination based on colour which has been a part of the Jamaican and Caribbean landscape. The Christian church cannot but claim its share of responsibility for the confusion and harm which have accrued to some black Jamaicans even into the present.

## Christianity and Colonialism

Race finds a prominent position in any contemplation of Christianity. The reason is not hard to imagine because Christianity and race have been tied into a Gordian knot in the life of the Caribbean since Columbus, perhaps by misadventure, found his way into the "New World" in 1492. As Jennifer Mohammed notes, "With equal vigour they sought to Christianize the people of the Americas whom they called Indians. . . . While the Taino (Arawaks), Kalina, and other New World groups had their own belief systems, the Spaniards labelled them all as *pagan*, simply because they were not Christians."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Jennifer Mohammed, *Sociology for CAPE Examinations* (London: Macmillan Education, 2014), 206.

On this same page Mohammed also points out that “it was never the intention of any European power to allow the Africans to practice their *own* religions freely.”<sup>2</sup>

Christianity, colonialism, and whiteness are so closely tied together that some Caribbean people have made a conscious decision to reject Christianity because of its negative impact upon aspects of the lives of the majority Black population. Whereas there has been some rejection of Christianity, “Schuler observes that the experience of Christianisation revealed that the Afro-Jamaican religious tradition . . . had consistently reinterpreted Christianity in African, not European cultural terms.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus religion remains an integral part of life in Jamaica but its forms are many and varied. Bryan writes: “Eminent colonial figures such as Archbishop Enos Nuttall understood that religion was inseparable from the daily life of the Afro-Jamaican working classes, and that their religious world-view was an important, perhaps the most crucial, viable element in what he termed their ‘mental construction.’ Social control could not be separated from the orientation of African religious thought. For Nuttall, Jamaica was a ‘mission frontier’ where the Afro-Jamaican population was to accept ‘Anglo Saxon’ Christianity and so to move closer to the supposed norms of white society.”<sup>4</sup>

Herein lies a conundrum which has roots dating back to the early days of colonial and plantation life. There are persons who participate in the aspects of the Christian faith which may be of direct benefit to them. At the same time, some, who may be members of churches, still hold fast to non-Christian traditions which would not meet the approval of their ministers. Afro-Caribbean Jamaicans who are resistant to being socially controlled in the manner attributed to Nuttall are more likely to resist full compliance with the tenets of Christianity and to hold on more decidedly to the practices of their African religion that fill needs in their lives.

To compound matters, alongside Christianity and other forms of religion, there is an increasing presence of secularization. That is to say, that “a movement away from regarding religion as important, and/or a decline in the place of religion in public life” is becoming more evident.<sup>5</sup> Somehow, the various religions and secularization are in competition for the same people. Despite

2. Mohammed, *Sociology for CAPE*, 206.

3. Patrick Bryan, “Nuttall and Religious Orientation,” in *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings*, ed. Christine E. Barrow and Rhoda Reddock (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), 545.

4. Bryan, “Nuttall,” 544.

5. Mohammed, *Sociology for CAPE*, 193.

such contestations, the role, historical roots, and present manifestations of Christianity are evident in the laws and customs of the wider society.

An interesting dynamic that developed from the earliest days of slavery in Jamaica was the colonial usage of Christian conversion and evangelization as tools of oppression and domination. As Erskine states: “It was unfortunate that the Christian churches were an important part of this process of domination. Very often their insistence that Christianity was a superior religion provided a rationale for the conquest and domination of so-called pagan peoples. In more overt ways the Christian church often used theology to underpin the system of oppression.”<sup>6</sup>

It is probably surprising that despite the evidence of the role the Christian church played in the oppression of Afro-Jamaicans, the institution continues to survive. Further, because of the country’s majority Black population, most Christians in Jamaica are Black. It seems that some people do see and hear the gospel in terms of the salvation and fullness of life that Christ intended for the whole of humanity. At this time, when the world and Jamaica are beset by so many problems, there is a great urgency for the church to examine why some persons are repulsed by certain actions of the church, both past and present. Among these actions is the church’s lack of understanding concerning the denial of the fullness of life to persons who seem to fall below par. In some cases, it is a matter of would-be converts literally keeping their distance from the church because they are unwilling to accept the psychological yoke of colonialism and Christianity—the two being viewed as two sides of the same coin.

According to Williams, “The vehicle *became* the message, so that with Christianity the Caribbean received a large dose of European culture. Furthermore, the colonizing culture cannot avoid presenting itself as superior to the host culture. Colonization is the presumption of superiority.”<sup>7</sup>

The current task of Christianity is to destroy this presumption of superiority and to work assiduously towards freedom and equality in the human enterprise.

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6. Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 8.

7. Lewin L. Williams, *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 1994), 19.

## Evolving Caribbean Community—Blackness and Whiteness

Despite historically entrenched constraints, some persons of Black and other ethnic groups managed to obtain elite education and training through government institutions and (partly) through schools that were financed by profits arising from slavery. This preparation and grooming helped to position such persons in seats of power in post-independence Jamaica and other Caribbean territories. In the 1970s, a number of nations in the Anglophone Caribbean were still in the early stages of, for example, developing their own political beliefs, steering their own economies, and learning to love and accept their own cultures and identities. Looking into the mirror of self and embracing the image which stared back was not always easy in an environment which generally looked down on Blackness. A variety of creative writers and scholars from a number of disciplines have commented on images of self and some possible meanings. Nettleford, for example, refers to this issue in his book *Mirror, Mirror*.<sup>8</sup> It was within this milieu that the Black Power movement made its appeal to members of the Caribbean community. Moving beyond images of self, the “historic association of race and ethnic privilege . . . and notions of black consciousness . . . channelled . . . black symbolic identity and antagonism to non-African ethnic minorities.”<sup>9</sup>

During the post-independence period, matters related to class and colour were in contention, for example, in the discussions, debates, and protests engendered by the Black Power movement. However, at the same time, there developed some significant dynamics in the social stratification in the Caribbean region. This was particularly evident in the areas of political leadership and professional positions. In referring to other analysts, Potter and colleagues discuss the “rise of a new cohort of educated black professionals and business people.” One of their observations is particularly germane to our discussion on whiteness and its tenacious hold in Jamaica and the region: “West Indians gradually moved into positions of power and prestige, in the process emulating white outlooks and attitudes.”<sup>10</sup>

The Black Power movement was invaluable in helping to clarify thinking on matters of race in the Caribbean region. In addition to political and economic

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8. See Rex Nettleford, *Mirror Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest in Jamaica* (Kingston: LMH Publishing, 2001).

9. Carl Stone, *Electoral Behaviour and Public Opinion in Jamaica* (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1974), 16.

10. Robert B. Potter, David Barker, Thomas Klak, and Denis Conway, *The Contemporary Caribbean* (London: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 201.

issues, the movement highlighted personal issues such as the beauty of black skin and facial features. It was a time when Nina Simone in the USA was singing the song “Young, Gifted and Black.”<sup>11</sup> In Jamaica, Marcia Griffiths and Bob Andy were also singing “Young, Gifted and Black.” Over the following decades, the Caribbean has continued to be awash with consciousness-raising sounds, lyrics, and literature announcing and interrogating the significance of race in the region. There has been a tradition in the area, dating back to the days of slavery, of Black voices insisting on being heard despite the power and efforts of white people to suppress them.

The foregrounding of colour, including Blackness and whiteness and all shades in between, has been an integral part of life in the Caribbean region from the landing of Christopher Columbus to the present. The creation in the Caribbean of a society based on colour was the invidious invention of Europeans to undergird the economic flourishing of the sugar plantation economy. Thus, stratification based on race, colour, and class has long been defined and understood, though not accepted by all groups. In speaking of the way in which society is divided, Potter et al. observe that “the colonial plantation system, therefore, created grossly unequal and inegalitarian social hierarchies that were primarily premised on race and skin colour.”<sup>12</sup> In their book, there is a diagram of a pyramid depicting “race and social class in Caribbean slave society.”<sup>13</sup> The lines demarcating the various sectors of the population were found to be firmly recognizable at the time of political independence, the 1960s and 1970s. “Thus, Clarke shows how race and social status in Jamaica in 1800 was just like that shown in the simple figure.”<sup>14</sup> The late Jamaican historian George Beckford emphatically addressed structural continuities such as that in his work on plantation society and economy.<sup>15</sup> Whiteness, a legacy of slavery, still holds thrall over the region in terms of privilege and other manifestations. The term *thrall* may not be comfortable, yet it is used deliberately to convey the sway that whiteness holds in this setting.

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11. “Young, Gifted and Black,” by Nina Simone, with lyrics contributions from Weldon Irvine, introduced by Nina Simone at the Harlem Cultural Festival, 17 August 1969; released on the album *Black Gold* (RCA, 1970).

12. Potter et al., *Contemporary Caribbean*, 193.

13. Potter et al., 194.

14. Potter et al., 194.

15. See, for example, George Beckford, “Plantation Society: Toward a General Theory of Caribbean Society,” in Barrow and Reddick, *Caribbean Sociology*, 139–50.

Norman Girvan refers to four of several broad definitions of *Caribbean*. He sees “the Caribbean as *island chain* lying in the Caribbean Sea; . . . as *basin*, comprising countries” within and bordering the sea; as “an ethno-historic zone” including islands and coastal areas in South and Central America that share historical, cultural, and ethnic commonalities; and as “transnational community” that embraces the Caribbean diaspora overseas. He concludes that in the long-term, physical space and current definitions might be much less significant.<sup>16</sup>

There are many notions of the Caribbean but in terms of the categories highlighted here, the Caribbean as an ethno-historic zone is of particular significance when contemplating whiteness as a legacy of slavery. Caribbean peoples have had similar but not necessarily the same experiences based upon the very fact of slavery. These lives have been lived in the same geographical space. The definition of this ethno-historic zone does not negate the immediacy of the diaspora Caribbean community within which whiteness remains a signifier.

The geographical and linguistic spread of the Caribbean makes it difficult to speak of a generic Caribbean person. There are differences even among countries of the same linguistic group. To simplify the discussion, look, for example, at whiteness as a legacy of slavery in contemporary Jamaica.

What is meant by whiteness? In brief, “whiteness and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared.”<sup>17</sup> A brief reading from the Sociology of Race webpage may help us to see how it is that whiteness remains a dominant presence in the Caribbean in general, and in Jamaica in particular, which has an overwhelmingly Black population:

Like water to the proverbial fish, whiteness has been largely invisible in the “modern world system” of European creation. . . . The uniqueness does not consist of the ‘normalization’ of whiteness. . . . While whiteness partakes of normality and transparency, it is also dominant, insistently so. . . . White supremacy has never gone unresisted . . . so whites (colonists, settlers, planters, etc.) . . . had to theorize whiteness, defend its “purity,” and justify their rule.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Norman Girvan, “Creating and Recreating the Caribbean,” in *Contending with Destiny: The Caribbean in the 21st Century*, ed. Kenneth O. Hall and Denis Benn (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2000), 31–32, 35–36.

17. National Museum of African History and Culture, “Talking About Race: Whiteness,” para. 1, <http://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/whiteness>.

18. “Whiteness,” *Sociology of Race*, Researchnet, n.d., paras. 1–3, <https://sociology.iresearchnet.com/sociology-of-%20race/whiteness/>.

## The Intractable Presence of Whiteness

Colonial slavery shaped modern Britain and all its former territories. The survival of the British Commonwealth in the contemporary world is an evolution from the past that still shapes the present. Jamaica is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, headed by Queen Elizabeth II, and is thus part of both the past and the present of an evolving colonial relationship. Jamaican nationals require visas to visit the UK, the country in which their head of state resides. The UK Privy Council remains Jamaica's final court of appeal and those seeking to access such services require permission to land.

These are examples of intractable whiteness in action. The people of Jamaica are a living testament to that colonial past that has located itself within our present. The memory of colonial slavery is coloured by Blackness and whiteness, which were also stratified along gendered lines.

The meaning of whiteness in Jamaica, from the beginning of Columbus' incursion into the region, was put into words that are reportedly from the journal of Christopher Columbus, the white European credited by some with having "discovered" the West Indies—an area which was populated at the time of the arrival of the Spanish in 1492. According to Augier and Gordon, Columbus wrote: "Some of them paint themselves black (and they are the colour of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor white). . . . They ought to be good servants and of good skill, for I see that they repeat very quickly all that is said to them; and I believe that they would be easily made Christians, because it seemed to me that they belonged to no religion."<sup>19</sup>

Clinton Black, in writing of the coming of Columbus to Jamaica, notes that "Jamaica appears to have been one of the best settled islands in the Antilles at the time of its discovery in 1494."<sup>20</sup> Columbus did not discover the land, but it is instructive that he readily set out to stratify the inhabitants in terms of their usefulness as servants and their malleability for future conversion to Christianity.

The position of Africans and other people who were transported to Jamaica began to be determined as stated in Columbus' journal. From the harsh contours of slavery through indentureship and independence, people who are not white have in the main been viewed as slaves or servants, and, later, as those who could be useful in filling evolving service roles. At convenient

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19. Christopher Columbus, Journal of Columbus, 1492, in *Sources of West Indian History*, comp. F. R. Augier and Shirley C. Gordon (Kingston: Longman Caribbean, 1962), 1.

20. Clinton V. Black, *The Story of Jamaica* (London: Collins, 1965), 13.

junctures, allowance was made for missionaries to fulfil their role of converting them to Christianity.

Significantly, it was never admitted by the colonizers that the people who were enslaved and colonized would have come from cultures and systems which could help in the shaping of Jamaican systems. Further, “successful” efforts on the part of the colonizers guaranteed that the concept “white” has been historically free of negative association. One example in Jamaica is that white females, even if decreasingly so, are often referred to as “white ladies”—a mark of regard. In addition, over the centuries, whiteness has spun around itself the notion and practice of white being right. In explaining the virtual impossibility for white people to not be racist, Robin DiAngelo noted in a CNN interview: “You just can’t help it, you see, because you have been swaddled in the cocoon of white privilege since you came sputtering out of your mother’s womb, protesting the indignity of it all.”<sup>21</sup>

A global effort on the part of white people, as strong as that which promulgated a pristine image of whiteness, has been made to denigrate the image of Blackness. Blackness is thus described as evil, unhealthy, hostile, and morbid. Ranging from “black mark” to “black sheep,” the list of negative connotations of Blackness is seemingly endless. *Why does black tend to be associated with or to connote that which is bad?*<sup>22</sup>

Unsurprisingly, whiteness is embedded into all aspects of Jamaican life and culture as the model of goodness and perfection. Jamaicans, particularly Black Jamaicans, have had the added burden of fighting the negative images of Blackness in every aspect of life.

The people of Jamaica constitute the chief legacy of slavery. Embodied in this structure is the persistent poverty which has profoundly constrained multiple generations of Black people. The juxtaposition with the historically visible material comfort epitomizing whiteness strikes a discordant note. Other aspects of this legacy bearing the mark of whiteness include the English language, education, national symbols, architecture, laws and institutions, family structures, Christianity, body images, standards of beauty (Caucasian vs. African features), the commodification of black bodies, high arts and

21. Robin DiAngelo, “How ‘White Fragility’ Supports Racism and How Whites Can Stop It,” interview by Sandee LaMotte, CNN, 7 June 2020, para. 2, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/07/health/white-fragility-robin-diangelo-wellness/index.html>.

22. John Egbeazien Oshodi, “Why Is ‘Black’ Always a Bad Word?,” *The St. Louis American*, 5 January 2006, [https://www.stlamerican.com/news/editorials/why-is-black-always-a-bad-word/article\\_9fdf3fd1-a263-536a-8b11-a80d4dcfe0b1.html](https://www.stlamerican.com/news/editorials/why-is-black-always-a-bad-word/article_9fdf3fd1-a263-536a-8b11-a80d4dcfe0b1.html).

culture versus popular arts and culture and “primitive” art, patterns of landholding, and tourism.

It must equally be stated that Black Jamaicans and other ethnic groups have not all embraced the status quo. Some do not accept whiteness as the pinnacle of human endeavour. They are making strides in breaking the glass ceiling represented by global and local whiteness. Through these cracks, with the undergirding of national development plans, the lines of stratification are being shifted. Each ethnic group has taken steps to ensure that aspects of their cultural expressions endure counteracting threats to their place and their identities.

Furthermore, the Black-majority working class continues to push forward in the spirit of Bob Marley and the Wailers, who called us, decades ago, in the words of “Redemption Song,” to “emancipate ourselves from mental slavery” because we are the only ones who can “free our minds.”<sup>23</sup> This call remains very timely. The major religion in Jamaica is Christianity; some Jamaicans are members of very conservative denominations that may not devote adequate time to challenge some teachings and hymns promoting white purity and perfection.

The Jamaicans who are sensitive to the global and local reach of whiteness continue with the voice and spirit of Peter Tosh to demand equal rights and justice. Increasingly, in terms of speaking to whiteness in this generation, strong calls are being made for reparations through the policies and voices of the National Commission on Reparations. Much progress is being made in this area. Thinking of reparations leads us to consider the social make-up of Jamaica.

### **“Out of Many, One People”**

Jamaica’s motto, “Out of Many, One People,” is one symbol of our independence. In thinking about independence and the abolition of slavery, however, some felt that freedom and self-determination were not the correct route for Jamaica. In the case of the abolition of slavery in 1834, one opinion expressed was that the Black people were not ready for freedom because the “[Jamaican] slaves were more backward than in most of the islands . . . and [would] set up a kind of jungle society which would be a social danger to

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23. “Redemption Song,” by Bob Marley, on *Uprising*, Bob Marley and the Wailers, 1980.

the country while causing economic ruin.”<sup>24</sup> My interpretation of the word *backward* in this quotation is that the planter class had fearful memories of the former enslaved persons being in a constant state of protest even though they were under the whip. These estate owners would have imagined a future filled with difficulties.

Having separated from the West Indies Federation, Jamaica became independent in 1962. Some believed that Jamaica could not survive as a nation. Nonetheless, the course was embarked upon and the enchanting motto referred to above was chosen: “Out of Many, One People.”<sup>25</sup> This represents an admirable ideal to which the nation aspires but the design of the coat of arms was not freshly created to commemorate the establishment of the independent Jamaica in 1962. It was designed by William Sancroft, then Archbishop of Canterbury, and was granted to Jamaica under Royal Warrant in 1661. The original Jamaican motto was “The Indians twain shall serve one Lord”—in reference to the Taino and Arawak Indians serving the colonizers. It was deemed to have no place in a modern country. The present motto was brought into service in 1962. Despite the almost incidental manner in which the new motto was adopted, a study has found that a majority of Jamaicans embrace core elements of an ethnic oneness philosophy.<sup>26</sup> This finding indicates that there is a strong desire for the ethnic groups to become one people.

It is true that Jamaica is comprised of many groups of people, but we cannot be readily described as one people. Jamaica’s 2010 Report to ICERD makes a statement which challenges us to consider the impact of skin colour in the land of one people: “Racism does not manifest itself as it does in other countries. The greater challenge for Jamaica is overcoming the residual impact of slavery on the society as skin colour is sometimes approximated with opportunities for upward or social mobility.”<sup>27</sup>

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24. Black, *Story of Jamaica*, 146–47.

25. “The Story of Jamaica’s Motto and Coat of Arms,” 10 August 2016, DIG, <http://digjamaica.com/m/blog/the-story-of-jamaicas-motto-coat-of-arms/>.

26. Monique Deeanne Asandra Kelly, *Jamaican Ethnic Oneness: Race, Colorism, and Inequality*, UC Irvine Dissertation, 2019, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/60m9j1pv>.

27. See Jamaica’s 2010 Report to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination “UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Reports submitted by States parties under article 9 of the Convention (5 November 2012), Jamaica, II.5 (9 July 2012),” UN Doc CERD/C/JAM/16–20, 3., <http://tinyurl.com/2p8bwnk6> [opens as Word document].

More than a century has elapsed since the abolition of chattel slavery. There have been some changes in the relations among ethnic groups, but whiteness still sets the tone. This expression is used in both a literal and figurative sense. Whiteness, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly, is used as the measuring stick for expressing what are considered to be the highest ideals of cultural expression and human enterprise. The invitation to whiteness remains a troubling phenomenon. Whiteness is understood to be the ideal skin complexion, viewed as the entrance to things that are ideal and desirable. It has had the visible and disheartening impact of enticing many persons to bleach their skin if they are of dark complexion or to even the tone of their skin if they are of lighter complexion. The lightening of skin knows no class boundaries as, for some, the reduction of melanin is likely to place them in an improved material position.<sup>28</sup>

Active steps are necessary to bring about a change in the circumstances causing people to be exposed to racism. With Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" there is opportunity for this generation to move forward triumphantly.

### Unsettled Settledness: "Big Ship"

It is inevitable that a discussion involving whiteness as a legacy of slavery would involve the motif of ships upon the ocean. In 1982, a gently rhythmic song, "Big Ship" by Jamaican Reggae singer Freddie McGregor, rose to number one on the charts in both Jamaica and the UK.<sup>29</sup> He reminisces that the inspiration for the song came to him when he was in his friend's yard, located 2000 feet above sea level. He could see the ocean, and in outline, a big ship. In speaking with Mel Cooke of *The Gleaner*, he said that when he saw the ship coming into the harbour, his initial thoughts were about Black nationalist Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line. He had also been reading the Bible and other books. He had an epiphany and within days the song was composed and recorded.<sup>30</sup>

28. Historically, lighten skin guaranteed better economic opportunities since the societies were organized along shade lines. The belief is still prevalent and so across social lines some people still lighten their skin with chemicals in the belief of upward economic and sometimes social mobility. See, for example, Cynanie Sawyers-Haylett, "An Exploration of Skin Colour Perception in Kingston, Jamaica," *The Excelsior Community Academic Journal* 1 (January 2021), 86-118, [https://www.ecc.edu.jm/images/research/Skin\\_Colour\\_Perception\\_A\\_Gender\\_Comparison\\_-\\_C\\_Sawyers-Haylett.pdf](https://www.ecc.edu.jm/images/research/Skin_Colour_Perception_A_Gender_Comparison_-_C_Sawyers-Haylett.pdf).

29. "Big Ship," by Freddie McGregor, on *Big Ship*, produced by Linval Thompson, released 1982.

30. Mel Cooke, "Story of the Song—Freddie McGregor Sees a 'Big Ship,'" in *The Gleaner*, 5 March 2017, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/entertainment/20170507/story-song->

It is not by chance that Freddy McGregor's epiphany is a segue into a recognition of Marcus Garvey, Jamaica's first national hero. Garvey's singular and indelible gift to humanity was his call to Black people across the world to see and claim their greatness as human beings. The Black Star Line (1919–22) to which McGregor refers was the shipping company that Garvey had established for transporting of Black persons to Africa. Garvey knew that for Black Jamaicans their state of "settledness" would always be unsettled.

It is no surprise that the Caribbean region would attract ships: a variety of ships for a variety of purposes. These ships did not simply transport Europeans into the region but also brought the notions of whiteness and white supremacy. These included the use of weapons of war upon hospitable hosts, leading directly to the virtual annihilation of the early Jamaicans at the time of Columbus' arrival. Clinton Black writes in *The Story of Jamaica*, "But for the arrival of the Spaniards in the New World, the Caribs might have exterminated these first Jamaicans" and "it was the newcomers from Europe [who] . . . in a fairly short time" completed "the work of destruction."<sup>31</sup> This comment calls for reflection although it is open to interpretation. In any event, it is apparent that the Europeans began their tour of duty as they intended to continue. Early on, they displayed their efficiency at slaughter. The clinical report above appears on the third page of Black's book. The remainder of the chapter reads like a remembrance at a funeral.

Here I wish to introduce two poems that offer different commentaries on the coming of Columbus to these shores, written from two different perspectives, reproduced by Al Stewart in *Stabroek News*.<sup>32</sup> Both poems chart the first encounter between Columbus and an Indian. The first, "There was an Indian," by John Squire is from a colonial perspective.<sup>33</sup> The second, "Christopher Columbus," by Bob Stewart, is from a post-colonial perspective.<sup>34</sup> Squire in his poem writes that the Indian had not known change and did not understand Columbus' "doom-burdened" galleons. Stewart for his part writes of both the Indian and Columbus standing bewildered on the

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freddie-mcgregor-sees-big-ship.

31. Black, *Story of Jamaica*, 13.

32. Al Creighton, "Two approaches to the Columbus-Indigenous encounter," *Stabroek News*, 11 September 2016, <https://www.stabroeknews.com/2016/09/11/sunday/arts-on-sunday/two-approaches-columbus-indigenous-encounter>.

33. John Squire, "There Was an Indian," reprinted by Al Creighton, *Stabroek News*, 11 September 2016.

34. Bob Stewart, "Christopher Columbus," reprinted by Al Creighton, *Stabroek News*, 11 September 2016.

beach, before Columbus reaches for his sword. The Indian has never seen a sword before and grabs the blade before bleeding onto the sand.

Al Creighton observes that Squire narrates the meeting of Columbus and the Indian as a life-changing and tragic experience, involving the imposition of a strange culture upon this man. In speaking of Stewart's poem, Creighton keenly points out that "all of this is further condensed in the last line: 'The covenant had been made.' It is a dramatic summary of the history that was to follow."<sup>35</sup>

We close with the image of tourist cruise ships which are a constant feature of life in the Caribbean islands in times that are not overshadowed by COVID-19. Still, we sing "Redemption Song" with Bob Marley and the Wailers.

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35. Stewart, "Christopher Columbus."



# Original Sin: The Legacy of Slavery in My White British Life

Susan Durber

## Introduction

I know now, in a way I haven't always recognized, that whenever and whatever I write, I do so as a white British woman. My various roles within the World Council of Churches (WCC), over decades, have taken me on many journeys that confront me with the legacy of the British Empire. I have worked for Christian Aid, an international development charity in the UK, which has made me think hard about why the world is at it is, how global economic systems have developed, and how they still work. The Black Lives Matter movement; my own growing choice to read books (including theology books) and watch films from the majority world and by British people of colour; and the stirring political currents of the world around me have made me reflect deeply on my location in the world, and in the world church. I have been pressed, rightly, to notice, understand, and act in light of my own white privilege. As part of that I have been learning about the legacy of slavery. What follows is a reflection on this legacy and the traces that the British transatlantic slave trade has left on my own life: on the place I live, the church I belong to, the work I do, and the ecumenical movement I seek to serve. I wanted to demonstrate how this is not something that is distant from my life, but deeply bound up with it, and that it therefore demands a personal and deliberate response.

