Special Issue: Racial Justice and Decolonising Christian Ethics

SCE

Studies in Christian Ethics
2024, Vol. 37(1) 39–48

DOI: 10.1177/09539468231213561
journals.sagepub.com/home/sce

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From Black Theology to Black Lives Matter and Back Again

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Abstract

This article is written by a descendant of enslaved Africans and explores the theological significance of Black bodies. Black bodies have been commodified, controlled and coerced by White hegemony, often lacking agency and self-determination. Using personal experience and contextual analysis, this article, drawing on Black theology inspired reflections, argues that we need to rethink how we conceive of Black bodies ethically, if Black lives are to really matter. The rehabilitation of Black bodies is achieved through a theological reappraisal of holiness and sacraments, underpinned by an embodied pneumatology, in which Black bodies are shown to be sacramental and worthy of mattering in a world underpinned by White supremacy.

Keywords

Black bodies, Black Lives Matter, Black theology, holiness, sacraments, commodification

My name is Anthony George Reddie and I am a descendent of enslaved Africans. I am proud of my name. I am proud to be called Reddie, my father's name. But Reddie is not an African name but a Scottish one. So, this is a constant and a poignant reminder that at some point in British history, a White Scottish person legally owned and controlled one of my ancestors, to the point of giving him, or her, their name—Reddie. This article seeks to reflect on the seeming casual phenomenon; Diasporan Africans carrying names that speak to our sense of non-being and as problematic Black bodies in history.

The decades-long struggle to end the monstrous institution that was the transatlantic slave trade had long been predicated on the belief that sentient human beings, the Black bodies of enslaved Africans, could not and should not be treated as objects, as chattel, as commodified things as opposed to human subjects. The famed Black British historian David Olusoga demonstrates how the indefatigable work of White abolitionists such as William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, all argued, using

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Christian theology as their base, that people created in the image and likeness of God should not be treated as commodified objects.[1] Richard Reddie amplifies this point when he states:

> The Quakers were one of the first groups to argue that Africans were made in the image of God, and were part of God's creation and inheritors of the spiritual and material freedoms won for them by Jesus Christ's sacrificial death. They questioned how, if an African could become a Christian, a fellow Christian who is made in the 'same' image could exploit or brutalize that individual.[2]

And yet, in 1833, when the British government sanctioned the end of chattel slavery, abolitionists such as Wilberforce and others had to concede to a brutal fact of realpolitik, namely that enslaved Africans were indeed chattel for whom a price could be calculated and for whom a debt needed to be paid for them to be redeemed. That price was calculated at 20 million pounds. The abolitionists against the transatlantic slave trade recognised that there was simply too much capital tied up in Black bodies for White hegemony to sanction their release without due financial recompense. African American Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas in her magisterial *Stand Your Ground* outlines the insipient belief in the sense of the sovereignty of White Anglo-Saxon defence of property and land, often enshrined in the popular aphorism 'An Englishman's home is his castle'.[3] That is, central to the rights of being White and Anglo-Saxon was the inalienable belief that land and commodity that had been accrued by an owner could not and should not be removed or they deprived of its pleasures without due process under the law. Black bodies, by definition of their not being White and not considered to be sentient beings, could not expect any such protections under the law—laws and customs created by White people for the benefit of White people.[4]

To be clear, I am not questioning the ethics of the abolitionists in accepting this bitter price of paying compensation to White slave owners, a good number of whom were White clergymen, in order to effect a semblance of freedom for enslaved Africans. Clearly, this was a dubious deal done under the rubrics of pragmatism and realpolitik. Rather, the issue at hand is the precedent it sets for the continued belief that Black bodies are commodities that lack any substantive ontological value when viewed through the lens of White hegemony and entitlement. Our bodies are still seen as things that are to be equated with commodity and property.

One quick example may suffice at this juncture to amplify this point. In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, I was interviewed on Radio 5 Live to comment on his death. The day before the scheduled interview, looting and vandalism

1. See David Olusoga, *Black and British History: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Books, 2016), pp. 216–32.
2. Richard Reddie, *Abolition: The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Colonies* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2007), p. 131.
3. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), pp. 4–11.
4. Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, pp. 48–89.

had broken out in several cities in the US as predominantly African Americans vented their fury at the outrage of yet another senseless death of a Black person at the hands of a militarised police force in the US. Yet, in the subsequent interview with myself, the interviewer repeatedly asked me to comment on and indeed condemn the looters and rioters for their desecration and destruction of property. I refused to be drawn on this matter—not because I condone such actions—to be clear, I did not nor do I condone such actions. But like Martin Luther King Jr., I do believe that riots are the language of the unheard. My refusal to comment, however, was born of the equation between the senseless murder of a sentient human being, whose life is incalculable, with that of mere property and commodity. But the fact that we could move seamlessly from one to the other, indeed to equate the one with the