## My Upbringing

I can remember, in 1977, watching the television series *Roots* and being horrified by the story of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>1</sup> It was hard to watch as such appalling suffering was portrayed. I didn't really want to stay in the room. That experience left me sure that slavery was wrong and terrible and that I wanted nothing to do with it and would have surely been against it at

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1. *Roots*, television miniseries, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, John Erman, David Greene, and Gilbert Moses, screenplay by Alex Haley, aired 1977 on ABC. Based on the book by Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

the time. I identified strongly with William Wilberforce and the abolitionists, and I thought, that is where I belonged. But I still thought of slavery as something that was in the past, that didn't need to trouble my conscience, and that was not part of my own responsibility to address in the present. Yet, I have come to recognize that 400 years of transatlantic slavery still shapes my life today in ways that need addressing right now, that it is still affecting the ways in which people are treated or regarded, and that it still confronts all of us with pain, suffering, injustice, racism, and all sorts of moral questions.

I once found it easy to think of the slave trade as something that happened a long time ago, in distant places and to people I had never met. I thought of the owners of enslaved people and slave traders as exceptionally and remarkably evil people, unlike anyone who might live or had lived near me or my circle. However, even a very little research into the place where I now live, the work in which I'm engaged, and what I often catch myself thinking about today, have convinced me that the legacy of slavery permeates my life far more than I had thought. Its story comes close to ordinary white people like me. This discovery challenges the way I understand slavery and my own place within it, as well as how I understand my Christian faith.

Looking back at my school days, I remember that, like children in the UK today, I learned a lot in history lessons about the Tudors and the Victorians. My religious education taught me about the Reformation and about progress and reform. I learned at school about those (white British men) who, through protest and parliament, had made the world a better place. The 17th and 18th centuries of British history were, however, something of a closed book. This means that I did not learn about the slave trade itself, but only about its later abolition. My education taught me to see and raise up the British heroes of abolition. It blinded me to the realities of, for example, the British people who were involved in the Royal African Company, and the centuries of trading in enslaved people that made many British cities and British people wealthy—a wealth that we are still living off today. I studied Clarkson and Wilberforce, the *white* abolitionist heroes, rather than the *enslaved people* who rebelled, who fought and argued for their own freedom.

As I look now at my white British life, I can see too that slavery has shaped it in lots of direct and indirect ways. My childhood was one in which *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was still on television; where white men blacked their faces and sang jolly songs in a parody of Black people.<sup>2</sup> I loved

2. *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, television variety show, created by George Mitchell, aired on BBC, 1958–1978.

marmalade and the “Gollywogs” that advertised it—a terrible cartoon version of people of colour that feeds a racism that portrays Black people as childlike, funny, and simple.<sup>3</sup> I developed a love of sweet things: of Demerara sugar on my porridge (now I know Demerara as a place where there were many plantations using enslaved people); of cakes, chocolate, cocoa, and coffee. I loved and still love wearing cotton clothes and sleeping between cotton sheets. I never asked and was never told how I came to have these things and how they became so strongly part of British life. One of my favourite films was *Gone with the Wind*, and somehow when I first saw it, I did not really notice, as I do now, the stereotypes of Black people, the romanticizing of slavery in that film, and the white privilege and gaze of the imagined viewer.<sup>4</sup>

I had an ordinary childhood in 1960s and 1970s Britain, but it was a childhood shaped by a racist context (post “Windrush”),<sup>5</sup> while at the same time the legacy of slavery was hidden.

## The Village Where I Live

I set out on an experiment to find out where the legacy of slavery might emerge close to the realities of my own present life. I live now in Bishops Hull, a small and quintessential English village in Somerset, with church, pub, and cricket on the village green. It is lovely and you would not think anything as ugly as slavery could touch it. But a little research reveals that a family that enslaved people once lived in one of the large Georgian houses in the lanes. The Mills family came to Bishops Hull in 1770 and lived in Milligan Hall. After slavery was officially abolished in England in 1833 (the trade in enslaved people having been prohibited in 1807), all enslavers were invited to apply for compensation from the government. Under the 1837 Compensation Act William Maynard Mills was compensated for the loss of 120 slaves from two estates in Nevis, gaining almost £2000, a huge sum then. There is a memorial to the Mills family in the parish church, a few steps from my house, that refers to them as “property holders and residents.” I doubt

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3. Robertson’s was a UK company founded in 1864 and incorporated as James Robertson & Sons, Preserve Manufacturers, Limited, in 1903. The “Golly” mascot was retired in 2002.

4. *Gone with the Wind*, feature film directed by Victor Fleming, screenplay by Sidney Howard, produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939. Based on the book by Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1936).

5. In 1948, a ship called the *Empire Windrush* brought one of the first large groups of post-war immigrants to the UK, from what was then commonly referred to as the West Indies. The “Windrush generation” was the term adopted to describe the many immigrants who came from the Caribbean to the UK over the period from 1948–1971.

many people looking at their memorial guess the nature of their “property.” I once spent an evening in the garden of their former house watching a play, little knowing the source of the money that paid for a fine house and garden.

The University College London Legacies of British Slave Ownership Project has charted all those who applied for financial compensation at the end of slavery in the UK,<sup>6</sup> and my own village appeared on the map with a reference to this family. There were, in the centuries of trading in enslaved people, large and famous companies who engaged in it—the Royal African Company being the largest. There were also individuals—like John Gladstone, the father of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone—who controlled vast numbers of enslaved people and plantations. There were also many ordinary people, of the middle classes, who in many places throughout the UK enslaved people far away in what they called the West Indies, a place they had likely never been to nor could imagine. Slavery was once part of the economic life of countless families, and it underlies the gentility of an English village like mine, though its history has been largely hidden.

## A Town Nearby

Nearby, in the same county, is the little town of Bridgwater, once a river port and now a town with high levels of poverty and deprivation. In 1785, Bridgwater was the first town in the UK to petition parliament for the abolition of slavery. The petition was, it seems, left to “lie on the table,” unworthy of debate. Bridgwater’s action seems worthy of celebration and congratulation—though there is speculation that the impetus for this petition came more from jealousy of Bristol’s rising and rival success as a port at a moment when Bridgwater was in decline than from moral outrage at slavery itself.

Frederick Douglass, the celebrated abolitionist (advocating for the abolition of slavery in the US), visited Somerset in September 1846. He spoke about “The Horrors of Slavery and England’s Duty to Free the Bondsman” and his speeches were reported in the Somerset County Gazette (still the local newspaper). He exhorted the people to exclude from their churches those who owned slaves, and not to hold Christian fellowship with “man-stealers,” just as you would not with sheep stealers.<sup>7</sup> The UK had passed the Slavery

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6. See the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, University College London, established 2009, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>.

7. See John Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

Abolition Law in 1833, but the institution was still legal in the US. Those in the UK were perhaps glad to be on what might have been seen as the moral higher ground.

## **My Nearest City**

About an hour's drive from where I live is Bristol, a city that was for a long time one of England's largest and most prosperous slave trading ports. There, in the early summer of 2020, protestors took down the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, a man who in the 18th century had worked hard to immortalize his name through philanthropy in the city, and who was honoured there in the 19th century. His name has now been removed from a prominent theatre in the city; at the cathedral, they are thinking about what to do with the stained glass windows that celebrate those who were enslavers or traders. His statue was erected in 1895, long after—you might think—the powerful of Bristol might have been aware of the evils of slavery. Despite many peaceful and democratic attempts to argue that his statue should be placed in a museum rather than displayed in a public square, nothing was done until his statue was taken from its plinth and plunged into the harbour in the summer of 2020. This event was a significant moment in the Black Lives Matter protests of that year and was noticed all over the world.

## **The Stately Homes of England**

In the UK there are many fine country houses now owned by the National Trust or by English Heritage and open to the public. Viewing them is a popular recreation. But the story of slavery often lies underneath the story of the family or the house. In very recent years more has been done to bring these stories to the surface. The book *Slavery and the British Country House*,<sup>8</sup> for example, reveals the story of Clevedon Court, a house a short drive from where I live. It was purchased in 1709 by Abraham Elton who restored it thoroughly, using money earned in the “Guinea trade.”<sup>9</sup> The family had slave ships and estates in Jamaica.<sup>10</sup> There is also, not very far from my home, a great house called Dyrham Park, the 18th-century home of William Blathwayt, a powerful man in government who supported the slave trade and was known

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8. Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, eds., *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/slavery-and-british-country-house/slavery-british-country-house-web/>.

9. A phrase often used euphemistically to refer to the slave trade, referring to the African Guinea coast.

10. Dresser, “Slavery and West Country Houses,” in *Slavery and the Country House*, 33.

to take bribes from enslavers in relation to the forming of government policy. He held government responsibility for the British plantations.<sup>11</sup> On a tour of the house, you could easily miss the two statues of Black slaves, chained, and holding platters. There has been some debate about whether the statues should be there to reveal the hidden history, or whether they should be taken from public view because they are so racist. Left on their own, without commentary or explanation, they simply strengthen racist stereotypes.

As I travel around the part of England where I live, whether for work or for pleasure trips to grand houses, I often use the Great Western Railway. This was a company in which many former enslavers, on receiving their compensation in 1837, invested their money. Every jolt of the carriage along the track is a legacy of slavery.

### **The Church Where I Pray and in Which I Serve**

Closer to home, the present building of the church I served until recently in Taunton was erected in 1797. Recorded in the history of the congregation is a visit to the minister from George Whitefield, a well-known evangelical preacher of the time. Unlike John Wesley, who opposed slavery, Whitefield had a slave plantation in the US state of Georgia. He aspired to run his plantation with benevolence, taking care of orphans, for example, but he used enslaved people, nonetheless. When I served as principal at Westminster College in Cambridge, I saw the documents associated with Whitefield's bequest of his plantation to Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. It included lists of enslaved people with their names, the work of which they were judged capable, and their assessed monetary values.<sup>12</sup> One of the enslaved women, I remember vividly, bore my own name, Susan. Whitefield was a controversial figure in his day, but this was because of his theology not his slave ownership—though he might have had some fierce debates with John Wesley about it.

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11. Dresser, 38.

12. The papers that include these details are part of the Cheshunt Archives, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertford, England. The Cheshunt Archives cover various elements of the Countess of Huntingdon's life: Trevecca College, which she founded in 1768; and the estates at Bethesda, which she inherited in 1770. The A series—American Papers (1770–88), is a collection of papers relating to the Orphan House and land at Bethesda, Georgia, which was left to the Countess by George Whitefield in his will when he died in 1770. The whole of the A series concerns the administration of the estate in Georgia, with correspondence and finances. Series A3/1, A3/2, A3/8, A4/4, and A4/6 all contain lists of enslaved people at Bethesda.

## A Charitable Trust

One of my present responsibilities is to serve as one of four trustees of a trust that administers the will of William Coward, an 18th-century Dissenter who left money for the education of dissenting ministers.<sup>13</sup> The trustees meet regularly to respond to applications for funding for ministers' sabbaticals or further study. A history of the Coward Trust, written in 1998, says that William Coward was a merchant.<sup>14</sup> He owned a plantation in Jamaica and lived there for a time. When he later returned to London, his plantation was likely run for him by a factor. After his return, his main business was running his fleet of ships. We know that the ships were often used to take dry goods or naval supplies to Jamaica and to bring sugar, ginger, and other produce back to England. However, we also know that "on three occasions, his largest ship, *The Golden Frigate*, was chartered by the Royal African Company [RAC] for use in the slave trade."<sup>15</sup> Coward once took the RAC to court because they didn't pay the full charter fee. There are also records of his correspondence with the RAC at a time when he wanted to "tight-pack" enslaved Africans into one of his ships. On 4 August 1707, the secretary of the RAC, Colonel John Pery, wrote to Coward and told him that the ship's surveyors judged *The Golden Frigate* too low to take two tiers of slaves "without stifling." With only one tier the ship could take 400. Coward wanted to have two tiers so that the ship could carry 800 and protested at the RAC's judgment, but they wrote back, "Tis morally impossible that 2 tier of Negroes can be stored between decks in 4 foot 5 inches."<sup>16</sup>

When I first became a trustee and read the history of the trust, I thought I would be comfortable taking the view that most money coming from an 18th-century source would be connected in some way with an economy enmeshed in slavery, and the history of this trust spoke of just three occasions on which Coward chartered ships for transporting enslaved people. But I have since found other sources that say that his vessels were "a familiar sight first

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13. The Coward Trust accessed 1 March 2021, <https://cowardtrust.wordpress.com/about/>. Those called Dissenters in 18th century England were those Protestants who chose to worship outside of the Church of England.

14. See John Handby Thompson, *A History of the Coward Trust: The First Two Hundred and Fifty Years, 1738–1988*, Supplement to the *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 6, no. 1 (1998), Supplement to the *Congregational History Circle Magazine* 3, no. 2 (1998)-

15. "About us," The Coward Trust.

16. The papers of the Royal African Company, quoted in Nigel Tattersfield, *The Forgotten Trade*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991) 18.

in Caribbean waters and late off the Guinea coast.”<sup>17</sup> And it is hard to admire a man who had to be lectured on morality by the RAC, however generous he was in his will. The trustees are now ready to award grants to ministers from churches in the Caribbean with whom we are partnered through the Council for World Mission. We are also exploring new ways, still congruent with Coward’s will, to disburse funds for the building up of the church.

## The Ecumenical Movement

Other parts of my work and my life have been indirectly or directly shaped by this legacy of slavery and the racism that was developed to support it. In ways that go deep, those long years of the transatlantic slave trade have shaped the international world we live in today, and in turn have moulded our understanding and work within the world church. I recognize that the society and church of which I am a part have awarded me immense privilege within a world in which others are marginalized.<sup>18</sup> For example, I am the moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. I am only the second woman to occupy this role, but I am also the second white British woman. The Faith and Order movement, which later became part of the WCC, was begun in Europe and North America in the early 20th century; the style of theology and the work that is done continues to be in forms that come from dominantly white European and North American cultures. It has proved hard to shift the work to truly include theologians who would begin their theology from the grassroots, from their own contexts and experience, and from the lives and the wisdom of the poorest and most marginalized people in the world. While we continue to use a certain kind of theological language and style to debate what it means to be the church, the people on our commission who are Indigenous or descendants of enslaved peoples, or who come from what we might call the “global South” or the majority world, challenge the rest of us deeply. They often remind us that the most important divisions in the churches and in the world today are between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the free, the men and the women, the healthy and the sick—and that it is these divisions we must strive to overcome as we work for Christian unity.

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17. Tattersfield, *The Forgotten Trade*, 241.

18. I am grateful to Rev. Dr Peter Cruchley, in his response to an earlier version of this chapter, for encouraging me to reflect further on this aspect of my work in theological education and in the ecumenical movement.

I have also worked for years in theological education. While it has been clear that the key texts we read and study are predominantly by white men, I have not done enough to engage in a radical shift so that Christian theology might be shaped by all the people of the church, and not only the most powerful and white. In Britain we have fine Black theologians producing vivid, faithful, and challenging theology, but they have often to work with huge grace and patience. My role, as a white British woman, is now to be quiet, to listen, to leave the space of power, and to let the world and church I grew up in change from the roots.

## Slavery and Racism

There are some parts of my life that are unusual. Not everyone is a trustee of the legacy of a former slave trader and not everyone has a role in the global ecumenical movement. But it is striking that so many parts of my life, including the most widely shared, turn out to have a living legacy from the transatlantic slave trade. Like all white people who have grown up in the UK, I have been shaped by the kind of racist tropes that were first formed amongst those who wanted, once, to argue *for* slavery. In this way, the debates about slavery—many of which took place in church contexts—continue to shape the ways that I see people of colour. The late 18th century saw the development of racial theories creating stereotypes of Black people in order to justify slavery. Black people were described as savage, lazy, sexually promiscuous, innately violent, and wild. It was argued that for these reasons, slavery was good for Africans. When, after abolition, the enslaved people in Jamaica left the plantations behind, this was seen as confirmation that they were work-shy.<sup>19</sup> The black-face minstrelsy tradition also shaped how Black people came to be seen as childlike clowns, frivolous and jokey. I can also remember that, as a child, a great gift for Christmas or birthday might be a guinea (a coin), worth, in British pre-decimalization currency, one pound and one shilling, at a time when many articles were priced in guineas. The very name comes from the manufacture of the coins from gold from the African Guinea coast, the heart of the slave trade.

Slavery, though legally prohibited, is not ended in the UK. There are people today, living in our communities, who are being exploited by others. They may be enslaved within a household, without payment or freedom, or made to work on building projects with only basic accommodation and food

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19. David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2017), 372.

for reward. There are women and children who are trafficked. Those who offer to wash my car when I park may well be being held in slavery. Some of the things I buy may be manufactured by those who are indentured labourers, virtual or actual enslaved people in other countries. This is an obvious way in which slavery continues today. But there are other ways in which the transatlantic slave trade continues to shape and define the whole world.

## What Now?

What should be my response to this fearful legacy? This is more than abstract history or reminiscence. It demands that I change my life, my work, and my faith.

### *Listening and looking*

I have to be willing to see the reality of Britain's history, looking at it honestly, without flinching, letting others tell me how it looks to them and being silent while I listen. How readily evil may be hidden from the gaze of those who are implicated in it, though of course it was and is never hidden from the sufferers. The story of slavery invites me to look for the ones who are suffering in our world and to listen for their voices and their cries. The theologian James Alison suggests that we should ask of any place or situation the question: "Where in all of this is Christ crucified?"<sup>20</sup> We follow, and we are saved by one who suffered and died the death of a slave. He is present wherever people suffer and if we want to find him, we must go *there*. He is with the black statues in the stately home, in the painful story that undergirds the wealth of an English village, in the people who endured the unutterable suffering that brought sugar to my country. He calls us to notice this other world, to see how the hidden must come to light and the silenced cries (as agonized as his own from the cross) must be heard.

### *Repenting*

I am prepared to own responsibility and not leave it with a few exceptionally evil people in the past from whom I can dissociate myself. I am reminded of Hannah Arendt's comments about "the banality of evil."<sup>21</sup> The story of slavery cannot be confined to the unusual and the exceptional. It pervades

20. James Alison, "Brought to Life by Christ," *The Christian Century*, 13 August 2020, para. 33, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/brought-life-christ>.

21. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

even an ordinary village and town like the one in which I live; and so much even of our faded wealth in the UK came from it. It has shaped the way I eat and think and see others. Its narratives have fed the racism that remains a remarkably powerful discourse in our world and that still divides us and oppresses many. It is implicated in the narrative of white privilege that still blinds many like me to the reality of oppression. Slavery was evil become ordinary—evil that was so apparently essential to the economy that it took decades to abolish, evil so tempting that it could turn those who may have been in other respects pious, devout, and charitable people into perpetrators of evil. As a white Christian, I cannot, and must not, cast slavery simply as the sin of a few evil “other” people. It is, rather, part of my inheritance. It has contributed to making me who I am, with my privilege, attitudes, and seemingly instinctive reactions. It is a communal sinfulness, a corporate responsibility that I (and the *we* of which I am a part) cannot escape. It is, in theological terms, an *original sin*. It is part of what makes white privilege possible and what makes it hard to grasp and take responsibility for. I have now to repent, to acknowledge with sorrow what happened and turn in a new direction. It will mean repenting publicly, saying that I renounce this evil.

### *Acting for Change*

There are also, I hope, things I can *do*. Having begun to see more clearly, I now feel compelled to work actively with others for change. I want to be not only more knowledgeable about the legacies of racism and slavery, but also committed to being positively *anti*-racist in the places where I live, pray, and work. It will mean making reparations wherever possible, working to restore wealth where it has been stolen from enslaved people, communities, and nations. It will mean speaking, praying, and working differently. It will mean investing money in different ways and supporting new ways of making the world work.

It will mean, as many urge upon us white people, letting go of my own fragility and my need to feel OK about being white. It will mean living with discomfort and the recognition that it's not all about us (white people) and our problems. It means caring more about making the world fairer for those who suffer from this legacy than about rescuing myself from historic guilt. The work of salvation and redemption belongs to God, and God has infinite grace and power to heal and restore. I must leave that with God, while I ask forgiveness and turn again.

## Conclusion

As a Christian, I know that I am in Christ, the one in whom God took the form of a slave and who suffered a slave's death.<sup>22</sup> The identification of the incarnate Word of God with the form of a slave is not, I believe, some form of romanticism. It is, rather, a true epiphany, a realization of the reach of divine love towards the lowliest and most cruelly treated of human beings. I cast my lot and my life with the God who is on the side of the enslaved, and who is coming to set them free. The nature of the salvation wrought by such a God for sinful and oppressive people, cultures and histories, is not to be determined by this white British theologian. On that question it behoves me to fall silent, and to listen for the voices of those oppressed by the white privilege that has given me the kind of power I would, in light of the story I have told here, now renounce.

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22. See Philipians 2:1–8.

# “Savage Healers”: The Rhetoric of Whiteness in the Council for World Mission Archives

Peter Cruchley

## Introduction

Addressing whiteness requires the laying out and deconstructing of historical myths and misrepresentations. White hate speech occupies our hearts, histories, and methodologies, delivering a symbol system missionaries helped to build. It is rooted in the colonial-capitalist history and practice of white nations who baptized this as progress—accomplished with the willing help of missionary movements that mistook their white urges for movements of the Spirit revealing to them Jesus as Lord (Chief) of all. This chapter surfaces the racist presumptions of white supremacy in mission materials. It offers a mirror to the emerging white figure portrayed there through a key biblical character who embodies and alerts us from the beginning to the fruits of whiteness.

## Rooting White Hate Speech in White Missionary Materials



*The Healer* (1915), by Harold Copping

*The Healer* was originally painted by Harold Copping (1863–1932). According to the archival abstract, the painting “was commissioned by the LMS [London Missionary Society] in 1916 to help publicize the Society’s medical mission. The painting was first presented in the Society’s periodical, *News from Afar*, which was aimed at children. The piece entitled “Sindano and the Good Chief,” by Vera Walker, was published to coincide with Medical Missions Week, February 11–18, and told the story of the picture.”<sup>1</sup>

1. “The Healer,” after Harold Copping by Tom Curr, SOAS University of London Digital Collections, accessed 28 September 2020, <https://digital.soas.ac.uk/AA00001471/00001/citation>.

The painting has a place in the Wellcome Collection, which sees it as an early form of product placement and says this about it: “An idealised white missionary, guided by Christ standing behind him, applies western medical knowledge to the healing of a sick African child. The missionary has a medicine chest identical in type to the Tabloid medicine chests which the firm of Burroughs Wellcome made for explorers and missionaries. In the foreground is the discarded African surgical instrument, the horn (used for cupping). The white missionary resembles Henry Morton Stanley as portrayed in a wood engraving published in the *Illustrated London News*, 17 August 1872, p. 156.”<sup>2</sup>

The LMS used art as a key didactic and propagandist tool to reach the many hundreds of churches and chapels in the UK and across the mission field. It was part of a series of paintings, *Famous Beautiful Pictures*, which were available for sale to adorn churches, chapels, and schools, as well as living rooms and front rooms.<sup>3</sup> The pamphlet of postcards notes that tens of thousands of the Copping paintings had been sold for profit to fund LMS and its projects.<sup>4</sup> The scale of production reveals the desire by LMS to locate this imagery in all possible locations where peoples’ hearts, minds and pockets can be touched.

In critiquing whiteness, capitalism, and colonialism, the driver of white missionary capitalism needs to be named. LMS materials were produced for sale, designed to shape and please a mass audience and so enable LMS to finance and staff its efforts. Here is one example of the connection between the propagation of the image and the prospering of the organization behind it:

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2. Wellcome Collection, “A Medical Missionary Attending to a Sick African,” accessed 28 September 2020, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/u4hc2hwe>.

3. London Missionary Society, *Famous Beautiful Pictures* (London: The Livingstone Press, n.d.), accessed 28 September 2020. <https://digital.soas.ac.uk/AA00001516/00001/pdf>.

4. The global intention of these images is revealed in the sales pitch: “PICTORIAL POSTERS IN COLOUR AND MONOCHROME. Suitable for announcing Missionary Meetings. Ample space is provided for local announcements. IN THIS SERIES THE FOLLOWING FIELDS ARE REPRESENTED. Posters: Size 30” x 20” 9d. AFRICA INDIA. CHINA (for S. E. Asia). SOUTH SEAS & PAPUA. GENERAL MEDICAL. Window Bills: Size 20”x15”. NEW GENERAL DESIGN (in colour) I/-. MADAGASCAR SOUTH SEAS & PAPUA 4d. Postage 2d (folded) Rolled on tube I/-, for any quantity up to 10.” London Missionary Society, *Famous Beautiful Pictures*.

WALL PICTURES (**for the School**) 30" X 20", price 3/9, packing and postage 9d. extra. If reinforced with linen. back, varnished and on wooden rollers. Price 12/6, packing and postage 1/- extra. ART PLATES (**for the Home**) 18" X 14", price 3/9, packing and postage 9d. extra. If process mounted ready for hanging, price 12/6, packing and postage 1/s. extra. PROCESS MOUNTS (for hanging or standing in the Home) 6" X 4", price 2/6, postage 3d. extra. POSTCARDS (**for the children**) price 5d., postage 1|d. extra.<sup>5</sup>

The painter, Harold Copping, was familiar to LMS projects, having been commissioned most famously for *The Hope of the World* in 1915. This "is arguably the most popular picture of Jesus produced in Britain in the twentieth century. It was an iconic image in the Sunday school movement between 1915 and 1960, embodying the shift to a progressive child-centred pedagogy, and providing the inspiration for juvenile involvement in the missionary project. Millions of copies of the picture were sold globally and its vision of the world united in the loving embrace of Christ was the inspiration for many variations on the same theme."<sup>6</sup>

The drama of the healer is clear. A white missionary doctor overseen and empowered by a white Christ brings healing to a poor African child, who would otherwise been prey to the superstitious customs of the "witch doctor" and would have died as a result. Thanks to the LMS medic, this child has been saved from pain and is offered an even greater healing from Christ himself, life eternal.

To underscore this broad message, LMS commissioned an author, Vera Walker, to write stories centred on the painting.<sup>7</sup> "Sindano and the Good Chief" was offered as a Sunday school resource to be used alongside the painting. Sindano is a fictional African ten-year-old boy from whose point of view stories of the white missionaries are told. His meeting with the missionary doctor and his native evangelist leads him to turn away from his African ways and turn to Jesus, for his brother is the poor child healed in the painting.

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5. *Famous Beautiful Pictures*, 3; boldface added.

6. Sandy Brewer, "From Darkest England to the Hope of the World: Protestant Pedagogy and the Visual Culture of the London Missionary Society," *Material Religion* 1, no. 1 (29 April 2015): 98–124, abstract, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/174322005778054500>.

7. Vera E. Walker, *Sindano Stories from Africa* (London: Livingstone Press, 1923).

This is how Vera Walker introduces him: “The sun was setting over the far off cluster of date palms as Sindano, the *brown* African boy, trudged along the narrow path in the high grass towards the village where he lived.”<sup>8</sup>

For a book which will focus so heavily on tribes and chiefs, Walker curiously makes the nationality of this African boy ambiguous, while his race is clearly drawn. His brown-ness gets referenced again in relation to the native evangelist who comes to teach him and the other boys in the village: “The new teacher was as *brown* as Sindano, and he had the same woolly hair and white teeth. But he wore a clean white cloth instead of the dirty rags the villagers had, and there were no charms hanging round his neck to frighten away evil spirits such as Sindano’s people wore.”<sup>9</sup>

Sindano is the interlocutor for white children about the African world, which he characterizes as savage, backward, lazy, and dangerous until Christ comes into the midst with his white missionary friends and his white clothes: “Sindano was only ten years old, so he did no very hard work yet. Sometimes he herded the village cattle or watched the crops, but he spent a lot of his day playing games with the boys of the village, swimming in the river nearby, sleeping in the hot sun, hunting for food or listening to stories told under the council tree.”<sup>10</sup>

Sindano, however, is depicted as preternaturally aware of the emptiness of his culture. He shivers when he passes the spirit house of the village’s ancestor chief, Kakungu. Sindano is already a critic of his community and culture, especially the witch doctor: “If the patient died it was said that some man or woman had cast a spell over him, and the witch doctor would accuse the murderer and demand that he should die a dreadful death. Then, even the strong men of the village shook with fear lest they should be accused. Sindano thought sadly about his own little brother who lay in the hut at home, very thin and miserable with illness. The witch doctor had done *him* no good.”<sup>11</sup>

This sets up the personal conversation Sindano will shortly have, and the avid interest and deep thirst he has for the teachings of Jesus, “the Great Chief.” The native evangelist explains the significance of Jesus using the concept of tribe and chief.<sup>12</sup> And Walker and Sindano both testify to the

8. Walker, *Sindano*, 5; italics added.

9. Walker, 12; italics added.

10. Walker, 7.

11. Walker, 8; italics added.

12. “This is something like the way in which the new teacher told the boys the story of Jesus: once, many, many years ago, there lived a great Chief of His tribe. The tribe had had many

colonizing power of white Jesus, for “when the school was over, Sindano waited whilst the others went back to their homes. Teacher, he said, I also would become one of His followers and keep His words. The Good Chief shall be my Chief.”<sup>13</sup>

The cultural, religious, and political shift of this kind of mission is clear. Sindano must cast aside the chiefs and the ways of the chiefs for the Great Chief. He does so willingly because of the healing power of this white Jesus, confirming that in the white, “true” estimation, Sindano’s culture is empty and corrupt.

The Sindano device reveals that, to LMS, Jesus was not only white but also a chief. Sindano, Sindano’s people, and the readers of the story would not find this chief Jesus leading an uprising of colonized peoples. The native evangelist in the story tells of Jesus’ life as a colonized native under Rome: “He was truly their Chief although they did not know it, for another and a stronger tribe ruled over them.”<sup>14</sup> When Sindano interrupted his teacher to ask: “Did not his people ask Him to rule over them and help them to fight against that stronger nation? Many would have done so, the teacher answered, but He spoke to them thus—men think that he is great who commands many people to serve him, but he is truly a great chief who serves his people by kindness and teaches them goodness.”<sup>15</sup> This, of course is the key mask for whiteness, that it should appear benevolent.

Thus, we enter the drama of the painting: “Sindano saw his own mother come towards the doctor carrying in her arms his little brother. She laid him down on the grass. A look of pity came over the doctor’s face. . . . He poured something into a glass, and gave it to the little boy. There was no sign at first. Then Sindano’s brother slowly opened his big eyes and smiled. See, see, said

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chiefs before Him some of whom had led their people into battle, some who had ruled them well and made them happy, and from one of these rulers this Chief was descended. He was truly their Chief although they did not know it, for another and a stronger tribe ruled over them. Now this Chief went through His country doing kind and merciful deeds to all the people. To those who were blind He gave back their sight. Those who were sick with fever He healed. Those who were lame and paralysed He made strong. And when they thanked him for his kindness He would say, even so is the Only Great One kind. He looks on all men and loves them and desires that they should be kind to one another. I speak His Message and it is by His power that I heal you” (Walker, 13–14).

13. Walker, 17.

14. Walker, 13.

15. Walker, 14.

the man with the bandaged arm to Sindano, he lives! What new witchcraft is this? Sindano leaned forward with sparkling eyes.<sup>16</sup>

There is not just healing here, but conversion:

That night at sunset the missionary gathered all the people around him and spoke to them again of the Good Chief whom he followed. Then the teacher called together his boys to sing their hymn. Clear and strong Sindano's voice rose above the rest:

*Shinganga Musuma 'lipo'*  
*Ishina iyakwe Yesu*  
*Atulangilile uluse*  
*Umfwe shiwi lya Yesi.*

The great good Doctor is here  
 His name is Jesus  
 He shows us compassion  
 Hear the words of Jesus

Take up the glad song,  
 the song of the Name of Jesus,  
 this greatest name  
 of Jesus, our Chief.<sup>17</sup>

This is the glorious ending? Of course, this is a Sunday school lesson driven by the urges of white missionary capitalism. So this is the ending:

Will the doctor come again? In the scattered villages of Africa, in the million villages of India, in the towns and hamlets of China, thousands of people are asking that question. They suffer untold pain and misery, and they know nothing of the story of the Good Chief. Sometimes there is only one doctor for hundreds of miles of wild country. How often can he visit the people? Cannot they come to the hospital? Yes, if there were enough hospitals. But every hospital is full, and each needs doctors and nurses and a big supply of medicines and bandages. We call ourselves followers of the Good Chief, what are we going to do?<sup>18</sup>

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16. Walker, 20.

17. Walker, 21.

18. Walker, 22.

Sindano and the Great Chief's message is clear: the global mission endeavour of a white Jesus needs white capital and white bodies, especially for the occupation, co-optation, and consumption of black capital and bodies. In the remainder of this chapter, I will follow Sindano's lead and ask, What has white medicine, power, Jesus actually done?<sup>19</sup>

## **Whiteness: A History of Savagery Made to Seem Like Healing**

The seeming tranquillity and tenderness of the picture is startling, given that it was painted against the backdrop of global war inspired by white imperial powers. With all that was becoming clear from such places as the Somme and the potential disillusionment with the old order of the white civilization, what does this painting tell us? The missionaries were quick to buttress the established order with reminders of its divine equivalence to whiteness, reassuring everyone of white enlightened beneficence. In modelling the doctor on one of the Victorian missionary and explorer heroes, Stanley, the persisting British colonial project was doubly baptized.

It is also curious that in 1936–37 the LMS brought together a collection of paintings like *The Healer* with more Sunday School materials. This was at the height of the Spanish Civil War. In 1936, as Hitler's grip on power became total, he sent troops to occupy the Rhineland. The 1936 Berlin Olympics was to be the paeon to whiteness, only to be left in tatters with the triumph of Jesse Owens.<sup>20</sup> Europe's appeasement of Hitler can be seen as yet another appeasement of whiteness as white nations prepared again for global war while still trying to maintain the white saviour mythology. This points not just to white exceptionalism but to *missionary* exceptionalism reflected in the mythology of the white saviour. Thus, the urgent task is to include mission and mission movements shaped by whiteness in the critique and press them towards the further de-colonization the critique demands.

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19. A play on Sindano's statement: The witch doctor had done *him* no good, see 42, n. 11 here.

20. Hitler expected the 1936 Olympic Games to further reveal the supremacy of the Aryan "master race." But these expectations were crushed by James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens, an African American track and field athlete who won four gold medals at the games for 100m, 200m, 4x100m relay, and long jump.

## White Exceptionalism—Missionary Exceptionalism Gathered in a Confluence of White Rhetoric

As white supremacy and Christian supremacy have reinforced each other, so too have mission movements adapted and adopted the exceptionalism and exemptions granted to white culture by white power. LMS missionaries, like those representing other mission organizations, placed themselves at the forefront of white power's "civilizing" role. However, missionaries have used education and health care to shield them from blame for their part in the colonizing past, not recognizing that education and health care were also instrumental in colonization. Indeed, the LMS played a complex and ambiguous role with the colonial authorities. The organization incorporated itself within the colonial framework to enable safe passage of its missionaries. It made use of a kind of *pax Britannica*, seeking a Royal Navy escort for its maiden missionary expedition in 1797 because England was at war with France. But it also saw itself as outside the colonial framework, believing its calling exempted it from the interests and attitudes of the British Crown in South Africa or the actions of East India Company in, for example, India and Southeast Asia.<sup>21</sup>

Bethelsdorp, the first LMS mission station in South Africa, saw itself as being outside the parameters of the colony and the Khoikhoi people, on whose land the missionaries Van Der Kemp and Read set up. They banned slavery in Bethelsdorp, so any enslaved runaway who came to the mission station was free. This engendered hostility with the Cape authorities and the Boer settlers. The indigenous people whose land the missionaries had annexed were also hostile. As Van der Kemp's entry in the *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* reads: "In 1801 Van der Kemp shifted his concern to the distressed Khoikhoi people in the Graff-Reinet area. There he experienced tensions and conflicts, first with the colonists and later also with the government. In 1803 he founded Bethelsdorp, a mission station near Algoa Bay through which he hoped to evangelize and civilize, and build character and society among the

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21. See, for example: Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground, Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008); Laurence Kitzen, "The London Missionary Society and the Problem of Authority in India, 1798–1833," *Church History* 40, no. 4 (December 1971): 457–73; Jon Miller and Gregory Stanczak, "Redeeming, Ruling, and Reaping: British Missionary Societies, the East India Company, and the India-to-China Opium Trade," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 2 (June 2009): 332–52.

Khoikhoi. From the beginning, however, Bethelsdorp was bitterly resented by the Dutch colonists, as well as by the Xhosa and Khoikhoi.”<sup>22</sup>

The LMS came to the Caribbean out of concern for enslaved people, having stated in its 1798 reports that a “mission to poor blacks” engaged “much of their attention.”

Few perhaps of all the children of Adam can have a stronger claim on our benevolence than those unhappy people, who have been cruelly torn from their native country and dearest connections, the victims of violence and avarice. The abolition of the slave trade, an event in which, with millions of our fellow subjects, we sincerely rejoice, seems to promise a fairer prospect . . . for the evangelizing [of] our sable brethren. A kind disposition to ameliorate their condition has appeared in many worthy planters, some of whom have expressed a readiness not only to permit but to encourage the labours of missionaries among them.<sup>23</sup>

LMS policy was that missions could only be sustained once they had earned local support, which meant the “benevolence” of the planters, and more often, the extraordinary giving of enslaved and freed black people. Thus, the LMS mission in Trinidad and Tobago failed; in 1808, the missionaries left because the planters refused to support them. And, as I have explored elsewhere, when the LMS had the opportunity to speak out against the cruelty of enslavement in Guyana, it instructed its missionaries to remain silent.<sup>24</sup>

The LMS missionary to Korea and soon-to-be martyr, Rev. Robert Jermain Thomas (1839–66), illustrates this further. This is the typical Sunday school version of the story curated to fulfil the mythology of white missionary capitalism: Thomas was ordained and commissioned by LMS for missionary work in Shanghai, China. Following the death of his wife soon after their arrival, he resigned his missionary post and worked as an interpreter for the Chinese Customs Office. During this time, he came into contact with

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22. I. H. Enklaar, “Kemp, Johannes Theodorus van der,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998), 357, <https://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/t-u-v/van-der-kemp-johannes-theodorus-1747-1811/>.

23. “Report of the LMS Directors 1808,” quoted in Robert Lovett, *History of London Missionary Society*, vol 2 (London: Henry Frowde, 1899), 315.

24. See Peter Cruchley, “Silent No Longer: The Roots of Racism in Mission,” *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 1 (January 2020), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/erev.12490>.

Koreans and through them rediscovered his missionary calling. He visited Korea in 1865 and acquired some language skills. After returning to Beijing, he rejoined LMS and prepared for a new mission to Korea. In 1866, he took passage on an American ship, the *SS General Sherman*, with a plan to distribute Bibles as he went along. The ship's commander and Thomas were advised against this by Korean river authorities but launched their voyage anyway. The ship was attacked by fire boats. Thomas waded to shore and was killed as he handed over a Bible.<sup>25</sup>

On deeper reflection, the white missionary exceptionalism becomes clear, with the painful irony that Thomas' incursion into Korea triggered the first of the military incursions by the US into Korea.<sup>26</sup> Thomas knew since 1700 there had been a Roman Catholic mission to Korea that had met with persecution and that foreigners were not welcome in Korea. He chose to launch his mission to Korea from an American gunboat. His whiteness meant he saw no contradiction in bringing Bibles on a gunboat to a land clearly ill-disposed to foreign incursion. The *General Sherman* was originally a British ship, a 187-ton sidewheel schooner, "well armoured with two 12-inch canon." Reports of the incident make clear that the *General Sherman* fired its canons on the Koreans on shore, "killing a dozen soldiers and many civilians on August 31." The battle continued for four days until the ship was set ablaze by fire ships. The crew and passengers were all killed. The news prompted US retaliation in 1866 under Admiral Rose, acting jointly with French naval forces. In 1871, a US expeditionary force under Admiral Rodgers set out "to receive a more accurate account, apology, and make recovery of survivors and/or remains."<sup>27</sup> So began a mission and history "through the provocations of a few delusional Americans convinced they could push themselves into a country about which they knew almost nothing and force its government to change fundamental, longstanding behaviours."<sup>28</sup> This mission and history is rooted in the connections of white and missionary exceptionalism.

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25. See "Overview of Protestant Churches in Korea: Dawning of Churches in Korea," Christian Council of Korea, <http://www.cck.or.kr/eng/html/intro02.htm>.

26. "The General Sherman Incident of 1866," in *Past Forward: Essays in Korean History*, ed. Kyung Moon (New York: Anthem Press, 2019), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/past-forward/general-sherman-incident-of-1866/40D71B80CF4CE13914A41AB069956119>.

27. *New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. "General Sherman Incident," accessed 18 February 2021, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/General\\_Sherman\\_incident](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/General_Sherman_incident).

28. Kyung Moon Hwang, "Korea, US and General Sherman Incident," *The Korea Times*, updated 17 August 2017, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2017/10/633\\_234855.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2017/10/633_234855.html).

Such missionary martyrdom drove the missionary movements and intensified the fundraising and recruiting appeals of the mission societies. Martyrdom manifested the extreme form of missionary and white exceptionalism, but also drove the missionary capitalism underneath. LMS materials for children are filled with the elegiac, stirring, money-spinning stories of missionary (white) sacrifice and martyrdom. When these stories were told, the focus was on what white people went through, not on the Black people who received, sheltered, and enabled the missionaries. An example of this is the slave uprising in Demerara, Guyana in 1823. Enslaved people were hearing rumours of emancipation and came to the LMS missionary, John Smith, to ask for counsel. Smith followed LMS advice and told them to stay at home and wait and not to rebel. However, the enslaved people could not accept such advice. They rose up in rebellion which the British authorities were quick to put down violently. The rebellion was led by Quamina and his son, Jack Gladstone. Quamina was a deacon in the LMS and was executed in a brutal fashion. Smith was also arrested by a vengeful governor and thrown into prison, where he caught tuberculosis and died. The LMS and British press quickly picked up on Smith's death and termed him, rather than Quamina, the Black LMS deacon, the "Demerara Martyr." Smith became the *cause celebre* of both the missionary and abolition movements, even a generation after emancipation.<sup>29</sup> The preface to the memoirs of John Smith was written by an LMS missionary to Jamaica who quoted a stipendiary justice as referring to the Black emancipated population as "idle and worthless . . . squatters,"<sup>30</sup> but brings the welcome news that where the gospel has been shared, a gradual improvement has occurred: "There can be no doubt about the progress among the emancipated peasantry with regards to the comforts of a civilised life, for it is only necessary to go out on a Sunday, and the people who the day before were working in the field, will be seen dressed in a most respectable and decent manner and conducting themselves with every degree of order and respectability. The great fault they have, and it is a very bad one, is the equality of feeling they show, without respect of persons."<sup>31</sup>

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29. More of this is reported in my previously mentioned article "Silent No Longer." The LMS cultivated this legend, as can be seen in various of their own publications. See, for example, Edwin Angel Wallbridge, *The Demerara Martyr: Memoirs of the Rev. John Smith, Missionary to Demerara* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1848). In the preface, the Rev. W. G. Barrett makes this clear: "The Missionaries alone stood between the oppressor and the oppressed," ix.

30. W. H. Ware, Esq., quoted in preface to *The Demerera Martyr*, xiii.

31. Preface, *The Demerera Martyr*, xviii, where Barrett is quoting Edward Carberry, a stipendiary magistrate in Colony of Demerara-Essequibo.

## Clothing White Rhetoric in Biblical Narrative

Sindano, our fictional friend, is made to believe Jesus is white. But Jesus was brown like Sindano. So, who is the white person Sindano should know from the Bible: in fact, the only white man in it at all? Pontius Pilate.<sup>32</sup> Pilate was a military man; *Pilatus* was a sobriquet which meant skilled with the javelin. *Pontius* indicates he belonged to the Pontii family, from southern Italy, which had historic and bloody roots in Roman life and politics. Pontius Aquila, an assassin of Julius Caesar, was a tribune of the plebs. This suggests that the family must have originally been of plebeian origin, of the common order of free people. In this way Pilate's family were social climbers who had done well from the system.<sup>33</sup> Josephus states that Pilate governed for 10 years which is a long time in the province of Judea.<sup>34</sup> A creature of the system, as Roman governor, he was head of the judicial system. He had the power to inflict capital punishment; he was also responsible for collecting tributes and taxes and disbursing funds, including the minting of coins.

We know Pilate from the Gospels, and his place in history is nailed down in the Apostle's Creed.<sup>35</sup> The Gospels display him presiding over a rigged and politically motivated trial requiring the convenience of state-enforced execution. His interest is only piqued when the seditious and subversive nature of Jesus' crimes are highlighted. He banters with a condemned man about kingdoms and kings and, while a man's life hangs in the balance, mocks the nature of truth. He is alternately depicted as weak and vacillating or jaded and indifferent. His handwashing has become iconic for disdain and passing the blame.

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32. For Pilate's biography, see historical sources such as Helen K. Bond, "Pilate in Josephus," in *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/pontius-pilate-in-history-and-interpretation/pilate-in-josephus/1297CF15D0D536A5F214941301A8301A>.

33. *Oxford Classical Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Pontius Aquila," by Theodore John Cadoux and Ernst Badian, accessed 28 September 2020, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-5234>.

34. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVIII, The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus the Jewish Historian*, ed. William Whiston (London, 1737), accessed 28 September 2020, <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-18.html>.

35. "I believe . . . in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried" (*Apostles Creed*, Ecumenical Version).

What does his single embodiment of whiteness reveal about whiteness? And what does it say when that embodiment is not in fact Jesus? First, we see whiteness in Pilate *in toto*, as it were. Colonial, military, governing, financial, and legal power all come to rest in one body. This centring of all forms of influence, power, and truth on him is the clearest reflection of what whiteness claims to be: the nom, the power, the life, the truth.

## **System Building and Social Climbing**

I recognize Pilate's whiteness and my own in his system-building and social climbing. Pontius "Pleb-no-more" Pilate is a reminder that whiteness is a system which rewards those who service its needs and aims. The historical figure reminds us that whiteness has deep-rooted, long-standing global ambitions, and pretensions to organize, systematize, and "hierarchalize," and replicates these systems and pretensions endlessly. This is white power, which enforces these systems onto our own, of course, but especially on the lands, cultures, and bodies of non-white people. It is designed to occupy whiteness and Blackness, and all races between. To be raised in whiteness is to know our place in a system/society/structure we expect to rise through, not dismantle: one which we want to defend and extend, especially against outsiders.

In 2002, Boris Johnson, then UK Foreign Secretary, wrote in *The Spectator*: "The best fate for Africa would be if the old colonial powers, or their citizens, scrambled once again in her direction; on the understanding that this time they will not be asked to feel guilty."<sup>36</sup>

### *Prevaricating*

I recognize his and my own whiteness in his prevaricating. Pontius "I didn't have a dream, but my wife did" Pilate lacks the moral courage to act on what is self-evidently the rigged trial of an innocent man. He doesn't need his wife's dream to reveal the injustice of inequality and oppression any more than we needed the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. But he cannot act to betray or confront a system that is his master and mistress. This leads him into the tactic of abstracting peoples' lives and struggles. Pilate finds time to dangle Jesus over an ontological debate about kingdoms and truth, which all the time is for Jesus an existential matter of life, death, and truth. This is

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36. Boris Johnson, "Africa Is a Mess, but We Can't Blame Colonialism," 2 February 2002, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-boris-archive-africa-is-a-mess-but-we-can-t-blame-colonialism>.

not unlike white people wanting to maintain statues of slave owners for the learning points they can offer, even though it offends and oppresses many of their Black and white neighbours.<sup>37</sup>

### *Upholding law and order*

I recognize Pilate's whiteness and my own in upholding law and order at all costs. The moment that makes up the mind of Pontius "I am the governor" Pilate is when the crowd gets nasty, the plebs become restless (please notice Pilate's ironic class betrayal here) and threaten riot. Then action must be taken and an innocent person of colour is automatically, instinctively tossed to his fate in yet another act of state-sanctioned police violence.

### *Victim blaming*

I recognize Pilate's whiteness and mine in the skill with which he delivers an innocent man to be executed, seemingly by his own people. Whiteness has not only named Blackness for itself, but for many Black people also. As a result, Black people become co-opted as orchestrators of their own oppression, drawn into the cycle of inequality, oppression, and violence spawned by the white hate system. In the whiteness system, Pilate represents how anti-Black violence is serviced and endorsed not just by a non-white victim, but also by his non-white accusers. There is no hint of anti-Semitism here. White Roman power is responsible for the extrajudicial killing of Jesus. Even so, Jesus is delivered into the hands of the white hate system by his own people: so Pilate can not only condemn one Black man, Jesus, but also sustain his contempt for Jesus' entire people for their barbaric behaviour. Matthew makes clear Pilate's public motives: "When Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves'" (Matt. 27:24).

### *Handwashing*

I recognize Pilate's whiteness and my own in the clever and shameless political act with which he concludes: handwashing. Pontius "my hands are clean" Pilate embodies white evasion of responsibility and culpability, which has allowed us to point the finger of blame at our victims, who we have portrayed as un-human, uncivilized, and unworthy. Thus, the racists blame Black people for crime, violence, and poverty; and our system "rewards" its

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37. See John 18: 28-40.

victims with more of the same.

Pontius Pilate is granted a moment where he can act for justice and, therefore naturally reveals himself to be on the side of the system. And in this is a type of whiteness that white people are uncomfortable to own, but people of colour know only too well. This is whiteness as an implacable violent, colonial, ruthless system that has deluded and styled itself as cultured and civilizing, that holds to itself the power to judge. It cannot help but keep choosing its own interests, even when it is apparently open to reform.

## Conclusion

Sindano is witness to over 400 years of white violence dressed up as progress, peace, and even healing. This was heralded in 2020 by the anniversary celebrations of the landing of the *Mayflower* at Cape Cod, Massachusetts, which exposed the bleak and racist heart of white Puritanism and Protestantism.

Boris Johnson as Prime Minister of the UK tweeted on 12 June 2020: “We cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend to have a different history. The statues in our cities and towns were put up by previous generations. They had different perspectives, different understandings of right and wrong. But those statues teach us about our past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history, and impoverish the education of generations to come.”<sup>38</sup>

In exactly the ways Johnson doesn't mean, white people do need to engage in telling history that does not exempt us from postcolonial critique, but rather owns the over 400 years of white violence our dominant cultural forms have perpetuated. This is a history that shows how white men and white male-dominant systems have continued to play the role of Pilate. This intervention into white culture will come through telling the truth, not lies, about our history. From this truth-telling, a consciousness of white history, sin and story, temptations, urges, and stratagems, can emerge. This might stop the stereotyping of people of colour into representations like Sindano

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38. Boris Johnson, Twitter, 12 June 2020, <https://twitter.com/borisjohnson/status/1271388182538526721?lang=en>

and stop the murdering of people like Breonna Taylor.<sup>39</sup> It might mitigate the weight of injustice and inequality heaped on communities and nations of colour. White people like me might look through Pontius Pilate at ourselves, and then perhaps find in his wife the means and model to decentre and recentre ourselves. Perhaps, with her, we may meaningfully back the calls for the emancipation of all those who are the victims of (white) savage systemic extrajudicial violence and participate in healing the harm and demons whiteness unleashed in the past and continues to unleash today.

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39. Breonna Taylor was a 26-year-old African American woman, “mistakenly” but fatally shot in her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, on 13 March 2020, when at least seven police officers forced entry into the apartment. The shooting of Taylor by white police officers, and the lack of charges for her death, led to numerous protests that added to those already taking place throughout the United States against police brutality and racism.

## Whiteness in the Age of COVID

### Words Matter! Image Feels! Discern the Times!

*Iva E. Carruthers*

Speech is more than words and whiteness is more than colour. Words have always mattered and images have always spoken. Whiteness is systemic, symbolic, sensory; it infects the mind, body, and spirit. And, thus, a discourse on whiteness in the age of COVID presumes all of the above. This discourse in the age of COVID is situated in a historical timeline that is also related to scientific and technological shifts.

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois argued: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War. . . the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. . . . No sooner had Northern armies touched Southern soil than this old question, newly guised, sprang from the earth,—What shall be done with Negroes?”<sup>1</sup>

Du Bois was referring to the racial segregation that existed after the official abolition of slavery in the United States. His observations were based on the idea of phenotype—how one looked—as a construct for race.

In 1979, as a professor of sociology and epidemiology, I started tracking the human genome project. At this time, a starting point in my analysis was the prophecy by W. E. B. Du Bois that the question of the 20th century was what he described as “the colour line,” to refer to the racial segregation that existed after the abolition of slavery in the United States.

What he might not have anticipated and predicted, but we have to confront, I wrote then, “is not that the question is still with us, but that the new racism is not merely a function of colour in a physical/phenotypic sense, i.e., how we look, but, racism in a biological, genetic sense, i.e., the DNA/

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1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

RNA crucible. Indeed, we have now moved into the era of the genome and genomic solutions to problems confronting humankind.”<sup>2</sup>

Fast forward to 2020. Racism’s iteration of the seeds of “whiteness and hate speech” now presents a unique confluence of conditions resulting from the transatlantic slave trade’s legacy of impoverishment and colonialism. These are especially ominous for people of African descent in the US and Africans on the African continent.

I am neither inclined nor competent to respond to this topic as an authority on whiteness. From my perspective, it appears both incredible and inhumane. Unlike some others, I opt out from debating the proponents of whiteness who would claim that it is a divinely appointed hegemonic and civilizing power in and over the wellbeing of the universe. However, I do feel compelled and competent to present a view from the bridge and speak prophetically on the socio-economic-political consequences, the spiritual and emotional trauma, and the collateral and existential damage that whiteness has had and is having upon people of African descent in the age that will be marked by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the years of the Trump presidency in the US. And this analysis implicates the harm “hegemonic whiteness” has on white identity, the souls of white folk, and humanity at large.

Having said that, I am inspired and emboldened by the words of womanist theologian, Rev. Dr Katie Cannon, who said, “Even when people call your truth a lie, tell it anyway.”<sup>3</sup>

“You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky,  
but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”  
—Luke 12:56

In the wake of 400 and more years of a dehumanizing white hegemonic culture that has not or cannot shed its identity or the worldview that people of African descent in particular, and people of colour more generally, do not belong as equals in community, the United States seems to have come to an

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2. Iva E. Carruthers, “The Evolution of Racism into the 21st Century,” in *African Presence in the Americas*, ed. Carlos Moore (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), 427.

3. T. Denise Anderson, “Even when they call your truth a lie, tell it anyway!” — Remembering Katie Cannon,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 10 August 2018, <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/08/even-when-they-call-your-truth-a-lie-tell-it-anyway-remembering-katie-cannon/>.

inflection point of reckoning with its past. The US is in an identity crisis such as it has never experienced before. In the midst of demographic shifts, whiteness in the US is dying and the death rattle is felt around the world. Centres of economic, religious, and cultural power are shifting. The death of whiteness is apparent—grounded in ontological and theological beliefs in an ordained exceptionalism; propped up by a myth of white supremacy that was incentivized by the Doctrine of Discovery, “a legal framework that justified European imperial ventures around the world, including the colonization of North America.”<sup>4</sup> It was foundational to a theological, financial, and political justification and movement of global white hegemony. Today, whiteness, as a movement, is at war with itself and with a God that it feels has abandoned it.

Nonetheless, there is hope! Death and transformation always coexist. The question before us is what cost must the world pay for the demise of whiteness? And for those opposing the transformation, the question will be how they deal with the legacy of having been a witness, and perhaps a remnant?

## **Evolving Fascism and the Threat of Genocide**

In 2018, the former US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, warned against the evolving culture of fascism in the United States: “I believe that Fascism and Fascist policies pose a more virulent threat to international freedom, prosperity, and peace than at any time since World War II. . . . Trump is the first anti-democratic president in modern U.S. history. . . . He flaunts his disdain for democratic institutions, the ideals of equality and social justice, civil discourse, civic virtues, and America itself.”<sup>5</sup>

Secretary Albright’s specific observation and warning foregrounds what we also know about the evolution of a nation’s spiralling into the abyss of genocide. Looking back to the Shoah, James Waller notes in his book, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, how it was “ordinary” people who took part in the Nazi crimes: “Rank and file killers, the soldiers, police, militia (paramilitary) and civilians at the bottom of the hierarchy . . . personally carried out the millions of executions. These people were so ordinary that, with few exceptions, they were readily absorbed into civil society after the killings and peacefully lived out their otherwise

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4. See “Doctrine of Discovery,” United Church of Canada website, <https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/reconciliation-and-indigenous-justice/doctrine-discovery>.

5. Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: Harper, 2018), 245–46.

unremarkable lives—attesting to the unsettling reality that genocide overwhelms justice.”<sup>6</sup>

In the post-Second World War era, the development of the United Nations and evolution of principles of national sovereignty and human rights resulted in multiple conventions to which nation states agreed to and/or engaged in.

Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” including “(a) Killing members of the group,” and “(b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group.”<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after the Second World War, concern was expressed that African Americans in the United States were facing the types of oppression that ultimately warranted a charge of genocide.

In 1946, the National Negro Congress, under the leadership of Max Yergen and John Davis, submitted *A Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America*.<sup>8</sup> The following year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, under the leadership of Walter White and Roy Wilkins, submitted *An Appeal to the World*.<sup>9</sup> In 1951, under the leadership of William Patterson, the Civil Rights Council submitted *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*.<sup>10</sup>

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6. James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16.

7. UN General Assembly, Resolution 260 A (III), Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Article 2 (December 1948), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-prevention-and-punishment-crime-genocide>.

8. National Negro Congress, *A Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America*, approved at the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the National Negro Congress, Detroit, Michigan, 1946.

9. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress*, ed. W. E. B. Du Bois (New York: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1947).

10. Civil Rights Congress, *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*, ed. William Patterson (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951).

In the current contextual space, multiple significant international conventions come into play if for no other reason than to establish the norms of civility and human dignity to which nations are to be held. From my perspective, in this current environment, it behoves us to monitor the directions the United States is taking relative to UN human rights conventions. This includes the implications of rights in the context of human genetic data.

## **COVID-19 and Structural Violence Against Black People**

In the age of the COVID-19 global pandemic, its disparate consequences, and its toll upon people of African descent, US President Trump's use of hate speech, coded language, and intentional mishandling of national public health policy informed and accentuated the situational analysis and hermeneutic of suspicion around genocide.

As of May 2022, the US had surpassed 83 million coronavirus cases and remained at the top of the global chart. Deaths due to COVID in the US have surpassed 1 million, accounting for over 16 percent of the deaths worldwide.<sup>11</sup>

The impact that COVID-19 has had on African American and Hispanic populations is staggering. For example, in Michigan in early summer 2020, Blacks made up 14 percent of the population, but accounted for 33 percent of the deaths; in Louisiana, Blacks made up 32 percent of the population, but accounted for 71 percent of all deaths;<sup>12</sup> and in Mississippi, Blacks made up 38 percent of the population, but accounted for 71 percent of all deaths.<sup>13</sup> This reflects underlying structural inequalities and lays bare the interlocking systems of racism and marginalization that originate in the genocide of Native American peoples and the enslavement of African peoples. These constitute the foundation upon which the nation was built.

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11. "Tracking U.S. Covid-19 Cases, Deaths and Other Metrics by State," Washington Post, 23 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/>; "Tracking Covid-19's Global Spread," CNN Health, 23 May 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/health/coronavirus-maps-and-cases/>.

12. Clyde W. Yancy, "COVID-19 and African Americans," *JAMA*, 323:19 (2020), 1891–92, doi:10.1001/jama.2020.6548, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2764789>.

13. Nick Judin and Ashton Pittman, "Pandemic Timeline: COVID-19 in Mississippi," *Mississippi Free Press*, no date, <https://www.mississippifreepress.org/9913/mississippi-covid-19-timeline>.

While the virus itself does not discriminate, its propagation within a society steeped in structural racism—and the reckless and uncoordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Trump administration—led to avoidable deaths. It wreaked havoc on Black communities. COVID-19 exposed the underbelly of systems of racism, economic greed, and denial of basic human rights to so many. It laid bare the warped values, the sinister and even demonic plots, that justified and rationed God’s humanity in favour of the interests of a few, according to the principle that property trumps people.

National rhetoric, specific public policies around testing and distribution of resources, the refusal to promote a coordinated national strategy, the politicization and weaponization of data, and actual threats targeting certain communities were designed to perpetrate differential impact as well as to confuse the public. The policies and speech served to cause unnecessary deaths, suppress the vote, and foment racial animus.

Though a humanitarian crisis of epic proportion, COVID-19 is also proving to be an opportunity for wealth creation of epic proportion. Oxfam found that “17 of the top 25 most profitable US corporations, including Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, Facebook, Pfizer and Visa, were expected to make almost 85bn [in US dollars] more profit in 2020 compared to previous years—with the lion’s share going to the most privileged, including many of the world’s billionaires.”<sup>14</sup> The report goes on to say that “the wealth of the 25 richest billionaires has increased by a staggering 255bn [US] between mid-March and late-May 2020. In the USA alone, billionaires . . . have seen their net worth increase by 792bn.” Further, Oxfam found that “32 pandemic profit makers are expected to distribute 88 percent of their excess profits to shareholders who predominantly belong to higher-income groups.”<sup>15</sup>

The intersection of whiteness as a pillar of hegemonic systems of global economies and the exponential growth of wealth disparity will only become stronger in the post COVID-19 era unless we better discern the signs of the time.

In 1994, in the midst of HIV/AIDS—25 years before the onset of COVID-19—Pulitzer prize winning epidemiologist Laurie Garrett warned that “all ‘new’ diseases must first be noticed by someone who has the insight and courage to sound an alarm and set in motion a thorough investigation.

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14. Oxfam International, “Power, Profits and the Pandemic,” briefing paper (9 September 2020), 20, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/power-profits-and-pandemic>.

15. Oxfam International, “Power, Profits and the Pandemic,” 22–22.

And once in place, investigations are best conducted in an atmosphere of candor and collaboration, rather than the secrecy, backbiting, rivalry, and mutual contempt that had unfortunately characterized many other scientific pursuits of emerging microbes.”<sup>16</sup>

Given the manipulation, misinformation, and destabilization of confidence in a national public health system, it is no wonder that the director of the National Center for Bioethics at Tuskegee University would sound the alarm: “Collecting racial and ethnic data on testing, infection, morbidity, hospitalization, and mortality rates associated with COVID-19 is essential; not collecting and sharing such data is racist, by design. . . . Where do we go from here? Surely, not to trust those who have not been trustworthy. We say to you: ‘Prove yourself trustworthy, before you ask for trust!’”<sup>17</sup>

It is important to underscore that many knowledge creators are acutely aware of the power of new technologies to be used both in unintended and intentionally harmful ways, threatening communities and/or spreading global disasters. A group of scientists, including Nobel laureates and bioethicists, released an article warning of germline modification or gene-editing techniques that have the potential to modify the next generation’s genomes. They argue that this industry of human germline genetic engineering must not become dominated by privatized corporate interests without informed public guidelines.<sup>18</sup>

No wonder that in the current US context of a national response to COVID-19, the COVID-19 research collaboration of epidemiologist Sharrelle Barber and colleagues concluded: “By any measure, the federal government has been reckless, failing to provide a coordinated response to the forewarned pandemic, including allowing severe inadequacies in testing and surveillance . . . [T]he failure to test and quickly isolate people with COVID-19 and lack of universal socio-demographic surveillance data means that COVID-19 outbreaks can grow unchecked in marginalized communities of color.”<sup>19</sup>

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16. Laurie Garrett, *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994), 548.

17. Ronald Braithwaite and Rueben Warren, “The African American Petri Dish,” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 31: 2 (May 2020), 498, 500.

18. John Bohannon, “Biologists Devise Invasion Plan for Mutations,” 20 March 2015, 1300.

19. Zinzi Bailey et al., “Racism in the Time of COVID-19,” *Interdisciplinary Association for Population Health Sciences*, 9 April 2020, para. 6, <https://iaphs.org/racism-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>.

And this is where another UN convention is relevant to the global competition to develop a vaccine and mitigating therapies, as well as to the debate on the origins of the disease. I have no doubt that we must use our intellectual prowess, organizational authority, and moral agency to advocate that the US adhere to principles of the International Declaration on Human Genetic Data. The preamble of the declaration states: “Recognizing that human genetic data . . . can be predictive of genetic predispositions concerning individuals and that the power of predictability can be stronger than assessed at the time of deriving the data; they may have a significant impact on the family, including offspring, extending over generations, and in some instances on the whole group.”<sup>20</sup>

The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights states that “independent, multidisciplinary and pluralist ethics committees should be established, promoted and supported at the appropriate level in order to: (a) assess the relevant ethical, legal, scientific and social issues related to research projects involving human beings; (b) provide advice on ethical problems in clinical settings; (c) assess scientific and technological developments, formulate recommendations and contribute to the preparation of guidelines on issues within the scope of this Declaration; (d) foster debate, education and public awareness of, and engagement in, bioethics.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Dr Ahmed Reid, then chair of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent: “Despite robust responses, States have not recognized the specific health risks faced by people of African descent or how racial discrimination and implicit bias and racial stereotypes may pervade policy.”<sup>22</sup> To be sure, this silent pandemic is taking its toll and will continue to disproportionately affect people of African descent; and what happens in the United States can matter for the rest of the world. While public policy experts and health professionals are making consequential decisions on how

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20. UNESCO General Conference, International Declaration on Human Genetic Data, Article 6 (16 October 2003), [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=17720&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17720&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

21. UNESCO General Conference, Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, Article 19 (19 October 2005), <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/universal-declaration-bioethics-and-human-rights>.

22. UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Racial Equity and Equality Must Guide State Action in COVID-19 Response, Say UN Experts,” press release, United Nations, 6 April 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25776&LangID=E>.

to mitigate and treat the pandemic, implicit and explicit methodologies of triage and resource deployment are being utilized.

## **Police Violence Against Black People**

If COVID-19 was not enough, add to that the increased inhumane state-sanctioned police violence against Black people in the US and you certainly must be on guard against the slow and methodical creep of an environment of silent neo-eugenics and blatant dehumanizing killings of African Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement became global because of the absolute abandonment of even the pretence of providing equal protection under the law in the US. The United States showed the world the deep rooted systemic and transgenerational racism people of African descent have had to endure. Clearly, during this conflated period of COVID-19 and police violence toward Black people, the unresolved racial oppression born out of the enslavement of Black people in America has been exposed. To be sure, this has also given rise to protests and momentum to the demand of “cease and desist” as well as a demand for reparations.

In this period, several documents supported by civil society, represented by NGOs from around the world, evidence the confluence of these acts of violence and trauma upon certain populations and call into question US policies.

In June 2020, family members of victims of police killings and civil society organizations from around the world issued an open letter to members of the UN Human Rights Council “to urgently convene a Special Session on the situation of human rights in the United States in order to respond to the unfolding grave human rights crisis borne out of the repression of nationwide protests.” The letter stated that “our greatest concern is that the violence and counter-violence are diverting the gaze of the global community away from the pain being expressed by a nation in mourning over the callous manner of the 8 minutes and 46 seconds that ended George Floyd’s life, while a group of police stood and watched, about the death of more than 100,000 souls from the coronavirus—disproportionally killing Black, Brown, and Indigenous Peoples—and about how injustice never ends and equality never comes.”<sup>23</sup>

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23. OMCT World Organization Against Torture, “Open Letter to UN Human Rights Council to Convene a Special Session on Police Violence in the USA, 8 June 2020, paras. 1, 4, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/open-letter-to-un-human-rights-council-to-convene-a-special-session-on-police-violence-in-the-usa-1>. Note that the time that former officer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck was later corrected to 9 minutes and 29 seconds.

## Demographic Change

Nearly 50 years ago, President Richard Nixon's populist nationalism was embodied in his declaration, as recorded in the diary of his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, that "the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to."<sup>24</sup> This sentiment ushered in the period of mass incarceration in the US. Since 1970, the prison population in the US has grown 500 percent. Black and brown people have been the chief victims of this system. As the American Civil Liberties Union notes: "one out of every three Black boys born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can one of every six Latino boys—compared to one of every 17 white boys."<sup>25</sup>

What is also apparent is that there was a concomitant concern around the "browning" of America—the result of demographic shifts in the US. B. F. Skinner wrote that these shifts were leading to a sense that old concepts of "democracy were obsolete and there was an overriding imperative to move to a genetic meritocracy."<sup>26</sup> In the words of neoconservative commentator and demographer Ben Wattenberg, the "survival of a white nation" required sustaining western values at any cost.<sup>27</sup> The Canadian diplomat Escott Reid, who helped form the UN, commented that the new world order would not be demarcated by capitalism and communism, but rather the gulf "between the rich northern whites and colored southern poor."<sup>28</sup>

In 2010, for the first time in the nation's history, more of the children younger than one-year-old (50.4 percent) were born to people of colour than to white parents.<sup>29</sup> The way in which, under the Trump administration the

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24. H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 53.

25. "What's at Stake," Mass Incarceration, American Civil Liberties Union, accessed 24 May 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>.

26. B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1971), 133–34.

27. Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Birth Dearth: What Happens When People in Free Countries Don't Have Enough Babies?* (New York: Pharos Books, 1989), 7, 48.

28. Escott Reid, *Strengthening the World Bank*, (Chicago: Adlai Stevenson Institute, 1973), 30.

29. Carol Morello and Ted Mellnik, "Census: Minority Babies Are Now Majority in United States," *Washington Post*, 17 May 2012, para. 2, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/census-minority-babies-are-now-majority-in-united-states/2012/05/16/gIQA1WY8UU\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/census-minority-babies-are-now-majority-in-united-states/2012/05/16/gIQA1WY8UU_story.html).

US responded, and still continues to respond to the convergence of historical white supremacy and racism, national identity, and immigration control has been revelatory.

In 2018, it was reported that while 43 percent of millennials were non-white, by 2020, the majority of all children would be a race other than non-Hispanic white and that within the coming 10 years, the positive net population growth in the US would be determined by its immigration growth rather than its natural births, with Asians and not Hispanics being the largest immigrant group.<sup>30</sup>

## **Global Afrophobia**

We also need to note that COVID-19 has emerged during a global era of national and global Afrophobia that is a culmination of this 50-year-period of incubating a new system of white supremacy and racism.

In 2017, the World Council of Churches began convening global meetings on the issue of the growing global Afrophobia and the specific moral challenges it poses for communities of faith. Afrophobia can now be measured by brain waves reflecting implicit bias,<sup>31</sup> racialized beliefs—and by extension, racialized actions, such as feelings of threat or security as operationalized in interracial/cultural transactions and human engagements. In this era of heightened global Afrophobia and its vicious deadly manifestations, bioethics and theo-ethics are profoundly implicated.

In the US, hate speech and acts of whiteness include African nations being referred to by then President Donald Trump as “shithole nations.”<sup>32</sup> Black people have been called thugs, and Hispanics have been referred to as vermin.<sup>33</sup> Families at the border seeking asylum have become victims of

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30. Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and David M. Armstrong, “Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060,” March 2018, revised February 2020, US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf>.

31. Sara Gorman and Jack M. Gorman, “Can Brain Imaging Teach Us Anything about Racism,” *Psychology Today*, 6 September 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/denying-the-grave/201709/can-brain-imaging-teach-us-anything-about-racism>.

32. Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt, and Frank Thorp V, “Trump Referred to Haiti and African Nations as ‘Shithole’ Countries,” *NBC News*, 11 January 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>.

33. Maria Hinojosa, “Hate Crimes Against Latinos Increase In California,” 15 July 2018, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/15/629212976/hate-crimes-against-latinos-increase-in-california>.

forced separation, with children, separated from their parents, ending up in detention cages. There is Islamophobia and proposed legislative quota and indiscriminate bans against entry of Muslim people into the US. Black people are being shot in the back by police officers, and there has been a rise on the streets of vigilantes and provocateurs of race war. The list goes on and on, including unprecedented patterns of voter suppression targeted at Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanic eligible voters.

And so, although the UN has declared 2015 to 2024 to be the International Decade for People of African Descent, people of African descent in the US are living, breathing, sitting, and standing during a period of unabashed abandonment of principles of democracy. The privileging of white domination and hegemony, racism, and unbridled capitalism has led to a global increase in Afrophobia that includes the weaponization of technology and even basic natural resources such as water.

We cannot afford to allow our epitaphs to read, “They ignored the signs and in their isolation forgot who they were, and this is what happened.”

People of African descent need to interrogate if and how evolving biogenetic and pharmaceutical research is undergirded by assumptions of a racialized hierarchy of human value, in which some people are considered to be more expendable or worthy than others. In this genomic age of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question becomes how to ensure that it is the culture of an “ubuntu” paradigm and not that of a “hierarchy of human value,”<sup>34</sup>—a white racial hegemonic patriarchal paradigm—that underlies the ethics of future biogenetic inquiry and research.

Almost six decades after the March on Washington in 1963, it behoves Black people to remain vigilant and not ignore the signs of what is afoot in the nation. It is a call to all people, and certainly to those who claim to be Christian, to look around and make a decision as to whose agenda they will serve, by their voice and action, or by their silence and inaction.

## Conclusion

The intersection of racism, national populism, and immigration is real and cannot be ignored. Instead of a commitment to the principles of a genuine democracy, there is on the part of many a commitment to whiteness that

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34. National Collaborative for Health Equity, “Dr. Gail Christopher Addresses Helsinki Commission,” 22 July 2019, para. 1, <https://www.nationalcollaborative.org/dr-gail-christopher-addresses-helsinki-commission>.

will send the US spiralling downward. The narratives used to uphold this commitment to whiteness, nationally and globally, are those of populist nationalism, securitization, and national security. These constructs and the commitment to “whiteness”—white norms, white values, white Christian heritage, white people, and white power—frame the irrational response of Afrophobia. Prioritizing “securitization” against pluralism, multiculturalism, and interfaith and cultural engagement is the sign of a failed race relations system and immigration system that must be corrected.

My grandmother taught me it is better to not know the answers to the right questions than know the answers to the wrong ones. It is time to dismantle the system of whiteness at its roots.

As we journey into the future, it is time to ask some different questions and make some different protestations. Yes, “Ain’t I a woman?” “Yes, I am a man!” “Yes, Black Lives Matter!”

To those who represent a culture of dominance built upon so-called Christian democracy, with all its hate speech and whiteness, I offer a heuristic paradigm shift of conversation that begins with one question: Where is your humanity? In conversations I have daily with younger African American faith leaders, new questions emerge out of a sense of both despair and hope: Why are you who epitomize hate speech and violence so afraid of violence? How does patriotism become a cover for evil? Why can’t you make space for self-interrogation? When do allies show they can really cross over to the side of the disinherited? Can you imagine what it is like to never really rest from the whiteness? And, of course, we all must ask: When will the Church stand up and be counted on the side of God’s righteousness and justice, reparations, and repairing of the breach?

I close with a message from a millennial African American pastor in the United States:

Jeremiah exclaimed the truth is, “They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly [carelessly], Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace.” To be Black in America is to know violence. To be Brown in America is to know death. To be a Negro in America is to know propaganda and the illusion of what has never been. Therefore, one could argue the chaotic state of our human condition riddled with a global health pandemic, death and violence, economic uncertainty, and unnecessary suffering still leaves us with great potential to see the

impressive handiwork of Jehovah through the intuitive workings of melanin hued creation amid supremacy.

Is it possible or plausible to say that peace in this nation state won't occur until the sword is rightly applied and its blade readily sharpened by all who decry justice in the name of freedom? A freedom not of exclusivity, but one of divine inclusivity where all of God's children abide, attain, experience and rest in life and death within the Holy Spirit's fullness.<sup>35</sup>

You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

—Luke 12:56

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35. Jamar A. Boyd, II, "Arise in Righteous Indignation," Medium, 21 September 2000, <https://boydii-j.medium.com/arise-in-righteous-indignation-4416181a8f91>.

# From Being Black with Sin into Pure Whiteness: Toward a Theological Appraisal of Whiteness in Africa

Tinyiko Maluleke and Hlengani Mathebula

## Whiteness Is Much More than Theory

Raka Shome's working definition of *whiteness* as a "power laden discursive formation that privileges, secures, and normalizes the cultural space of the white Western subject" is a useful one.<sup>1</sup> But we must not make the mistake of reducing whiteness and racial hatred to discursive academic theory or sets of theories. The founding institutions of whiteness are colonialism and slavery. The relationship between whiteness and colonialism is mutually fulfilling and mutually-reinforcing: colonialism breeds whiteness, while whiteness perpetuates colonialisms of many types, in different ways.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2008, what was described as the "first" whiteness studies conference in South Africa was held at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. The title of the conference was "Interrogating Whiteness: Literary Representations of 'Race' in Africa." Although interdisciplinary in both content and intent, English literature and literary studies dominated. Care must be taken not to mistake this conference for the very first whiteness studies conference in the world. Indeed, by the time whiteness studies came to South Africa, it was long established as an area of research, advocacy, and intervention elsewhere in the world. One could in fact argue that, to the extent that the white subject was at their centre, all the humanities and social science disciplines have been reflections of various shades and emphases of whiteness. Nor are the so-called "hard science" subjects completely exempt from racism and whiteness.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Raka Shome, "Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections," in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (London: Thousand Oaks, 1999), 108.

2. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1993); also Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (London: Currey, 2008).

3. See Christa Kuljian, *Darwin's Lhunch. Science, Race and the Search for Human Origins* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2016).

Such has been the pervasiveness and normativeness of whiteness that in the vast majority of humanities and social science disciplines, it has not even been necessary to deliberately name “whiteness,” let alone to reflect on it consciously. Subjects such as anthropology, psychology, theology, and history are among a variety of post-school subjects offered in universities across the world, mainly from a whiteness point of view, but seldom acknowledged as such. One hardly ever finds a module on white psychology, the anthropology of whiteness, white theology, or the history of white people in Australia or North America. Yet we all know that, invariably, the white subject tends to be the norm in all these and many more subjects. By neither owning up to nor foregrounding white normativity, these subjects shield whiteness from scrutiny. In many of these subjects, white is normative because it presents itself as the way things have always been, the way they are, and the way they will always be. So instead of presenting the history of white people in North America, whiteness will present it as the history of North America. Similarly, the history of white people in Australia is often presented as the history of Australia.

It has fallen to a few counter-hegemonic pedagogues to “out” the problem of whiteness. Among these should be counted Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate for literature, who wrote novels from the place and space of African Americanism; Paulo Freire, who after unmasking the fact that mainstream education was in fact the pedagogy of the oppressor, went on to produce his own and now famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*;<sup>4</sup> Walter Rodney who took on the discipline of development studies in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*,<sup>5</sup> and many others whose works are invoked in the rest of this chapter.

## Whiteness in Colonialism

Writing about whiteness and hate speech in relation to the whole of Africa—the second largest continent in the world; a continent comprising 1.4 billion people living in 54 countries—is nearly impossible. As Kwame Appiah once noted, if Africa were a village, it would be one with many mansions.<sup>6</sup> By this he meant Africa is a continent of many countries, many peoples, many cultures, and many experiences.

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4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1968).

5. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle L’ouverture, 1972).

6. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Although most African countries experienced colonialism of one sort or the other, African peoples do not have an even and homogenous experience of colonialism. While similar in terms of the fundamental objectives of conquest, the Portuguese,<sup>7</sup> German,<sup>8</sup> Belgian,<sup>9</sup> Dutch,<sup>10</sup> French,<sup>11</sup> and English<sup>12</sup> deployed various forms of colonialism. The result was that various forms of colonialism were experienced and responded to in different ways in different African contexts.

There are people who lived in places so far away from the colonial centres of influence; their experience of colonialism was delayed and not as ferocious as in the centres. This was part of Kwame Appiah's argument. However, we would suggest that such was the power of colonialism and its foster child, modernity, that no country, city, or village was left untouched by it, in tangible or intangible ways.

## **Whiteness in the Myth of "Pristine" Africa**

The myth of pristine African villages—set in breathtaking landscapes with rolling hills and swollen rivers, villages built on unpolluted, prehistoric virgin lands which had allegedly not been touched by colonization, modernity, or “civilization”—is a myth we must constantly be on guard against. Such a myth is perpetuated by films such as *The Gods must be Crazy*,<sup>13</sup> and authors such as Karen Blixen and Joseph Conrad.<sup>14</sup> This myth was also used in the recruitment of both colonial settlers and missionaries. Sometimes the myth of pristine Africa took the form of the peddling of stories about a mythical African country of abundance which was ruled by a Christian king called Prester John.<sup>15</sup>

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7. Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Mozambique's Samora Machel: A Life Cut Short* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2020).

8. David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

9. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan, 2012).

10. Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948).

11. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1961).

12. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1902).

13. *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, written and directed by Jamie Ulys (C.A.T. Films, 1980).

14. Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (London: Random House, 1937); Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

15. Martin Meredith, *The Fortunes of Africa: A 5000-Year History of Wealth, Greed, and Endeavour* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2014), 88.

In many such myths, the character of the landscape, the hill, the river, and the butterflies are better developed than the characters of the “new caught sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child,”<sup>16</sup> who are thrown in as appendages to the storyline. This real storyline is the story of whiteness, its triumphant march across the world to discover “unknown” places and peoples, to “civilize” both places and people, to appropriate, to subjugate, and to remake everything and everyone in the image of whiteness. It is a storyline often couched in the language of the “white man’s burden,”<sup>17</sup> and in the European missionary’s “moral duty to spread the gospel.”<sup>18</sup> But, in reality, this is nothing but whiteness at work.

The attempts to return Africa to its mythical and idyllic past, just like the quest to salvage what is left of that romantically-imagined past—often without regard to the needs of present-day Africans—is as vicious as open racism, if not more so. In a way, the search for a pristine Africa is also a search for pre-industrial Europe, a search for a paradise lost. The problem is that the paradise that had been “discovered” had inhabitants who would have to make way for the conquering colonialist.

On one level, the search for a pristine Africa by the very people who were actively participating in the destruction of the very pristine Africa they claimed to love, appears to be a cruel joke. The search for an Africa as it once was, before it was contaminated by human presence, especially humans of the African type, is not only a function of other unseemly motivations but a form of violence. It is ultimately a search for an Africa empty of human beings, an *a priori* or *post facto* excuse for the dehumanization and brutalization of the humans found already in the occupation of these lands. This way, a new history could be written on the African *tabula rasa*. The Africans encountered in the process were only “the shackled form of a conquered monster . . . monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.”<sup>19</sup>

16. Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden,” in *Modern History Sourcebook* (Fordham University, 1899), accessed 29 July 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/Kipling.asp>.

17. Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden.”

18. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Racism *en Route*: An African Perspective,” *The Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 1 (January 2020), 25.

19. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 37.

The search for an unspoiled Africa was also an exercise in the laundering of white European consciences in light of the violence with which the Africans were (being) colonized in the search for a pristine Africa. In their quest for superiority, the colonizers projected inferiority and subhuman status to Africans. In short, there was nothing pristine about the way European settlers went about searching for the mythical pristine Africa.

## **Missionaries and Mission Stations as Incubators of Whiteness**

Some missionaries were also caught up in the search either for a pristine and “authentic” Africa, or for its “archiving” or “restoration.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, nowhere was whiteness working more efficiently and more anonymously than in the seemingly benevolent missionary enterprise in Africa. So efficient and so anonymous was it that some of the missionary culprits appeared to be wilfully unaware of the harm they were doing. While a missionary such as Henri-Alexander Junod—who worked both in Mozambique and in South Africa—sought to save and preserve both “butterflies and barbarians” in Africa,<sup>21</sup> he does not seem to have done much to put a halt to the processes in the colonial and modernist projects that were exterminating both butterfly species he wished to preserve and annihilating the many “heathen barbarians” whom he wished to save from damnation.

The mission outpost and the mission station must therefore be allowed to take their place among the chief incubators and purveyors of whiteness in Africa.<sup>22</sup> The colonial idea of a “dark continent” was translated by many missionaries to include the “darkness” of lack of faith in Christ, as well as the lack of education and civilization. Thus, the idea of darkness was inclusive of all culture, faith, and knowledge not European in origins or ambition. Indeed, the most derogatory word used to refer to Black South Africans, namely, Kaffir—a word reserved for non-believers in Islam—was born in religious rather than political circles. But in South Africa, it became a swear word for all Black people, so much so that the democratic South African government has passed laws to prohibit the usage of the term.

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20. Henri Alexander Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, vols 1 and 2 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1927).

21. Patrick Harries, *Butterflies and Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

22. Leon de Kock, “The Call of the Wild: Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa,” *English in Africa* 37, no. 1 (May 2010): 15–39.

Whereas the colonialists distinguished between themselves and Africans using many unflattering terms, missionaries added other layers of discrimination among Africans themselves. The missionaries divided the people into those who lived in mission stations and those who lived in the *kraals*, the wild and far-flung villages that surrounded the mission station. Notions of lightness and darkness found practical and geographical expression in relation to the geographical location of the mission station, as opposed to the geographical location of “heathen,” “uncivilized,” and still unevangelized villages. Outlying villages were considered places of “darkness” while the mission station was the place of “light”. Those who lived in mission stations were given special names that spoke to their enlightened and privileged positions. They were called *Amagqoboka* (in isiXhosa), *Majagani* (in Xitsonga), and *Amakholwa* (in iSizulu). Imagine what havoc these divisions would play among the pupils in the mission school as they too would carry the stigma determined by the proximity of the parents to the mission station. The Majagani were a special class of people. In the secular sphere, the same people were referred to as the elites, the educated, the assimilated (*assimilado* in Portuguese colonies) and the evolved (*les évolués* in French colonies). These novel stratifications of African societies created by colonialists and missionaries were crosscutting. They were the subject of several fiction and non-fiction works by African writers.<sup>23</sup> In short, the elite, converted, and educated Africans either embraced whiteness or had it foisted upon them. In any case, they became representatives of whiteness, willy-nilly. And this was not the only form of social stratification wrought by missionaries. Through evangelization strategies that focused on African linguistic groups, missionaries also contributed to the flowering if not the creation of ethnicity.<sup>24</sup> As each group evangelized by the missionaries acquired its own Bible and other basic texts such as dictionaries, their sense of ethnicity was enhanced, and myths of prehistoric ethnic purity and unity were strengthened. The creation of these literate linguistic communities and the reduction of their languages into writing—translating the “word of God” into those languages—was yet another way of preserving the “pristine” and “original” Africa. Indeed, some scholars like Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako would argue that the very reduction of African languages into writing was a way to give those language communities a fighting chance in an

23. For fiction, see Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *The River Between* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1965); for nonfiction, see Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

24. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Mission, Ethnicity and Homeland—The Case of the EPCSA,” *Missionalia* 21, no. 3 (January 1993): 236-52.

unfolding and confusing modern world in which, according to some forms of racist social Darwinism, only the fittest would survive.<sup>25</sup>

## The Logic of Whiteness

To understand the logic behind the deeds of those colonialists and missionaries who went about searching, preserving, or restoring the “pristine” Africa, we must pause to briefly consider the theory of social Darwinism, which was built on a warped version of Darwin’s notion of the “survival of the fittest.” According to social Darwinists, the supposed pristine Africa—both in terms of the human being and the environment—was disappearing, because, faced with the superior European civilization, Africans and their environment were unfit for survival and therefore destined for ultimate extinction. The best that could be done for the Africans who were quite literally dying off, was to archive a few of them in their natural habitat. In the European greed for land, the hatred of Africans, and the disregard for their dignity, it did not once occur to the missionaries and other Social Darwinists to attack the root of the problem, which was whiteness.

All over the continent, colonialism has left its footprints, visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, stinking and odourless. Such has been the trauma of it all, that the effects of colonialism have been played out in tremors and spasms of the most horrific post-colonial violence. Consider, among other situations, the Rwandan genocide of 1994,<sup>26</sup> and the mayhem that Charles Taylor, Idi Amin, and Mobutu Sese Seko wrought in Liberia, Uganda, and Zaire respectively,<sup>27</sup> as well as the seemingly never-ending wars in present-day Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>28</sup> Often implicated in many of the recurrent and ongoing conflicts in Africa are the former colonial masters or their proxies, as was the case in Angola and Mozambique, where apartheid South Africa stepped in to prop up the rebel militias, UNITA and RENAMO respectively. The US Central Intelligence Agency was deeply implicated in the assassination of the first prime minister of the Democratic

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25. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

26. Kā Mana, *Théologie Africaine pour Temps de Crise: Christianisme et Reconstruction de l'Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1993).

27. For more on Mobutu Sese Seko, see the documentary film *Mobutu Roi Du Zaïre*, directed by Thierry Michel (Brussels: Les Films de la Passerelle, 1999).

28. Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and The Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

Republic of the Congo, and in his swift replacement by Mobutu Sese Seko, who immediately renamed the country Zaire.<sup>29</sup> The Great Lakes region has never known complete peace since then.<sup>30</sup>

## The Psychological and Spiritual Toll of Whiteness

The key moment in colonialism goes back to the period roughly between 1880 and 1915, when most of Africa was colonized. Colonization took the forms of military conquest, dispossession, exploitation, deracination, humiliation, and even attempts to exterminate some indigenous populations. Liberia and Ethiopia were the two countries that escaped direct European colonization; yet even though they were not colonized in the classical sense of the word, they have not entirely escaped the traumatic symptoms and aftereffects of colonialism.

Many times, the violence of colonialism reached levels that defied description.<sup>31</sup> It is impossible to find words to describe adequately the horror of the “rubber killings” that were carried out in the Congo at the pleasure and instruction of King Leopold of Belgium, where workers who refused to participate in rubber collection were brutally killed and entire villages destroyed.<sup>32</sup> Nor has anyone found the prose and the appropriate narrative style with which to capture the atrocities committed by Germany in its genocidal quest to wipe out the Nama and the Herero people in what was then German South West Africa, and today is Namibia.<sup>33</sup>

We have not really come to terms with the total number of lives lost during South Africa’s hundred-year-long frontier wars as the locals attempted to ward off the European settlers. Nor have we truly fathomed the massacres and various atrocities of the apartheid state.<sup>34</sup> Even if we were to find the words, the prose, and the narrative to write it all up, we would not have even begun to speak of the cultural, psychological, and spiritual toll of colonialism.

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29. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Patrice Lumumba* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2014).

30. Emmanuel Katongole, *Who are My People: Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

31. J. B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989)

32. See Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*.

33. See Olusoga and Erichsen, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust*.

34. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Sharpeville and the Map of our Bloody Country,” *News24*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.news24.com/news24/Columnists/GuestColumn/tinyiko-maluleke-sharpeville-and-the-map-of-our-bloody-country-20210327>.

Toward the end of his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon puts on his psychiatrist hat and shares a few illustrative cases of what he calls colonial mental disorders, caused by the violence of colonization:

In the period of colonization when it is not contested by armed resistance, when the sum total of harmful nervous stimuli oversteps a certain threshold, the defensive attitudes of the natives give way, and they then find themselves crowding the mental hospitals. There is thus during this calm period of successful colonization a regular and important mental pathology which is the direct product of oppression. Today the war of national liberation which has been carried out by the Algerian people for the last seven years has become a favorable breeding-ground for mental disorders.<sup>35</sup>

Among other things, Fanon lists the following effects of torture and other forms of colonial violence: sexual impotence, “homicidal impulses,” depression, psychosis, delirium, and suicidal conduct. But one frequent consequence of colonial violence is the engendering of yet more violence. This was the fear that many anti-apartheid activists harboured as they wondered if the violence of apartheid would not beget more violence. From Alan Paton to Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu,<sup>36</sup> they all feared that unless the apartheid state changed its ways, the country could explode into more violence. Again and again, Desmond Tutu pointed out that the apartheid system wrongfully elevated biological irrelevancies such as skin colour to the most important trait about human beings. Tutu has always argued that, on the contrary, it is the stamp of being made in the image of God that makes all human beings special.

## **Towards a Theological Response to Whiteness**

Understandably, the sharpest and most articulate theological responses to whiteness, namely, Black and African theologies, have come from its victims.<sup>37</sup> These theologies emerged out of the practices of resistance and justice-seeking among the earliest Black churches, both on the continent and

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35. Fanon, *The Wretched*, 200–50, at 201.

36. See Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country*; Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London, Abacus, 1993); Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution*, ed. John Allen (New York: Bantam Books, 1994).

37. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Why I am not a Public Theologian,” *The Ecumenical Review* 73, no. 2 (April 2021): 297–315.

in the diaspora.<sup>38</sup> They also derive their inspiration in the pre-colonial search for divinity and for meaning in Africa.

Initially these theologies were undertaken anonymously and without many of the contemporary labels that have come to define them. At the heart of many of these theologies is an insistence on the humanity of African people and their affinity with God. In an earlier work, we suggested that by 1997, formal and written African theology had been in existence for 50 years.<sup>39</sup> It is now about 75 years since written and self-conscious African theology emerged. However, this estimation should not be taken literally, since written and explicit African theology lags unwritten and lived African theologies by centuries.

In order to deal with the deadly effects of whiteness, Black and African theologies wield a variety of weapons and invoke a variety of themes and issues. These include *decoloniality* as an “epistemic response of the subalterns to the Eurocentric-US hegemonic project, be it in theology, in politics, or in social relations and forms of presence in the world.”<sup>40</sup> They also invoke the theme of *reconstruction* in order to confront an increasingly unipolar world in which Euro-American whiteness (this time including Eastern Europe) seems to have returned with vengeance,<sup>41</sup> and the African political theology of liberation appears to be losing some of its relevance.<sup>42</sup> An equally important theme is that of *reconciliation*,<sup>43</sup> which is pursued by such scholars as Emmanuel

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38. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Black and African Theologies in the New World Order: A Time to Drink from Our Own Wells,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96 (1996): 3–19.

39. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 4–23.

40. The quotation is from Ronilso Phacheco, “Black Theology in Brazil: Decolonial and Marginal,” *Crosscurrents* 67, no. 1 (March 2017), 60. For discussion of decoloniality, see Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (New York: Berghan, 2013).

41. Charles Villa Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction. Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992).

42. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Johannesburg: WITS University Press, 2015).

43. See James Jay Carney, “Roads to Reconciliation: An Emerging Paradigm of African Theology,” *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (October 2010): 549–69.

Katongole,<sup>44</sup> Desmond Tutu,<sup>45</sup> and John Rucyahana,<sup>46</sup> amongst others. The main motivation for the reconciliation theologians is the search for the healing of both colonial and post-colonial traumas in Africa. Another theme tackled in Black and African theologies is that of *translation*, whose main interlocutors include Andrew Walls,<sup>47</sup> John Mbiti,<sup>48</sup> Kwame Bediako,<sup>49</sup> and Lamin Sanneh.<sup>50</sup> Translation theologians appear to be looking for a third-way response to whiteness: one in which, amongst other things, the translatability of the gospel is given more weight than the foibles of the white missionaries.

African Initiated Church theologies and Pentecostal theologies have also produced some of the most innovative ways of mitigating the effects of whiteness in black church life.<sup>51</sup> This is in a world in which communication technologies are exploding and secularization appears to have failed to take people away from religion.<sup>52</sup> Among these theologies are to be found some of the best and the worst attempts to respond to whiteness in church and

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44. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace, and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); Emmanuel Katongole, with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

45. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* (London: Rider, 2010); Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (London: William Collins, 2014).

46. John Rucyahana, *The Bishop of Rwanda: Finding Forgiveness Amidst a Pile of Bones* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

47. Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," *Faith and Thought* 108, nos. 1 and 2 (1982): 39-52.

48. John Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," in *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. Koffi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 83-94.

49. *Kwame Bediako: His Life and Legacy*. Documentary film, produced and directed by James Ault (Northampton, MA: James Ault Productions, 2018), <https://vimeo.com/jamesault/kwame-bediako-his-life-and-legacy-1/video/281714305>.

50. Lamin Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

51. See Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1948); Allan Heaton Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

52. Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 153-70.

theology.<sup>53</sup> Other key themes are African women's theologies,<sup>54</sup> as well as Black theology in South Africa and in North America.<sup>55</sup> *Land* and *ecology* issues have also become important in Black and African theologies.<sup>56</sup>

## The Ghost of Whiteness Is Still Lurking

All the postcolonial, Black consciousness, and Black theological theories in the world have not exorcised the ghost of whiteness completely. Part of the problem is that, for the past two hundred years at least, to be an educated African has included some form of intellectual or dogmatic flirtation, if not complete immersion, with either Christianity or Islam. The very milieu in which most educated Africans are immersed in order to acquire an "education" necessarily requires them either to embrace or to actively fight against whiteness. As the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has observed, the greatest task facing African knowledge workers and intellectuals today is the decolonization of the mind and the soul.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, we must stop regarding whiteness as something out there, and begin to see it as something that has been planted in our minds and in our souls. All expeditions intended to expunge the whiteness out there will not succeed until we have exorcised the whiteness within—the whiteness of our Western education and our largely Westernized Christian faith and theology.

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53. For "best" attempts, see Tinyiko Maluleke, "Of Africanized Bees and Africanized Churches: Ten Theses on Christianity in Africa," *Missionalia* 38, no. 3 (November 2010), 369–79. For "worst" attempts, see Maluleke, "The Prophet Syndrome: Let Them Eat Grass," *Mail and Guardian*, 23 October 2014, <https://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-23-the-prophet-syndrome-let-them-eat-grass>.

54. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

55. See Klippiess Kritzing, "Black Theology: Challenge to Mission" (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 1988); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

56. See Temba L.J. Mafico, "The Land and the African Context for Theology," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* 37, no. ½ (2011), 57–68; Sophie Chirongoma, "Karanga-Shona Rural Women's Agency in Dressing Mother Earth: A Contribution Towards an Indigenous Eco-feminist Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 142 (March 2012), 120–44; Tinyiko Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in Search of Comprehensive Environmental Justice," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 167 (July 2020), 5–19.

57. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*.

## White Skin versus White Hearts

In many black churches of South Africa today, there is a short, repetitive, but very popular chorus which is sung with much enthusiasm and much dancing. It goes like this:

Inhliziyo zethu (“our hearts”)

Zimhlophe ngaphakathi (“are white on the inside”)

The brevity of the chorus leaves little scope for extensive exegesis. We should, however, start with the most sympathetic interpretation of the song. To begin with, it must be noted that there is greater meaning to choruses and songs than simply the literal meaning of lyrics. The meaning of a chorus derives only partly from the words. The type of song and the context in which it is regularly invoked provide clues to the meaning it holds. Sometimes the meaning of a song comes more from the demeanour of the singers than from the words themselves. There are songs whose lyrics are joyful, but the demeanour of the singers is invariably not joyful. In short, we cannot judge a song by its score and its lyrics alone.

The chorus quoted above is joyful overall—a chorus in which the singers express joy, with hearts that are free of doubt, regrets, or grudges. Their hearts are clean on the inside. Sometimes the *inhliziyo zethu* chorus is sung during the tithing or offering ritual. Other times it is sung at the end of the service, perhaps as a testament to the gratitude and joy that comes after a time of worship.

Clearly, the chorus is rooted in the dozens of Bible verses that speak of purity and purification of the heart. At the heart of this song is the suggestion that God desires pure hearts, and that a pure heart is the best offering one can give to God. There are many other similar choruses that are rooted in this theology of purity of heart. Here, the singers, through repetition of the chant-like lines, wish to offer to God their pure hearts in worship and in gratitude, in the most poetic manner possible.

However, the actual choice of words in this chorus is also curious. In the iSizulu language there are several alternatives to the phraseology of “white hearts.” If the idea was to communicate purity and good intentions, the phrase might have been rendered *inhliziyo zethu zimsulwa ngaphakathi*, which literally means “our hearts are pure on the inside.” In a society such as South Africa, where the symbolism of whiteness and blackness, light and darkness, has been as pervasive as it has been dangerous, the significance of

“white hearts” cannot be brushed aside as innocent or as a slip of the tongue. Similarly, in the African languages of the Bantu and Nguni groups, *whiteness* is neither the only nor the best word to describe cleanliness or purity.

If this is a slip of a tongue at all, it seems more like a Freudian slip. In a society where *white* means “human” and *black* means “almost but not quite human,” the expression *inhliziyo zethu zimhlophe nga pakhathi* (“our hearts are white inside”) is pregnant with meaning. Could it be a chorus of defiance intended to say, “Hey, white people, you may think you are better than us, but actually on the inside, we are just like you (and you are just like us).” Does this song mock whiteness rather than buy into its warped logic? Is there a suggestion here that while white people may, in their twisted logic about whiteness, think that a white skin is what matters, the singers suggest that what actually matters is “whiteness of heart” not “whiteness of the skin”? In other words, they may be saying that humaneness of the heart is better than the possession of a white skin.

But this is doubtful; it would be too generous an interpretation. It is likely that the chorus is indeed a Freudian slip that reveals a hankering after whiteness. The idea of hearts being white on the inside would be jarring even if it were sung by white Christians, but it is even more so when sung by black Christians.

## From Black with Sin into Pure Whiteness

Another very popular but controversial hymn is the one whose first line is *se teng seliba sa mali*, (“there is a fountain of blood”), found in a hymnal originally assembled by French missionaries in Lesotho.<sup>58</sup> This particular hymn is credited to S. Rolland, probably a missionary who either wrote the tune or adapted it from a pre-existing European hymn. This hymn too is very popular. Several choruses have been spun off some of its lines, including some based on the first line, and others based on the last line of the first stanza, *mat’la sona ke bophelo* (“its power is life”; that is, the power of fountain of blood). But it is the first line in the second stanza that catches the eye. It reads *baetsalibe ba batšo*, which means either sinners who are black, or more poetically, sinners who are black with sin. Here is the entire verse:

*Baetsalibe ba batšo* (“sinners who are black” [with sin])

*Ba se kenang ka tumelo* (“who enter [the fountain of blood] by faith”)

*Ba tloha teng ka bosoeu* (“they come out in/with whiteness”)

*Ka thabo le ka tsoarelo* (“in joy and through forgiveness”)

58. Lifela Tsa Sione [“Songs of Zion”] (Morija: Morija Printing Works, 1918), hymn no. 89.

The association of blackness with sinfulness feels like an embrace and affirmation of the logic of whiteness. It is difficult to find a kinder interpretation of it. The song invokes the imagery of the sinners who enter the fountain of blood in blackness, but because of faith, come out in whiteness -joyful and forgiven. Incidentally, the word *bosoeu* literally means “whiteness.”

Did Rolland allow his prejudices to show in this stanza, at least for a moment? Was this a Freudian slip, or did he do what was natural? Maybe Rolland was voicing “statements of fact” that were commonplace in his circles. Whiteness has seldom been theologized and expressed more articulately than in worship, where images of the blue-eyed Jesus are reinforced with racially-charged hymnologies and equally racialized Bible translations that equate blackness with sin and whiteness with salvation.<sup>59</sup> If one were to take the hymns discussed above, one could conclude that the European missionary effort, at least in Lesotho and South Africa, aimed to convert Africans who were black with sin into people who were white on the inside.

It has been several dozen years since Rolland died, but the song and its imagery continue to seize the imagination of many. While we can blame Rolland for infusing racial imageries into the hymn originally, we cannot blame him for the fact that his song remains popular long after his death. There is a complicity and a resonance here that speaks to the power of whiteness—especially when it is inserted into Bible translations,<sup>60</sup> articles of faith, and rituals of worship. Indeed, the chorus *inhliziyo zethu zimbhlophe ngaphakathi* has since been sung by no less a South African musical group than the multiple Grammy award-winning Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

To conclude, let us reiterate what we said earlier in this chapter, namely that, whiteness is not something out there: it resides inside minds, hearts, and souls. The fight against whiteness must begin there.

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59. Tinyiko Maluleke, “The Next Phase in the Vernacular Bible Discourse: Echoes from Hammanskraal,” *Missionalia* 33, no. 2 (August 2005): 355–74.

60. Musa We Nkosi Dube, “Consuming a Cultural Colonial Bomb: Translating Badimo into ‘Demons’ in the Setswana Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21, no. 73 (1999): 33–59.



**RACISM**



# Being Asian in the Time of COVID-19

Yolanda Pantou

*Stigma, to be honest, is more dangerous than the virus itself.*

—Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus<sup>1</sup>

## **(Not) An Excuse for Racism**

COVID-19 has become a justification for expressing prejudice and hate in many places in the world. Throughout the history of human pandemics, it is not rare that these breakouts are accompanied by some form of racism or racial discrimination. It has to do with fear, a natural human reaction to a death-threatening virus. However, the fear we need for survival can easily turn into xenophobia and blaming others who are seen as associated with the cause of the pandemic.

The idea that people of other cultural and ethnic backgrounds carry contagious disease can be traced back to the great plague in Europe, where people looked for scapegoats.<sup>2</sup> In the 14th-century pandemic, Jews, who were already considered outsiders by the majority Christian society, became the scapegoats. When the society learned that there were fewer people dying in the Jewish community, they believed that Jews were deliberately spreading the disease. This false assumption caused abuse and murder of Jews by Christians.

Such a xenophobic attitude has been carried on in modern times. From 2002 to 2004, the Asian community was blamed for causing the SARS pandemic, which originated in China. There were many hate crimes committed against members of the Asian community in places like the USA and Canada. Thus, we can understand why the World Health Organization (WHO) quickly came with the name “COVID-19” to address the pandemic that started in the year 2019 and originally appeared in Wuhan, China. The

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1. Director General of the World Health Organization.

2. Merlin Chowkwanyun (American historian and assistant professor of socio-medical sciences at Columbia University), as quoted in Abikh Roy, “Xenophobia and Covid-19,” *The Statesman*, 12 April 2020, <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/xenophobia-covid-19-1502876546.html>.

WHO has learned from experience that choosing a location to name a virus will only create and strengthen stigma. The Ebola virus, for instance, which had its outbreak in West Africa in the year of 2014, comes from the name of the river in the Congo, where the existence of the virus was first known. Naming the virus after a specific geographical location fortified the pre-existing racism and discrimination toward people of African descent, and increased their social alienation.

The effort to separate the pandemic from a certain group of people was belittled by Donald Trump, the US president at the time of the outbreak. He refused to use the official name of the virus, preferring to call it the “Wuhan Virus,” the “China Virus,” or “Kung-Flu.”<sup>3</sup> In one of his rallies, he said, “Wuhan was catching on, coronavirus, kung flu. I could give you many, many names. Some people call it the Chinese flu, the China flu, they call it the China.” Not only did he mock the name, Trump also “downplayed the virus that has afflicted millions across the globe.”<sup>4</sup>

This immature attitude not only shows disrespect toward the worldwide consensus and effort to handle the pandemic, it also threatens a particular ethnic group. This is not an exaggeration, because since the outbreak began, racism against all East Asians, not only Chinese communities, has grown exponentially. People who look Chinese are being yelled at, spat upon, and even beaten. Research conducted at San Francisco State University found a 50 per cent rise in the number of news articles related to the coronavirus and anti-Asian discrimination between 9 February and 7 March 2020. The lead researcher, Russell Jeung, professor of Asian-American studies, said the figures represented “just the tip of the iceberg” because only the most egregious cases are reported by the media.<sup>5</sup>

The obvious demonstration of xenophobia and racism towards Chinese and other Asians does not happen only in the United States. Anti-Asian bigotry is also experienced in the UK. An Asian student from Singapore who

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3. “President Trump Calls Coronavirus ‘Kung Flu,’” BBC News, 24 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53173436>.

4. Colby Itkowitz, “Trump Again Uses Racially Insensitive Term to Describe Coronavirus,” *Washington Post*, 23 June 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-again-uses-kung-flu-to-describe-coronavirus/2020/06/23/0ab5a8d8-b5a9-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-again-uses-kung-flu-to-describe-coronavirus/2020/06/23/0ab5a8d8-b5a9-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html).

5. Alexandra Kelley, “Report highlights emerging trends of Asian American discrimination amid coronavirus pandemic,” *The Hill*, 2 April 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/490803-report-highlights-emerging-trends-of-asian-american>.

is attending a university in London was brutally attacked on the street. The assault was so bad that he required facial surgery. His case was so tragic that it was highlighted on media, but he was not the only one attacked based on his Asian looks and the ignorance-based-fear of COVID-19.

In Tokyo and in Rome, several eating places put announcements on their doors stating that visitors from China were not allowed to enter. This, of course, also discouraged people who were neither visitors nor Chinese but might be taken for Chinese nationals, from entering the restaurants or cafés.<sup>6</sup> Chinese and other Asians in Australia have also been at the receiving end of racial discrimination. They have faced not only racial slurs, but also evictions and rejections from medical clinics and classes.<sup>7</sup> In Toronto, around 10,000 people signed a petition urging the local school authorities to identify and separate Chinese students who might have travelled to China for the Lunar New Year.<sup>8</sup>

*Le Courrier picard*, a French newspaper, used headlines like “*Alerte Jaune*” (“Yellow Alert”) and “*Le Péril Jaune?*” (“Yellow Peril”), along with an image of a woman of East Asian ethnicity wearing a mask. The paper apologized afterward, but it was too late because the discrimination had spread. Many people of East Asian ethnicity (including Southeast Asians) have experienced discrimination, despite their European nationality and never having been to China or Asia. The hashtag #*JeNeSuisPasUnVirus* (“I’m not a virus”) became one response from many Chinese-French youth.<sup>9</sup>

The stigma and xenophobia do not stop with harassment on the street or discrimination in public places. People who face stigma also face the possibility of losing their income, jobs, and homes.

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6. See, for example, Mark Lowen, “Coronavirus: Chinese targeted as Italians panic,” BBC News, 4 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51370822>.

7. Asian Australian Alliance and Osmond Chiu, “Reporting Racism Against Asians in Australia Arising due to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic,” 12, Asian Australian Alliance, <http://diversityarts.org.au/app/uploads/COVID19-racism-incident-report-Preliminary-Official.pdf>.

8. Jesse McLaren, “Coronavirus: vaccinate against racism,” 12 February 2020, Spring, <https://springmag.ca/coronavirus-vaccinate-against-racism>.

9. “Coronavirus: French Asians hit back at racism with ‘I’m not a virus,’” BBC News, 29 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51294305>.

## Attack on Asian Food Culture

Different food culture has separated people and contributes to discrimination. Whether it is about religious understandings of what is “clean,” or whether or not you should eat meat and dairy, people may refuse to sit together with another because of differences in food preference. In regard to East Asian food culture, there is a hint of discrimination. Take for instance, monosodium glutamate (MSG), a food additive. It became known as causing “Chinese restaurant syndrome.” This assumption and belief—not based on research—basically stereotyped all Chinese cuisine as unhealthy, even to the point of costing someone’s life. Only later was it shown that MSG is not unhealthy and, further, is not used only in Chinese food.<sup>10</sup>

Douglas Wong, a contributor to the *Washington Post*, shared his personal experience of the stigma given to his food culture. His parents were Chinese immigrants who owned a restaurant in Houston, Texas—but they served hamburgers and chicken fried steak, not Chinese food. The reason was that his mother knew that the American expectation of Chinese food was quite different from the Chinese food she knew from her own tradition and culture. One day his mother asked one of the waitresses if she would like to bring some food from their restaurant to her parents. Her reply was, “Oh no, ma’am. I asked, but my father said he wouldn’t eat at any place run by Chinese. You can’t trust what they will try to pass for meat.”<sup>11</sup> This story shows that the real Chinese food culture was never fully embraced; also that there is openly held stigma against Chinese food culture and perhaps many other Asian (and African) food cultures.

COVID-19, the cause of our recent global pandemic, most likely first cropped up in humans around the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market—a wet market located in the city of Wuhan, in the Chinese province of Hubei. This fact alone was enough to reinforce the pre-existing assumptions and stigma against Chinese food culture. Although it is true that some Chinese and other Asians do eat things considered exotic by Westerners, it is not true that every Asian eats this type of food on daily basis. An internet post about a Chinese eating a bat went viral at the time of the pandemic began. It was

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10. Jessie Yeung, “MSG in Chinese Food Isn’t Unhealthy—You’re Just Racist, Activists Say,” CNN, 18 January 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/18/asia/chinese-restaurant-syndrome-msg-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>.

11. Douglas Wong, “Eating Chinese Food in the Age of Coronavirus,” *Washington Post*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/01/30/eating-chinese-food-age-coronavirus/>.

discovered later that the video was not filmed in China, and it was from 2016. The prejudice of western media has helped to perpetuate the exotic food stereotype.

Moreover, the consumption of exotic food is also not something exclusive to Chinese or Asian food culture. The definition of what is exotic should itself be revisited. There are people who eat worms, crocodile, seal, kangaroo, rabbit, deer, and other creatures which are sources of protein. Some of us might find these foods exotic or even repulsive, but for others it is their food culture—not to mention that sometimes we use our own standards to determine what is or is not delicious.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Italy was one of the countries hit most severely, mostly due to its aging population, which made it more vulnerable to the virus. However, there was never fear of going to an Italian restaurant, in contrast to the fear of going to or ordering from Chinese restaurants. And it was not only about the food; it also extended to the people who cooked and served in those dining places. Many people said that they were afraid to come to the Chinese restaurant because they assumed the people who work there might just have arrived from China. The same could be said about Italian restaurants—but there was no corresponding association with Italians being sick and communicating that illness to others overseas. Grace Kao, professor of sociology at Yale University, said in an interview with Lauren Frias: “It’s easy for them to make that association because Asian Americans are not seen as actually American, no matter how long we’ve been in this country. . . . It’s just something that every Asian American faces, that we can never quite be seen as an actual American, which means that we’re always treated as such. . . . And so anytime there’s some kind of conflict with that part of the world, I think it just raises a real fear.”<sup>12</sup>

## **Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship**

When we are talking about food and humanity in the Bible, most of the time we go directly to verses that are talking about the need to share food with those who lack it. Our humanity is measured on whether or not we care for our neighbours who have no food on their plates, or for children

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12. Grace Kao, interviewed by Lauren Frias, for “Trump Has a Penchant for Calling the Coronavirus the ‘Chinese Virus’ or ‘Kung Flu’: Experts on Asian Culture Said the Racist Implications of the Term Divert Attention from the Disastrous US Response,” *Insider*, 11 July 2020, paras. 31–33, <https://www.insider.com/experts-trump-racist-names-for-coronavirus-distract-from-us-response-2020-7>.

far away who go to bed hungry every night. But how about accepting food from people who we think are of different faith and ethnicity from ourselves? How about accepting hospitality with trust that the others also have our best interests in mind?

Many parts of the Bible address that principle. There is, for example, the story of Abraham, who begged the strangers to come to his tent, where he (or his wife?) later prepared the best dishes for the guests—showing us how sharing food is one of the fundamental forms of communion. In the Gospels, Jesus bridged the separation between Jews and Samaritans by asking for water from the Samaritan woman he met at the well. In his last supper with his disciples, Jesus broke bread and shared the cup with Judas, to show—despite Judas’ poor judgment—that Judas was never out of God’s care and love.

Food is both worldly and sacred. It is worldly since it comes from the soil and the sea, butchered and sold, bonded to tradition and taste. But it is also sacred in the way it is used to form friendship and communion, to turn strangers into relatives, and to celebrate religious events in our lives.<sup>13</sup> Through food we know God’s providence and healing love. To leave someone without food while we have more than enough should be considered immoral. To look down on someone’s food culture is a form of racism that not only attacks history, tradition, values, but also the people who eat and share that food.

Another thing to consider is the fact that sometimes people choose a certain kind of food not out of pleasure, but out of necessity or scarcity. It is also important to take into account that although COVID-19 does not itself discriminate, in the US, the people who are more vulnerable to the virus are Blacks and Latino/as, who are more likely than whites to come from socio-economic backgrounds with fewer opportunities to maintain a healthy diet and fewer possibilities to stay safely at home.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of our WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, we are proposing an “ecumenical theology of companionship.” As the WCC central committee

13. See *Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation*, Faith and Order Paper No. 226 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020), para. 24: “Not only can creation invite us to turn our thoughts to God, but the New Testament itself shows God making use of the humble material elements of the earth to enter into communion with us, such as in the bread and wine used in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper,” [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Cultivate%26Care\\_fin\\_0.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Cultivate%26Care_fin_0.pdf).

14. See Judith Graham, “Elderly, Ill, and Black in a Pandemic: ‘I’m Doing Everything I Can Not to Get This Virus,’” *Kaiser Health News*, on CNN, 1 September 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/01/health/older-black-americans-covid-19-disparities/index.html>; also Edith Bracho-Sanchez, “How Black and Latino Children Came to Be the Most Affected by the Severe Complications of Covid-19,” CNN, 1 September 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/01/health/misc-coronavirus-inequality-comment-wellness/index.html>.

declared at the beginning of the Pilgrimage: “Pilgrims on their way are moving—lightly as they learn that only the essential and necessary counts. They are open for surprises and ready to be transformed by encounters and challenges on the way. Everyone who will walk with us with an open heart and mind will be a welcome com-pan-ion (“the ones we share our bread with”) on the way. The pilgrimage promises to be a transformative journey, discovering ourselves anew in new relationships of justice and peace.”<sup>15</sup>

It is not by coincidence that our theme talks about “com-pan-ion,” breaking and sharing food with the others. Racism in the form of attacks on food culture is a major hindrance in our discourse and pilgrimage of justice and peace.

## **A Calling for Solidarity with the Other Groups Facing Discrimination**

Considering companionship, we will have to talk about compassion and solidarity. One should not have to experience racism to start experiencing compassion and solidarity with others who are being discriminated against. As an Asian who lives in Asia, I realize how my people are still far from grasping the reality of racism as a crime against humanity. Discrimination and xenophobia are still accepted as the norm in the society I live in, although there is a hopeful change among the younger generation

Among international immigrants, Asians as a group have been depicted as immigrant role models, especially because they tend to be high achievers and passive on political issues. However, this also means they might only take care of their own interests and show little care about systemic racism that affects other minority or marginalized groups.

We should be aware of the other side of this experience of discrimination. Grace Kao reminds us that it is possible for the overseas Asian to grow a more pan-ethnic identity. She states that the hate crimes bring out the fact that it doesn't matter whether someone is Chinese or not but whether they have an Asian face.<sup>16</sup> Although that might be true, it could also be far from happening as we learn to practice compassion and solidarity with each other. The Black Lives Matter movement that grew during the COVID-19 pandemic has

15. *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (revised), WCC Central Committee, 2–8 July 2014, Geneva, Switzerland, 3, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>.

16. Kao, interview with Frias, “Trump has a Penchant,” para. 35.

helped the Asian overseas to understand the severity of racial discrimination. Haruka Sakaguchi, a professional photographer, has started a photo project on ten individuals of East Asian descent who experienced discrimination in the pandemic time. It was the Black Lives Matter movement that helped her to see those experiences not merely as discrete personal incidents. Reflecting on an encounter of her own, she said,

after witnessing the unfolding of the antiracism movements and encountering heated debates between police abolitionists and those who cling to the “few bad apples” theory, I came to realize that I too had internalized the “bad apple” narrative. I gave my aggressor—an elderly white man—the benefit of the doubt.

As an immigrant, I have been so thoroughly conditioned to think that white Americans are individuals that I wrote him into an imagined narrative in a protagonist role, even while he had so vehemently denied me of my own individuality by calling me a “chink.” The protests have brought public attention to the idea that individuality is a luxury afforded to a privileged class, no matter how reckless their behavior or how consequential their actions.<sup>17</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

In the discussion of my original paper, Philip Peacock pointed out that our present global context is marked by three crises. The first is the global COVID-19 pandemic, the second is the issue of racism and the Black Lives Matter movement as opposition to it, and the third is ecological destruction. These three crises are deeply connected with each another. All three of them deal with the “other,” which is deemed dangerous and deadly: the virus, the food culture, and the consequences of ecological destruction.

This context is indeed a challenge to those who are committed to follow Jesus, who came to the world to liberate people from injustice and to heal the sick. In light of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, it becomes clear that the call to fight racism is primarily a call to the churches themselves. The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace should be understood as a way to bridge the separation made by human beings, so that we can once again be in communion with God and with one another.

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17. “Haruka Sakaguchi,” in Anna Purna Kambhampaty, “I Will Not Stand Silent: 10 Asian Americans Reflect on Racism During the Pandemic and the Need for Equality,” with photographs by Haruka Sakaguchi, *Time*, <https://time.com/5858649/racism-coronavirus/>.

**HATE SPEECH**



## New Forms of an Ancient Evil: Hate Speech and Its “Vaccination”

Guido Dotti

*A word is dead  
when it is said,  
some say. I say  
it just begins to live that day.*

—Emily Dickinson

I had always grasped in these wonderful verses of Emily Dickinson a profoundly positive meaning: the power and effectiveness of a spoken word, its ability to give life, to start fruitful paths, to open new horizons. Gutenberg’s “revolution,” post-Enlightenment rationalism, and the European Protestant Reformation made us aware of the singular significance of the printed word, especially the Bible—the Word.<sup>1</sup>

In a radically different tradition, we find the same emphasis on the importance of word in civil life and the search for common good through governance: “Confucius was asked on the assumption that Prince Wei would entrust him with the government: ‘What will you do first?’ Confucius replied: ‘It is absolutely necessary to give names back their true meaning.’”<sup>2</sup>

The spread of hate speech in our contemporary society has now led me to grasp at the same time all of its potential negative value: even a word of slander, of backbiting, of defamation, even a word of perjury does not die as soon as it is spoken but, on the contrary, begins its life—a life that can lead to the death not of the one who has spoken it, but to its recipient.

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1. I am grateful for this addition by Anthony Reddie, in response to an earlier draft of this chapter.

2. Confucius, *Dialoghi*, Book VII, 305, in *Confucio Opere*, ed. F. Tomassini (Milan: TEA, 1989), 148–49.

## The Scripture Warning

An awareness of the deadly effectiveness of the word runs already through the whole of the Old and New Testament, in profound similarity to the sacred texts of other great religious traditions, and in harmony with the cultural heritage of humanity in every place and time. An exhaustive summary of this is a passage from the Book of Sirach 28:13–21.

Curse the gossips and the double-tongued,  
 for they destroy the peace of many.  
 Slander has shaken many,  
 and scattered them from nation to nation;  
 it has destroyed strong cities,  
 and overturned the houses of the great.  
 Slander has driven virtuous women from their homes,  
 and deprived them of the fruit of their toil.  
 Those who pay heed to slander will not find rest,  
 nor will they settle down in peace.  
 The blow of a whip raises a welt,  
 but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.  
 Many have fallen by the edge of the sword,  
 but not as many as have fallen because of the tongue.  
 Happy is the one who is protected from it,  
 who has not been exposed to its anger,  
 who has not borne its yoke,  
 and has not been bound with its fetters.  
 For its yoke is a yoke of iron,  
 and its fetters are fetters of bronze;  
 its death is an evil death,  
 and Hades is preferable to it.

There is a popular saying modelled on verse 18 above: “The tongue kills more than the sword.” But there is a word of Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew that goes beyond the wisdom expressed by the author of Sirach and is taken up in similar terms in the Letter of James 3:1–10.<sup>3</sup> In the Sermon

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3. “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a

on the Mount, shortly after the Beatitudes, Jesus sounds a warning that we might find excessive: “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matt. 5:22).

Eternal judgment and condemnation for epithets that are customary today, which we hear without scandal even from the mouths of children? We would be led to think so, and yet the First Letter of John helps us to grasp the exact scope of this admonition of Jesus, showing us its most radical consequences: “All who hate a brother or sister are murderers” (1 Jn 3:15).

Hate speech generates hatred and provokes a profound response from the offended person. The Jewish tradition recognizes that the insult causes a redness on the face of the offended person, a sign of an alteration in the blood circulation and therefore—since blood represents life—it constitutes a threat to the life of the insulted person. The harshness of Jesus’ words against those who address their brother or sister in such a way as to make them blush, was commented on effectively by Pope Francis in the Angelus of 12 February 2017:

With regard to the commandment “you shall not kill,” he [Jesus] states that it is violated not only by murder in effect, but also by those behaviours that offend the dignity of the human person, including insulting words. . . . Of course, these insulting words do not have the same gravity and culpability as killing, but they are set along the same line, because they are the pretext to it and they reveal the same malevolence. . . . Insulting is on the same line as killing. One who insults his brother, in his heart kills his brother.<sup>4</sup>

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small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be” (NIV).

4. Pope Francis, Angelus, 12 February 2017, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20170212.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2017/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20170212.html).

## Today's Hate Speech

Anthony Reddie's experience as a child of Caribbean migrants in post-war, postcolonial Britain, at his second day at the local primary school,<sup>5</sup> seeing "a sea of angry white faces and gesticulating hands issu[ing] a torrent of racial epithets" at him is not so different from the scene I witnessed when I was 14 years old. It was in 1967, during the Six-Day War in Israel, when a dozen boys surrounded my two Jewish classmates, shouting insulting epithets.

But the contemporary phenomenon of hate speech, to which we have tragically become accustomed in recent decades, is even more serious than behaviour that is harmful to the dignity of a single person, if, in fact, slander can be traced back to unpleasant gossip; if backbiting, defamation, and perjury target a specific person or a specifically labelled group and are punishable by criminal prosecution when they exceed a certain public dimension. Hate speech takes on a dimension of physical violence from its very first appearance on the public scene, often in explicit forms. And, significantly, even when individuals are targeted, they are so because they belong to very specific social groups perceived as "other" by the verbal hater: in particular, women, people of other ethnic groups, foreigners and migrants, or political opponents. Thus gender (in)justice and racism find verbal expression in the hate speech relaunched by all the mass media, starting with social networks: a climate of incivility that increasingly ends up triggering violent behaviour. As Pope Francis put it in his recent Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, speaking about "shameless aggression": "Even as individuals maintain their comfortable consumerist isolation, they can choose a form of constant and febrile bonding that encourages remarkable hostility, insults, abuse, defamation, and verbal violence destructive of others, and this with a lack of restraint that could not exist in physical contact without tearing us all apart. Social aggression has found unparalleled room for expansion through computers and mobile devices."<sup>6</sup>

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5. Reddie made his remarks during his contribution to the World Council of Churches webinar on "Hate Speech based Caste and Class Discrimination and Religion," 23 October 2020, see the video available at <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/webinar-series-theological-reflections-on-hate-speech-and-whiteness>.

6. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, Encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship, October 2020, para. 3 44. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

On the other hand, even what we once defined as educational agencies now seem to be places where every kind of language is accepted or even propagandized as outspoken, free from hypocrisy and falsehoods. In schools, in political debate, among journalists in various media, and sometimes even in the religious sphere, political correctness has become synonymous with hypocrisy. In contrast, systematic insult, incitement to targeted hatred, and media pillory of those who are considered enemies have free rein. "In our daily relationships," observes the psychiatrist and psychotherapist Nicoletta Gosio, "we breathe a climate increasingly marked by intolerance, easy offense and an excessive propensity to prosecute," so that "we are perhaps sadly getting used to breath[ing] an air polluted by animosity and enmity and the constant appeals to recognize and accept the humanity of the other slide easily on us."<sup>7</sup> We see, once again, the close link between the denial of the truth and the traumas it can cause in people publicly insulted just because they belong to a minority, a gender, an ethnic or social group different from those of "social haters." Nor can it be overlooked how hate speech is increasingly turning into physical violence, triggering an uncontrollable spiral.

In my home country, Italy, the phenomenon of hate speech has taken on disturbing dimensions, and the careful anthropological, sociological, psychological, political, and spiritual reading that is carried out from many sides outlines the heavy consequences in terms of degeneration of social relations, offence to the dignity of every human being and deterioration of the quality of civil coexistence.<sup>8</sup> What is more difficult to bring forth is the possible response to this phenomenon of the degradation of daily relationships: the very nature of hate speech makes it difficult to contrast it with the ordinary instruments of language.

## **How to Fight Hate?**

I would like to sketch out a path against hate speech, starting with the fact that it is a serious contemporary disease we could call a pandemic. In this sense, the recent worldwide spread of COVID-19 and its characteristic threat

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7. Nicoletta Gosio, *Nemici miei: La pervasiva Rabbia Quotidiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 2020), 4, 8.

8. To limit ourselves to some more recent studies, see, in addition to the work by Gosio quoted above: Federico Faloppa, *Razzisti a Parole (per Tacer dei Fatti)* (Bari: Gius Laterza & Figli, 2011); Caterina Ferrini and Orlando Paris, *I Discorsi dell'odio. Razzismo e Retoriche Xenofobe sui Social Networks* (Rome: Carocci, 2019); and Luciano Manicardi, *Contrastare l'Odio* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2020).

constantly lurking in the world, starting from interpersonal relationships, can provide us with some good practices.

I am thinking, first, of a more appropriate metaphor to narrate the daily contrast to hate speech. Whenever we are faced with an event, a reality, or a situation that we consider a threat to our lives and to those we care about, it seems natural to use the metaphor of war: we are at war against an enemy. This was the case in the prevailing narrative of the fight against the coronavirus and its deadly consequences for many people around the world. But hatred and its subsequent violence cannot be defeated with their own weapons. Historical experiences of non-violent struggle—a strategy radically different from waging war—show that the most effective antidote to even mortal wounds caused by hatred is not hate but love. This is illustrated in the most common and secular form the world knows: *care* for people, for the environment, for interpersonal relationships, for the common good.

As I wrote in a reflection in the first weeks of the spread of the pandemic in Italy: “Now, both war and care have need of some attributes: strength (a different thing from violence), perspicacity, courage, resoluteness, also tenaciousness.”<sup>9</sup> These are resources that verbal haters—unlike war professionals—do not seem to be particularly gifted with in reality: weak as they are with the strong, fearful in hiding behind the anonymity of the social media, stubborn rather than tenacious, obsessive rather than perceptive. But what nourishes the duration and progress of war or care in daily life are radically different foods: “War has need of enemies, borders and trenches, arms and ammunition, spies, deception and lies, ruthlessness and money.”<sup>10</sup> These are all elements which, as everyday experience teaches us, are also indispensable to fuel hate speech. Here then, to counter these deadly words, it is absolutely necessary to use different ethical tools, the tools of *care*: closeness, solidarity, compassion, humility, dignity, delicacy, tact, listening, authenticity, patience, perseverance.

The first area for this care as a “vaccine” to hate speech is language. Bringing “words back to the reality” (Confucius) means bringing to light the truth they contain, calling things and people by name, with their proper names, and not giving in to slogans, clichés, or stereotypes that imprison people and events in caricatured cages.

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9. Also reproduced on the blog of the WCC’s Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, “We are under care, not at war,” 20 April 2020, <https://www.oikoumene.org/blog/we-are-under-care-not-at-war>.

10. Ibid.

This care for language, words, and their value is the first step in caring for people who have been hurt by hate speech. It allows us to look at these victims as men and women in the flesh, inhabited by feelings, shaped by their personal stories, affections that have marked them for better or worse. Only rarely do we know them personally, and almost never are we allowed to approach them physically; but this does not prevent us from seeking and finding ways to express our closeness to them, our suffering with them. Understanding suffering is the interpretative key that opens up the creativity of caring for individuals. If we understand that a human being suffers, if we listen to the silent cry that rises from their pain, if we try to detect the reasons for their suffering, then our being close to them will find the most suitable ways and times, the most reliable allies to soothe that suffering.

When, as often happens, the target of hate speech is a certain category of people—such as women, foreigners, people of a different colour or ethnicity, NGO volunteers—caring for them has two very broad areas of application. On the one hand, there is the space of advocacy, the intervention in their defence by those who have the opportunity to do so in public debate and in the appropriate legislative and decision-making forums. On the other hand, there is the vast space of our daily behaviour, as individuals and as communities or social groups.

### **Everyone’s Responsibility**

Here the most challenging but also the most effective aspect of solicitude for those who are verbally assaulted comes into play to counteract hate speech: the daily care of relationships. It is here that the contagion of good practices is effective in counteracting the spread of hate in the social fabric. It is here that prevention can achieve decisive success in purifying the soft air we breathe. By creating ever-widening resistance and resilience garrisons, the contagion of the verbal hate virus can be reduced. In daily practice, in the family, at school, in the ecclesial communities, in the social spaces in which we live, we can bring the “vaccine” of civil coexistence, of political confrontation, of cultural exchange, into the circle. It may seem trivial, but the non-violent fight against hatred, verbal and physical, is conveyed in the way each of us personally relates to the categories normally subject to media pillory and social injustice. Restoring the truth, caring for trauma, unmasking xenophobia and racism, gender justice, respecting human rights, and the dignity of foreigners and migrants, will become a common heritage when each one of us cares for the weakest members of our societies.

## The Role of Christians

In conclusion, I fully agree with Anthony Reddie: “It is the commitment to live with one another and to honour the other that becomes the means by which the potency of hate speech is dissipated. This cultivation of conviviality with the other finds its theological grounding in God in Christ who cultivates loving relationships with us and showers us with love and respect.”<sup>11</sup>

Yes, in this demanding daily work of caring for the weakest or most wounded—which is also care for the living environment that we all share—Christians have the gospel as their ultimate guide and reference, and in the gospel, Jesus’ words, gestures, and behaviour. By listening to how Jesus himself came into contact with people at the margins of the religious and social world of his time, we, his disciples of the 21st century, can discern on the one hand who is most in need of our care and on the other, what balms can soothe their wounds. The Gospels are a mine of despised humanity: poor shepherds stigmatized because they are unable to respect the rules of worship; young women brutally deprived of their new-borns; lepers driven out of towns and villages; publicans pointed out as execrable collaborators of the occupying power; widows denied their rights; prostitutes and adulterers who are blamed for those who exploit their bodies with impunity; foreign women ignored in their needs; blind, crippled, and lame rejected as superfluous excrescences; children who are victims of scandals; poor people from whom even their cloaks are taken away. A humanity that suffers and that must suffer not only the mockery of the rich and powerful, but also the mockery of those who, taking it out on the least of these, feel socially promoted. This is the humanity that we, disciples of Jesus, have in front of our eyes every day, on the sole condition of not looking elsewhere, of not closing our ears to the voice of those who have no voice. A humanity to which Jesus himself asks us to be close, making sure that the first beneficiaries of this human solidarity will be ourselves. In taking care of the victims of hatred, both verbal and physical, we will discover that it is precisely the wounded humanity that will heal our wounds, enrich our poverty, and transform our heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

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11. See Reddie’s remarks to the World Council of Churches webinar on “Hate Speech based on Caste and Class Discrimination and Religion,” <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/webinar-series-theological-reflections-on-hate-speech-and-whiteness>.

# Reflecting on Religious Communal Violence Spurred by Hate Speech: A Perspective from India

Philip Vinod Peacock

Between 23 February and 1 March 2020, violence gripped the north-eastern sectors of New Delhi. The violence was specifically along religious lines and targeted the minority Muslim population. The riots left 53 people dead, of which at least two-thirds belonged to the minority Muslim community. Eyewitness accounts and videos in circulation also show that the local police force joined hands with the rioters against the minority population. There is ample evidence that the riots were spurred on by some politicians' inflammatory speeches and were furthered by messages sent on social media, messaging services, and other online platforms.

However, the events of that week should be seen from a broader historical perspective. While the riots were fuelled by a right-wing Hindu government controlled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and voted into power with an unprecedented majority, the conditions that led to the riots existed already. Violence against India's religious minorities is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, sectarian violence was unleashed by the Congress party against the minority Sikh community. In 2002, riots against the minority Muslim population in Gujarat, a province in western India, resulted in the death of around 2000 people. In 2007, the Kandhamal area of the state of Orissa saw violence against the Christian community.

It is noticeable that the party presently in power in India has successfully driven a right-wing agenda that has marginalized and threatened to disenfranchise religious minorities, those coming from the lower castes, and Indigenous people. Moreover, any form of dissent has been dealt with brutally both by the state and by vigilante groups—so much so that lynching, usually targeting the most marginalized, has become a common occurrence—and the perpetrators act with impunity.

Given this increasing violence based on religious identity—which in the Indian context is referred to as communalism or communal violence—how are we to understand what is going on and, more importantly, how can we respond to it theologically?

## Understanding Communalism in India

One way to understand India's crisis would be to move from the specific incidents that have taken place under the BJP government and Narendra Modi's leadership as prime minister and to conclude that the problem is specific to this particular regime. However, this would be to misunderstand the depth of the crisis. There is no doubt that the BJP has been fuelling an anti-Muslim and anti-minority sentiment for a long time. However, Islamophobia and the religious fundamentalism that violently breaks out against minority communities is rooted in India's colonial past.

Neither can we afford to take a solely human rights-based approach to the problem because that too would be missing out on a more in-depth material and historical analysis of the situation. A human rights approach would tend to treat communalism, to which I will return later, and communal violence as distinct entities that do not overlap. Bipin Chandra, in an article that explains the continuity between communalism and communal violence, suggests that communal violence in its different forms, based on extreme communalism and feelings of fear and hatred, is ultimately the ugly and barbaric expression of and the logical extension of the prior spread of communalism as an ideology. While communal riots, for example, give credibility to the basic communal ideology precepts among ordinary people and enlist further support for communal politicians, it is communal ideology and politics, that the communal politicians and ideologies preach at normal times, which form the fundamental basis on which communal tension and violence occur. In other words, communal ideology and politics are the diseases, communal violence only its external symptom.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, to begin to understand the threat of communalism, we must first gain a thorough understanding of communalism as an ideology.

Another common error is to understand communalism as essentially a religious phenomenon. However, a closer analysis lays open for us the deeper economic, social, political, and psychological issues at stake. These use religion merely as a garb. After all, it is hoped that no religion preaches sectarianism or violence.

Moreover, it is vital to point out here that communalism and communal violence are not the same. Before we proceed any further, we must clarify the issues that are involved.

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1. Bipan Chandra, "Communalism and Communal Violence in Modern India," in *Communalism in Modern India* (Burdwan: University of Burdwan, 1994), 27.

## Communalism as an Ideology

In popular language today, we often use fundamentalism, communalism, communal violence, and fascism interchangeably. The first step in understanding communalism as an ideology is to clarify the terms.

### *Fundamentalism*

*Fundamentalism* is understood as a belief in the timeless and universal nature and application of religious commandments. Interestingly, the term fundamentalist is a Christian concept, first used in the 1920s by some conservative Protestant groups in the US. The term fundamentalism has since become practically synonymous with terrorism, anarchy, and fanaticism. It has often been used as a tool to achieve mass political and economic mobilization. On the personal level, fundamentalism is characterized by a comprehensive and absolutist belief system capable of generating intense aspirations and a total commitment to precepts. It involves a total redefinition of reality to revitalize authentic values, usually by restoring the dedication and spirit of a past era.

### *Communalism*

Surprisingly, in India, the term *communalism* has a different meaning than it does in other parts of the world. In some places, communalism refers to harmonious living in community. What we refer to as communalism in India would be called *sectarianism* elsewhere. In India, communalism has come to mean the coming together of a religious community to achieve secular goals. That is to say that Hindus should unite as Hindus, Christians as Christians, and Muslims as Muslims, to defend their interests as merchants or farmers to get a share of political power.<sup>2</sup> This ideology of unity based on religion has led to sectarianism and hatred.

Simply put, in India, communalism is the force that generates conflict and crisis between two communities. Communalism as an ideology is based upon the assumption that people belonging to a particular faith have common social, economic, and political interests. Therefore, the interests of believers in different religions must be different.<sup>3</sup> Communalism is a popular ideology because it offers a straightforward explanation of life and prescribes an easy

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2. Gabriele Dietrich and Bas Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society* (Madurai: Centre for Social Analysis, 1998), 183–84.

3. Bipan Chandra, “Communal Ideology: An Analysis,” in *Problem of Communalism in India*, ed. Ravindra Kumar (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1990), 87.

remedy for a believer's personal tensions and problems. It offers security and certainty and does away with the obligation to think. The ideology creates myths about itself and other communities, presenting its adherents as victims who need to retaliate to win back their lost pride. In India, the majority community presents itself as the victim. Thus, we have a majority community with a minority consciousness, a phenomenon replicated by right-wing forces elsewhere.

Bipin Chandra points out that communal ideology leads to "political and psychological differentiation, distance and competition along religious lines. Sooner or later, it leads to mutual fear and hatred and ultimately to violence."<sup>4</sup> He identifies three stages in the process of the growth of communal ideology into communal violence:

1. Declaring that the religious community is the base for common interests in wider society
2. Declaring that there are not only differences between two separate religious communities but that the secular interests also differ
3. Declaring that these different interests are opposed to each other<sup>5</sup>

### *Communal violence*

To Bipin Chandra, communal ideology is not the same as communal violence. The former can exist for a reasonably long period without escalating into communal violence. It is precisely for this reason that Chandra believes that we must begin our analysis from communal ideology and not from communal violence, which, as was stated earlier, is merely the symptom of the disease.<sup>6</sup> Again Bipin Chandra spells out three stages in the movement from communal ideology to communal violence:

1. The first is acceptance of the fact that differences of belief also include differences of socio-economic and political interest
2. The second stage is an attempt to reconcile them

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4. Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, 29.

5. Khushwant Singh and Bipin Chandra, *Many Faces of Communalism* (Chandigarh: CRID, 1985), 45.

6. See Singh and Chandra, *Many Faces*, 28ff., in which Chandra shows how this works out in the case of Punjab.

3. The third extreme step is when the two groups resort to violence

### *Fascism*

Fascism is an ideology that originated in Europe in the 1930s; at a popular level, it has been associated with virtually every authoritarian system of governance. Prakash Louis, in his book entitled *The Emerging Hindutva Force*, lists ten salient features of fascism:<sup>7</sup>

1. Its political philosophies are a mix of radical/fundamental ideas and mysticism; they are left-oriented in their slogans and rhetoric but conservative/right wing in terms of politics.
2. Powerful centralized leadership maintains hegemonic control and is opposed to any form of dissent. Fascists also deny any divergence of class interests between opposing elements, such as the exploited and the exploiter, or the upper castes and the Dalits.
3. A party system based on mass participation is used to enter mainstream politics, but its true belief is in a presidential form of governance based on the one nation-one leader theory.
4. It includes an admiration of a cult of violence with strong patriarchal-masochistic tendencies. Authoritarianism, discipline, conformity, and submissiveness hold considerable sway in fascist ideology.
5. There is nostalgia for a glorified, unified, mythical, and legendary past.
6. Women are relegated to traditional feminine roles.
7. The system normally comes into power with the financial support of big industrialists, businesspeople, and landowners, and the electoral support of the petty bourgeois and the lower-middle classes.
8. Fascists consider their national, racial, religious caste, and class group as superior to all other groups.

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7. Prakash Louis, *The Emerging Hindutva Force: The Ascent of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2000), 16.

9. By considering themselves superior to others, fascists whip up extreme and mostly misplaced patriotism to consolidate communal or national pride.
10. This communal pride gives fascists the leverage to project the “inferior” as the enemies: they are the scapegoats, the “others” who are solely responsible for present social ills, and against whom all social hate, aggression, and violence are let loose.

In another article, I expound on India’s worrying turn to fascism, which I contend is increasing state control over the body politic.<sup>8</sup> While it is crucial for us to distinguish between the various terms used, we must not make the mistake of believing that these are isolated concepts. Each one inevitably overlaps with the other; and on the practical level, there is always the possibility of one becoming the other. This is precisely why hate speech is not innocent.

### **Communalism—A (Post-)Colonial Perspective**

Just as any ideology uses myth and legend to sustain itself and its class interests, history has become a significant player in the politics of communalism. Communalism uses a specific reading and interpretation of history. Muslim and Hindu communalists view Indian history as an unrelenting struggle between the two religious communities. In reality, the struggle has been more socio-economic and socio-political than religious. This communal reading of Indian history is strongly colonial; it was used by the British to facilitate their political and economic interests. When correctly analyzed, we note that communalism is a modern ideology. Bipin Chandra emphasizes that it is not a pre-colonial hangover or something that was rooted in medieval India, as many historians suggest. He says, “Communal politics and Communal violence were more or less absent in pre-colonial India. Religion was, of course, then an important part of people’s lives. People quarrelled over religion. There was also religious suppression. But politics of the ruling classes were not organized along religious lines of Hindu vs Muslim.”<sup>9</sup>

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8. Philip Vinod Peacock, “Is India Really on the Road to Fascism?” sify.com, updated 24 May 2017, <https://m.sify.com/news/is-india-really-on-the-road-to-fascism-news-columns-rfylBvcdcgchd.html>.

9. Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, 28.

Chandra adds that communalism was also not a part of popular consciousness. According to him, communalism was a part of the transition of India under colonialism. Since religion has the capacity of mass mobilization, the pre-modern identity of religion was used as a tool of mass mobilization in the new politics of mass participation and popular sovereignty. Then, in the modern period, the ideology of communalism used religion for a secular end. Communalism must then be seen as a specifically modern phenomenon that has no basis in history. However, history is used to perpetuate certain communal myths of religious humiliation and conquest.

To properly seek the causes of communalism, we have to look into the socio-political and economic situations of the modern age. In the following sections, we shall consider the socio-economic, political, and socio-psychological basis of communalism.

### **The Socio-economic Basis of Communalism**

There can hardly be any doubt that the period of colonialism created a socio-economic crisis in India. Since independence, the chosen economic model, capitalism, has not delivered the promised development either. There were tremendous opportunities, especially for the middle classes, in the period immediately after independence in both government (including the administrative services as well as the military) and private sectors of the economy; however, this initial push was exhausted by the mid-1960s. At that point, the middle classes began to see themselves back in a situation of job scarcity and lack of opportunity.

It is in this period that we first noticed the influence of communal ideology. In the present context, with the onslaught of globalization and rapidly declining employment opportunities, we find communal ideology at its worst. There can hardly be any doubt that there is a close connection between communal ideology and globalization. In fact, it almost has to be accepted that communal ideology, fundamentalism, identity politics, and even terrorism have become inextricable parts of the globalized world. It is not a mere coincidence that the worst cases of communal riots and probably the places with the highest degree of communalism are Mumbai and Gujarat, two of India's most prominent capitalist centres.

Capitalist development has funnelled communalism and communal politics in two ways. On the one hand, India has been unable to solve economic problems such as unemployment and poverty, leading to frustration and unhealthy competition for scarce jobs. On the other hand, prosperity has

been generated for a specific class, leading to a visible and sharp inequality and new social strains and anxieties. The petty bourgeoisie (the middle classes) have been significantly affected. This is the group most influenced by communal ideology. In the words of Bipin Chandra:

In one of its main aspects, communalism was an expression of and deeply rooted in the interests, aspirations, outlook and attitudes and psychology and point of view of the middle classes in a social situation characterised by economic stagnation and the absence of a vigorous struggle to transform society—the communal question was [a] petty-bourgeois question par excellence. . . . While communalism was able to draw supporters from all classes of people, its main social base was to be found in the middle classes or the petty bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup>

We find that communalism and fundamentalism seem to be distorted ways of dealing with social reality. In the age of globalization, people seem to seek simplistic answers to the social problems of unemployment, poverty, and loss of job security. Coupled with the loss of earlier identities such as caste and village associations, modern urban India has come to grips with the present crisis by asking the wrong questions and providing themselves with the wrong answers. In coming to terms with their social reality, a convenient scapegoat has been found in the “other”—in this case, a particular religious community—as the source of all society’s ills. In the face of unemployment and the scarcity of resources in a competitive society, religion is used as a rallying point to exert economic control.

## The Political Basis of Communalism

As mentioned earlier, in a modern society with mass participation in representative politics, religion becomes an easy tool of mass mobilization for a particular political or electoral objective. Therefore, communalism’s political causes are evident when politicians appeal to the citizen’s religious identity for gathering votes. By doing this, as John Desrochers points out, “political parties become prisoners of narrow electoral politics and vote arithmetic; their concern for vote-banks makes them abdicate their responsibilities as impartial promoters of the common good and defenders of Indian citizens. In this process, the state loses its credibility, and secularism severely suffers.”<sup>11</sup>

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10. Chandra, 40–41.

11. John Desrochers, *The India We Want to Build: Perspectives for a Better India*, vol. 2 (Bangalore: Centre for Social Action, 1995), 284.

## **Socio-psychological Basis of Communalism**

While in an earlier section, we have related communalism to the economic effects of globalization, we must also realize that globalization has socio-psychological consequences that also play a role in forming communalism. Specifically, identity loss, due to modernization and the homogenizing and hegemonizing effects of globalization, is a significant cause of communalism. These processes lead to feelings of humiliation and radically lowered self-worth. The masses bear the effects of bureaucratic and other impersonal encounters. Simultaneously, the elite classes are humiliated by their civilization's defeat and their impression of being second-class citizens in the global order. This humiliation is replaced by a feeling of grandiosity and a glorification of the past, to which one is called to return. In India, this golden age was, of course, a time when neither Muslims nor Christians were present, and the rigid social order of caste was firmly in place. The return of this golden age would doubtless favour the current elites, who fear that their positions are being snatched away by forces from outside as well as from newly assertive lower-caste groups and religious minorities.

As a further point, it should be noted that democratization and the assertion of Dalit identities have also resulted in the upper castes feeling threatened and then attempting to unite all Hindus. The Ayodhya crisis took place shortly after the V.P. Singh Government declared its intention to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission.<sup>12</sup> The Ayodhya crisis was an attempt to consolidate a community that was divided by caste. In response to the assertions of rights by minority and other oppressed groups, the communal forces have taken a robust right-wing position. Many would argue that Hindutva politics have attempted to unite the fractures within Hinduism that Mandal revealed.

Some other thinkers on communalism have sought to expose the psychosexual politics at work to deconstruct communalism. They argue

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12. The Mandal Commission was established in 1979 and issued its report in 1980. The report acknowledged the severe disadvantages faced by the dominated castes in India and the lack of representation of these communities in education and employment. The extension of affirmative action policies to under-represented communities in the 1990s drew fierce protests from dominant-caste communities, thereby exposing how fractured Indian society was along the lines of caste. In attempt to unite a fractured Hindu society, the issue of a mosque in Ayodhya—allegedly built on a site believed to be the birthplace of Ram, the Hindu God—was politicized.

that among the followers of the Sangh Parivar today,<sup>13</sup> there is an almost unnatural fear of the sexual prowess of the Islamic male. This is manifest in the oft-quoted myth of the enormous increase in the Muslim population in the country and in the overtly sexual language and symbols used by the Hindu right. In an article by Sikata Banerjee, the author quotes an interview with a Shiv Sena activist.<sup>14</sup> The activist says that when the news of Hindu households being burned in Mumbai reached the ears of his wife, she remarked that “I should offer you bangles now. What are we? In our own country, Hindus are being burned.”<sup>15</sup> The sexual overtones are apparent—the “manhood” of the activist is being called into question here<sup>16</sup>: it is as though he has been emasculated. It is also interesting to note that the question “What are we?” is posed instead of “Who are we?” The obvious inference here is that the activist is a eunuch and not a man. The same sexual overtone was again seen in the post-Godhra chants of the All Indian Student Council (ABVP) on the Jawaharla Nehru University campus. They chanted, “*Jis Hinduon ka Khoon na Kholo, voh Hindu nahin, voh hijra hai*” (“That Hindu whose blood does not boil is not a Hindu but a transperson.”)<sup>17</sup> This feeling of emasculation is usually built up by myths and legends, namely the rape of Hindu women during the partition, rapes of Hindu queens by Muslims, and abductions of women by Muslims throughout history. The penis envy is further perpetuated by the Indian “Hindu” cricket team’s loss to “Muslim” Pakistan in 2021. One can begin to understand then why cricket becomes such a bone of contention for the Sangh Parivar. The politics of sex and sexuality also comes clear in the Shiv Sena’s reaction towards Valentine’s Day; after all, love has to be countered for fear of Hindu girls falling in love with Muslim boys. The anger against cross-cultural marriages can be seen as a response to the same phenomenon.

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13. The Sangh Parivar is an umbrella term given to a collective of right wing Hindu organizations and political parties.

14. Shiv Sena is a right-wing nationalist party in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. The party has since broken its alliance with the BJP.

15. See Sikata Banerjee, “The Feminization of Violence in Bombay: Women in the Politics of the Shiv Sena,” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 12 (December 1996): 1214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645576>. Note that it is the man who is putting these words into the woman’s mouth.

16. Wearing bangles signifies feminine traits or qualities. The offering of bangles here is to ridicule the masculinity of the man and suggest that he is in fact a woman. It is a gendered insult that is predicated on the patriarchal myth that women are weaker than men.

17. Tanika Sarkar, “Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women,” *Hindustva Economic and Political Weekly*, 37, no. 28 (13-19 July 2002), 2875.

The loss of virility then has to be compensated for by overt signs of masculinity; it is no wonder then that the BJP tested nuclear weapons—a sure sign of male aggression—as soon as it came into power. Pakistan’s follow-up of a greater number of atomic tests was just another way of comparing size! Even more overt are the innumerable missiles that have been tested: the phallic symbolism of a missile should not go unnoticed. It is argued that communal violence against women, in particular, has to be read within the framework of men regaining their lost virility by overt acts of aggression towards others and towards the women of the “other” community in particular. The form that this aggression takes is, of course, rape and other forms of sexual violence.

### **What Is to Be Done?**

Having attempted to understand the ideology of communalism, it is appropriate to offer some guidelines as to how we should combat this serious issue facing our society. One way of tackling this menace should have become evident within the context of this chapter itself: we must make a thorough study and analysis of communalism. We must move away from the notion that communalism is just ignorance or prejudice: we must be willing to understand it as an ideology. Bipin Chandra, often quoted as an authority here, says, “Study of Communalism as an ideology is the crucial area for the containment of communalism as well as communal violence.”<sup>18</sup> To combat communalism we must make a thorough and a systematic study of it. Yet, this can only be the first step.

In the following sections, I will outline a few examples of how communalism can be combated by the state and civil society. We shall first start by looking at the role of the state.

First and foremost, what is needed is a healthy and impartial state that is willing to act quickly and efficiently in cases of communal violence. Unfortunately, what we have been witnessing in communal riots is the culpability of the state. In Delhi, Gujarat and Maharashtra, there were complaints concerning the communalization of state forces. This was in particular reference to the police in both places. In the case of Gujarat, evidence has pointed to the collusion of the administrative services. There were reports of election lists being used to find and target Muslim households; police officers who dared to take action were immediately transferred.

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18. Chandra, 27.

But even where the police are not implicated in communalism, they seem to be ineffective in dealing with extensive rioting. They are often relegated to the role of bystanders to mob action, unable to take charge of the situation. A larger and better-trained police force would certainly be an asset. Also, the organizers and perpetrators of communal violence should be punished. Too often, they have been allowed to go scot-free. An impartial state would also mean a strongly secular state. This does not imply relegating religion to the personal realm; in India, that would be undesirable and almost impossible. The goal would be a state that treats all religions equally under the law.

But the state cannot just be involved in damage control. It must also engage in preventive action, particularly in the areas of education and media. In terms of education: Let us not be so naïve to imagine that an educated population is necessarily a non-communalized population. What is being called for here is not just more education but also an inquiry into what is being taught in our education system. Communal ideology draws from a specific interpretation of history that has to be countered. A secular history, taught scientifically, is needed. In terms of the media, what is needed is not only a truthful reporting of what has happened but also sensitive, ethical reporting. For example, sometimes the sensational reporting of communal violence leads to escalation. At other times, attempts to quash rumours has an adverse effect.

Further, there is also a need for a civil society that is anti-communal. This can be done by organizing peace marches, interfaith rallies, and processes of dialogue in times of violence. Here I do not mean the type of interreligious dialogue that only involves the religious elite, but rather one that involves all people—so that in our everyday lives, people can meet and interact with others of different faiths. This would truly build a sense of community through communication.

A question that remains, though, is what an ecumenical theological response would be. There is no doubt that the word ecumenism has its roots in a common oneness which is, of course, useful in itself. Still, a more modern concept of ecumenism would be a shared commitment to justice, peace, and integrity of creation. An ecumenical response to communalism would then be a shared commitment by all religious groups to the cause of justice. And it is in our common struggle for justice that we will find our oneness.

## **Moving Forward Theologically**

### *Hagar and the ideologies of election*

Perhaps one of the first stories that deals with minorities in the Bible is the story of Hagar. She is not just a minority in terms of ethnicity: she is also a slave and, of course, a woman. The story itself is of two women, one privileged and the other not. One is the bearer of the promise of the nation of Israel, and the other is used, abused, and thrown away. Yet as we know, the one conceives the child, and the other does not. Significantly, Sarai hopes that the child's birth will raise her status and esteem, but this does not happen; instead, she is despised in the eyes of Hagar. And this is something significant that speaks to us.

The birth of something new offers the possibility of an evolving relationship, one that is based on justice and love in action, but this is precisely what does not happen in this story. The birth of the child, the newness, leads to solidification of old hierarchies that become not just firmer but also stricter. And this is something we need to think about. Independence offered India a new starting point. Yet, it became the point of the solidification of old hierarchies. The ideas of one particular class were named nationalism, and this was universalized in ways that reinforced old hierarchies. It is no wonder then that today, Dalits, Adivasis, Tribals, and religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims, are termed anti-national. This version of nationalism is nothing but casteism and Islamophobia in camouflage.

Yet our biblical narrative does not end here. To escape her suffering, Hagar runs away to the desert, in an obvious parallel to the exodus narrative. Still, unlike the God who comes to the rescue of the Hebrew slaves, the divine being acts on behalf of the oppressors and sends Hagar back home. This divine being is a thug, a bounty hunter who drags those who are not elected back into subjugation. Perhaps it is here that we need to think about our theologies of election.

Of course, theologies of election are powerful ideologies for both the dominant and the dominated. On the one hand, it legitimizes the dominant; on the other, it enables the registration of the self by the dominated. Yet I would argue that the idea of the God who does not belong calls us to reconceive election from the perspective of the other. While we do not deny the freedom of God to choose, what we come to realize is that it is always the other that is the chosen. No one has the right to claim chosen-ness,

but it is demanded that one see it in the other. One has to tread carefully, though, noting the relations of power exerted in and through the ideologies of election. To recognize that it is always the other who is chosen is also to delegitimize all claims of chosen-ness: not only our own, but also those who make such claims. Therefore, this demands that the dominated do not claim their own chosen-ness and simultaneously reject the claims to election of those that dominate.

How do we think of the dominated, the ones who are not elected? The minority? The narrative of Hagar is replete with imageries of sight. Hagar names God. She does not invoke God, but names God, names God as a God who sees, *el roy!* But the question is, what does God see? Does God notice the suffering of the marginalized, or is God more concerned about the interests of the powerful, the chosen ones? Whom do we see? Which perspective are we seeing from?

The story of Hagar continues in Exodus 21 with her exile, paralleling the Babylonian exile, and she is left with her child to die. The hospitality she found in the wilderness is no longer available until God opens a space for her. Yet this is a problematic space: Phyllis Trible puts this in the most beautiful language possible. She says that Hagar “experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wandering without land, promise without fulfilment and unmerited exile without return.”<sup>19</sup> This description parallels the experiences of the minorities in India.

### *The prodigal son—and those not counted*

A second theological motif for this situation comes from the parable of the prodigal son. I would invite us to read this story from the perspective of the first Jewish listeners. While we have often interpreted this story through the lens of repentance and forgiveness, this is probably not Luke’s intention. A merciful, forgiving God would not be something new for the Jews; this is what they were familiar with. Moreover, given the context of the two sons, any Jew who knew their scripture would be familiar with the idea that God would be on the side of the younger son.

If we consider this story’s literary context, we note that it is placed immediately after the lost sheep’s story and the lost coin. Out of a hundred, one sheep is lost; out of ten coins, one coin is lost. Both people who have

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19. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 46.

suffered loss go to seek what they have lost. The parable isn't about repentance and forgiveness because neither sheep nor coins require repentance or forgiveness. This is a parable about counting.

The younger son in our story does not receive our sympathy because he wastes his wealth. In the biblical world, a world of few resources, wasting was an activity that was available only to the very wealthy. Wasting was a sign of wealth and social status. The father waits for the errant son to return. But the question we are left asking is who is not being counted? Who is left out from the process of counting? For whom is there no celebration? Our sympathies are drawn to the older son, the one who labours and is faithful.

Perhaps in the context of what is happening in India, we have to account for those not counted. Missing young Kashmiri boys picked up the armed forces, north-eastern women raped by the military, those who have their land snatched from them in the name of national development. Who are we not counting? Who does this nation belong to anyway?

## **An Ethical Conclusion**

Perhaps what we need then is not so much a theology as an ethic that does not link the ideas of nationalism to the ideologies of the powerful. Not a nationalism that has fed off the texts of the dominant-caste communities. Not a nationalism dictating unfailing loyalty to the state, which is, as Marx put it, nothing but a committee that oversees the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.<sup>20</sup> Instead, what is needed is a nation focused on the interests of the most vulnerable, the very least, the minority. For in the end shall we not be asked, as in Matthew 25:40 (NLT): What have you done “for the least of these my brothers and sisters?”

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20. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” ch. 1, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>.



## **CONCLUSION**



# Theological Reflections on the Journey toward Racial Justice

Masiwa Ragies Gunda

## Introduction

As the introduction to this book and its eight chapters testify, the issue of racism has emerged as one of the main themes of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, which was launched following the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Busan in 2013. The webinar series on “Hate Speech and Whiteness” from which these contributions were drawn was organized by the Theological Study Group of the Pilgrimage. The webinars were a follow-up to a theological forum in Tokyo, planned by the study group in 2019, that identified global manifestations and present-day complexities of racism. Together they underline the need for the ecumenical fellowship to amplify its struggle to overcome racism.

The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the experience of the Pilgrimage led the WCC executive committee to agree in 2016 to a focus on racism. In 2020, the executive committee agreed to detailed plans and a budget for a new programmatic response to overcoming racism. The plans sought to reinforce existing work and strengthen the ecumenical response to the increasing manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia. To assist in the implementation of these plans, in July 2021, I was appointed WCC programme executive for overcoming racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia.

In September 2021, the WCC’s acting general secretary, the Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, appointed an advisory group to help this new programme understand the breadth and depth of the problem and sin of racial injustice in the world. The advisory group met in December 2021 to explore, dialogue, and reflect on racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia across all the regions of the world; to undertake a historical evaluation of previous commitments by the ecumenical movement toward the elimination of racial injustice; and to analyze and evaluate past and present strategies and activities.

The consultation also considered proposals and recommendations to WCC governing bodies on future work to overcome racism, racial discrimination,

and xenophobia, especially during critical ecumenical conversations at the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022.

What follows is based on edited extracts from the report of the advisory group, which was received by the WCC executive committee in June 2022.<sup>1</sup> The report will be a resource for the WCC's work on overcoming racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia, and will inform Ecumenical Conversation 16 at the assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022.

## **Background**

Globally, racism continues today in various forms, perpetuating both racial discrimination in the quotidian normative existence of racialized communities and in structures that segregate and exploit. It is evident that racism, xenophobia, and discrimination extend beyond the binaries of colour: they can be defined as social constructs that have structured society on the lines of "race" and ethnicity to benefit those in power at the cost of those who do not have any. They are grounded in and have enmeshed themselves with legacies of colonialism in ways that continue to benefit the former colonizers while marginalizing the formerly colonized. Racism, discrimination, and xenophobia are faced by Indigenous people, racialized peoples, Dalits, Roma people, people of African descent, and by East Asians in places where they are a minority. It is furthered by public policy and by notions of whiteness and white supremacy that give rise to acts of violence, both overt and covert. It is perpetuated by the actions of the state (particularly the police), hate speech, and exclusion. State policy and hate rhetoric by the government of Azerbaijan, for example, has led to the exclusion and severe persecution of Armenians, as some people of Armenian descent cannot enter Azerbaijan regardless of their citizenship.

While Black Lives Matter is a movement that initially emerged from the experiences of people of African descent in the US, it has become a national and global movement of solidarity among various racialized groups. As a slogan, it raises the issue of human dignity and self-worth in the face of systems that dehumanize and pervert human dignity into a sense of non-being.

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1. "Report of the Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia 6-10 December 2021." Doc. No. EC 04, World Council of Churches Executive Committee Video Conference 8 February 2022. Also, Doc. No. EC 10, World Council of Churches Executive Committee Video Conference 30 May–2 June 2022.

The experience of racialized communities struck by the perpetual blows of discriminatory and exclusionary structures is worsened by the forced subservience of these communities to the system of racialized global capitalism.<sup>2</sup> We specifically name capitalism as a racialized economic system, although we are aware that most of the contemporary dominant economic systems of our world are racialized insofar as they exploit racialized communities and benefit the dominant communities. We have pointed to capitalism in particular because of its historical connections to racism and colonization. Capitalism as a structure has resulted in wealth creation for a few—off the backs of those forced into slavery and through the brutal processes of colonialism, the legacies of both of which continue to be felt today. Racial colonialism is still perpetuated by the enforcing of national boundaries and borders determining who belongs where, irrespective of pre-colonial fluidity that characterized these communities. Racism is based in policies, governance structures, and the way in which distribution of and access to resources is deliberately skewed against racialized groups.

Racialized capitalism has also resulted in a climate catastrophe. Its victims are the same communities that have been exploited for capital gains, especially the Pacific Islands, Africa, and the Caribbean. Moreover, COVID-19 has served as an apocalyptic moment unveiling the deep inequalities along racial lines that exist in our world and our communities.

While the impacts of racism are increasingly felt within the context of the scarcity of resources and competition for them, anti-racist discourses and actions have also been rising. Anti-racist protests have taken place the world over. The church has been involved in such activities, and many times has taken the lead. Sadly, as in the past, there are elements within the church that are in denial concerning the reality of racism and xenophobia. These elements are reluctant to acknowledge historical and persisting complicity with racist structures and institutions by both church and society. They defend whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy as God-given, natural, and normal.

We recognize that racism, xenophobia, and discrimination have become far more visible today than in any period before the advent of social media. We also recognize that in decades gone by, the church was more influential and powerful; today, the church has less power and influence than it did in

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2. Racial capitalism is “the process of deriving value from the racial identity of others.” It harms the individuals affected and society as a whole. See the abstract to Nancy Leong, “Racial Capitalism,” *Harvard Law Review* 126, no. 8 (June 2013).

the 1960s. However, the church, even as a minority, is called to act decisively and firmly. We must unequivocally denounce racism as a sin against God, a Christian theological heresy, and a crime against humanity. We must go further and acknowledge that some Christians have played key roles in the creation of systemic racism, providing false theological and spiritual justifications of racism and xenophobia based on misinterpretation and misappropriation of biblical texts. We are, therefore, invited to participate in the creation and development of an anti-racist system that includes an emancipatory theological and liberative spiritual system, because racism is incompatible with our faith. The anti-racist system must seek to overthrow systems of discrimination and to usher in a world that is grounded in “justice for all who are oppressed” (Psalm 103:6).

### **The Consultation: Objectives and Affirmations**

The Advisory Group on Overcoming Racism, Discrimination, and Xenophobia met in hybrid format in Geneva and online between 6 and 10 December 2021. It had the following objectives:

- To undertake a historical evaluation of previous commitments by the ecumenical movement toward the elimination of racial injustice.
- To analyze and evaluate past and present strategies and activities.
- To describe the current spheres or sites of engagement for overcoming racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia.
- To outline the areas of focus for the work on overcoming racism into the next decade.

In the three days that the group gathered, multiple ideas, themes, and strategies emerged that will go a long way in making the WCC’s sixth transversal theme—overcoming racism, discrimination and xenophobia—a success.<sup>3</sup> Several intersectionalities were highlighted, showing why making this programme a transversal was an inspired move.

Racism is a system created, entrenched, and sustained by religious, political, and economic self-serving structures of hegemonic powers. This is systematized by the ideology of white supremacy, the culture of whiteness, and white privilege. Casteism and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic supremacy have

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3. *Transversal* is a concept used by the WCC to denote programmes or themes that are cross-cutting. Presently there are six such cross-cutting programmes/themes.

also been used in some contexts to sustain other forms of discrimination. As Paul Kivel stated, “Racism is based on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.”<sup>4</sup>

After listening to stories and experiences from all the eight regions of the WCC, covering the whole of the world, the advisory group made the following affirmations:

1. Racism is a sin against God, a Christian theological heresy and a crime against humanity.
2. Racism is real and manifests itself in multiple overt and covert disguises in all regions of the world.
3. Discrimination based on varied variables has become normalised across the world, especially affecting racialized peoples, migrants, and refugees, people living with disability, women and children.
4. Xenophobia, like racism, is widespread in all regions of the world. In most cases, xenophobia appears like an extension of racism.
5. While Casteism is an acknowledged and named sinful practice in South Asia, we see notions of Casteism as an underlying variable informing racism and xenophobia globally.
6. Racism, discrimination and xenophobia are root causes of many injustices in the world—climate, economic, political and religious.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Press, 1996); see extract reproduced on the website *Utne*, <https://www.utne.com/arts/uprooting-racism-ze0z1304zcal>.

5. As contained in the “Report of the Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia 6-10 December 2021.” The first affirmation that “Racism is a sin against God, a Christian theological heresy and a crime against humanity,” is drawn from *Racism in Theology and Theology against Racism: Report of a Consultation organized by the Commission on Faith and Order and the Programme to Combat Racism* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975) and from the report “Section V: Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation” of the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in *Breaking Barriers: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November-10 December, 1975*, ed. David W. Paton (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1975), 109–13, WCC Digital Archive <https://archive.org/details/wcca17/page/108/>; and the National Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits,

The advisory group went on to affirm that:

1. Racialized communities around the world are the most disproportionately affected by climate injustice, economic injustice, political inequalities and religious persecutions.
2. White supremacy is a system that has historically advantaged white people. Whiteness is a product of white supremacy and a pseudo-innocence that makes it invisible to many white people, and this perpetuates a lack of knowledge or understanding of difference which is a root cause of oppression thereby driving economic, political, climate and religious injustice.
3. Whiteness is a culture that goes beyond skin colour. It is found in many racialized communities, it is a colonial legacy. It is a recognition of the power, privilege, dominance, unaccountability and structural advantage of whiteness (irrespective of ethnicity or skin colour) over others. Racialized communities from all over the world struggle with the legacy of whiteness.
4. Racism and xenophobia intersect with gender injustice thereby making racialized women to experience the effects of racism and xenophobia disproportionately.
5. Racism and xenophobia intersect also with disability injustice. People living with disabling conditions are faced with the lack of inclusive systems and structures in most communities and their situation becomes intolerable when they also belong to racialized groups.
6. Racism and economic class or status have produced an environment in which the poor and working class are among the worst victims of a racist economic blueprint running this world.
7. Racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance have seen religious minorities suffer a racist-xenophobic-inspired religious persecution in some parts of this world.<sup>6</sup>

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convened by NCCI in partnership with the WCC, New Delhi, 22–24 October 2010.

6. As contained in the “Report of the Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia 6-10 December 2021.”

Various ecumenical actors, including the WCC and its commissions, have propagated these convictions since the 1960s. Now more than ever before, Christians are invited to re-affirm them.

## **The Consultation: Themes**

According to the advisory group, the following themes recurred throughout the consultation, indicating that the group considered them to be important for relevant, contextually sensitive, and responsive programmatic work by the WCC:

*Partnership and Collaboration:* An inclusive approach to respond to racism, discrimination and xenophobia was continuously lifted as an appropriate approach. The consultation discouraged an exclusive approach in which the WCC will seek to work in a silo. The greatest returns from this programme will be dependent on strategic partnerships and collaborations with other similarly minded groups and institutions. The role of member churches can never be overstated; partnering member churches will be critical because they are on the ground and have the necessary social capital to be effective in local contexts. Working with suffering communities was emphasized and the consultation implored the WCC to reconsider the extent to which it can resource deprived communities but reiterated the importance of funding such communities, especially their life affirming anti-racist activities.

*More action and fewer statements:* There is need to intensify transformational and transformative actions guided by the felt needs of racialized communities from around the world. Participants reiterated that while statements are important, actions were more powerful and important statements. Both the WCC and member churches have a role in turning statements into actions. Actions that equip local communities to interrogate whiteness and white supremacy as root causes of racism and racial discrimination around the world.

*Theological, Biblical, and Ecumenical History resources:* There is need for theological and biblical resources that promote theological, ecumenical, and biblical insights that critique whiteness, white supremacy, white privilege, and power while embracing anti-racist work. These resources need to be written in plain and accessible language. In doing this, resources from past decades need to be properly reviewed and evaluated, updated from an anti-racist approach.

*Adequate resourcing of the programme:* There is need to assure and ensure that adequate resources (personnel and financial) are allocated to the programme. The success of the programme was tied to the resources it had for activities including in target communities and groups. Participants called upon churches to second staff to complement the existing staff, as well as allowing the WCC to tap from expertise that is already present in member churches.

*Reference Group:* The understaffing of the programme led the consultation to also widely consider the question of a Reference Group that can accompany the staff and the WCC as a whole.

*Whiteness, White privilege, White guilt, and White fragility* emerged as key themes that have to be addressed directly by churches, especially in the global north but also in the global south where racist whiteness infrastructure from the colonial era has been adopted and deployed creating new instances of whiteness, white privilege and white fragility in everything except skin colour.

*Intersectionalities of Racism and other oppressive variables:* Whereas racism can be confronted in all its manifestations, the consultation kept hearing the need to acknowledge the intersectionalities that exist between racism, xenophobia, economics, politics, gender, and disability. These intersectionalities make the environment in most societies toxic for and within racialized groups. The economic cost of racism received special focus and recurred throughout the consultation. It was reiterated that the success of this programme hinges on a concerted effort towards undressing the economic and political dimensions of racism.

*Restorative Justice, Recognition, Remorse, Repentance, Reparations, Restoration, and Transformation:* Closely connected to the intersectionalities is the theme of restorative justice or reparations for racialized groups that have endured centuries of discrimination, deprivation and exploitation. There is no way of undoing centuries of racism-based-economic development and deprivation without addressing the question of the denial of the reality of racism, especially by racially privileged persons. Participants reiterated the fact that without reparations, the Body of Christ cannot be healed. Reparation is not a subject for nation-states and corporations only, but for churches and ecumenical bodies, as well. In that context, it was suggested that racism audits, codes of conduct on racism, discrimination and xenophobia, as well as diversity review groups will go a long way in addressing the historical legacy of racism in churches and ecumenical bodies, as well as helping to monitor compliance. If

our aim is to bring lasting change, reparations and reparatory justice must be an integral part of the anti-racism work. It would be helpful to connect with the reparations movement, devising reparative ecclesiologies and missiologies, which address the hurts of the people who have been exploited and for the earth which is also in need of reparation.

*Committed Leadership:* One critical theme that kept coming back into the plenaries was leadership. The consultation affirmed and applauded the commitment of the WCC leadership in setting up this programme, as a response to the increased visibility of racial injustice throughout the world. Further, the consultation constantly emphasized the importance of having a committed leadership that can lead the churches to venture out of their comfort zones to interrogate the depth of racism and xenophobia in church, institutional and societal structures, and policies.

*Education:* There was unanimity among participants that anti-racist education will play a central role in the success of the programme. Education, formal and informal, has been central in instilling whiteness, racist and xenophobic attitudes and practices. In response, any work that seeks to undo what has been done through (mis)education will have to deploy anti-racist education to counter the effects of colonial education. Anti-racist education has to target both children and adults. Since white supremacy, whiteness, racism and xenophobia are effects of colonial legacies, the consultation belaboured the urgent need to *decolonize* education, theology, ecumenism, *reparations* and structures of governance including the WCC.

*Funding:* The consultation reiterated the need for adequate funding for the programme's activities. Furthermore, the consultation recommended funding activities of grassroots groups, in the manner of the PCR Special Fund.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Consultation: Challenges and Opportunities**

While acknowledging the commitment by the WCC to tackle racism, discrimination, and xenophobia, the consultation acknowledged that there are both challenges and opportunities that will impact this work.

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7. As contained in the "Report of the Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia 6-10 December 2021."

### *Challenges*

The consultation, as well as the advisory group, acknowledged that the process of working together on overcoming racism, discrimination, and xenophobia will meet with certain challenges. The process may reinforce existing tensions and difficulties within the WCC and beyond, or even create new ones. These challenges, tensions, and difficulties will have to be addressed and discussed openly in order to avoid obstructing our common task and calling. Part of this discussion needs to be a sincere and truthful commitment to *critical self-reflection*. All individuals, churches, and other communities must undertake the task of analyzing how the history of colonialism and the presence of neo-colonialism, as well as white supremacy, whiteness, and white privilege influence our faith, our ecclesial life and structures, our mission, and our message. This critical self-reflection then needs to be translated into a committed *critical praxis* of not only overcoming racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia, but also (neo-) colonialism, white supremacy, whiteness, and white privilege, and all their persistent and life-threatening consequences. Critical self-reflection and critical praxis are part of journeying together in the spirit of humility, truth-telling, metanoia, and, hopefully, reconciliation.

The specific challenges highlighted by the advisory group were:

- Reluctance by churches to critically self-introspect, especially regarding historical and unconscious racial biases at an institutional level.
- Reluctance by white and privileged Christians to confront whiteness and white privilege are stumbling blocks to racial justice and xenophobia free churches.
- Greater commitment to theoretical statements and hesitancy to commit to practical interventions by churches.
- Lack of adequate resources may make it impossible for the programme to reach out to all who need accompaniment, especially from poor communities.
- There is a danger of using “reconciliation” to frustrate far-reaching interventions in the attempts to overcome racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia, especially by churches in the global north that have benefited from white privilege and white supremacy.<sup>8</sup>

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8. As contained in the “Report of the Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia 6-10 December 2021.”

### *Opportunities*

According to the advisory group, this historical moment invites a unique global engagement to renew our faith commitment to dismantling the systems, policies, and relationships that promote and further codify racism. This moment calls us to participate in global, regional, and domestic efforts by civil society and the private and government sectors. The group acknowledged the opportunities that lie in the following:

- African Union Agenda 2063
- International Decade for People of African Descent 2015–2024
- the new UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent, a Pan African Network
- UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Global Black Lives Matter campaigns and similar Pan African movements

Racism, discrimination, and xenophobia are not simply spiritual problems, which only faith communities can address. These are worldly problems and/or crimes; to deal with them the ecumenical movement will need to collaborate with other institutions. These engagements were recommended by the Africa and African Diaspora (AAD) conference in October 2021 and affirmed by this consultation.

This historical moment also invites a unique global and collaborative engagement with the following groups and networks:

- International Dalit Solidarity Network
- Roma People's Solidarity Network
- Pan African Network
- Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network
- Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network
- Indigenous Peoples' Network

The advisory group affirmed a multi-continental approach (from the African continent, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, North America, Central America, and Oceania-Pacific), including voices from Indigenous peoples and the people of Palestine.

It further affirmed the uniqueness of this moment, which invites the commitment to decolonizing history and minds that leads to a rewriting of the narrative of these peoples in the history of the churches and the wider society. Such priorities encourage these groups to deepen their resolve to lead and to take their rightful place of responsibility for their own political, economic, environmental, and cultural liberation—and to engage more substantially the creative and innovative opportunities offered by this moment to envision and live into a new earth.

Many churches in our ecumenical fellowship are rethinking the way racism is a global problem. Therefore, we invite strategies and tools for churches to look internally and to hold themselves, institutions, and other people accountable. This also invites accountability for commitments made over time that have yet to be realized. These efforts in turn support tangible actions in this opportune moment.

For example, at the present moment, the WCC, the Council for World Mission, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Methodist Conference are working on an economic justice agenda through the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA). In this project, the organizations commit staff time and financial resources to working together on a common agenda. This might offer us a model for future work on racial justice.

## **Conclusion**

The increased visibility of racism, xenophobia, and related discrimination owes much to the power of social media. In the past, there was over-reliance on mainstream media, and information was almost always edited or censored. Editorial policies may have helped sweep examples of racism and xenophobia under the carpet. Social media and the ability to relay news in real time has meant that racism and xenophobia and related discrimination are now “in our faces.” Racism is a sin and a crime. All Christians are, therefore, called upon to take a stand and become more than non-racists. We are called to be anti-racist, anti-xenophobic, and anti-discrimination followers of Christ.

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A comprehensive list of WCC Publications can be found <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications>

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# Hate Speech and Whiteness

## Theological Reflections on the Journey Toward Racial Justice

During the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, initiated in 2013 at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the issue of racism has emerged as one of the pilgrimage's four common themes. The chapters that make up this publication represent a selection of the papers presented at a series of webinars organized in late 2020 by the Theological Study Group of the Pilgrimage. Organized around three major themes—whiteness, including its relationship to slavery; racism; and hate speech—the contributions represent an invitation to the ecumenical fellowship to engage in self-critical examination of how practices, orders, configurations, methodologies, and structures of the church(es) have perpetuated the discrimination, xenophobia, and racism that counter unity in Christ.



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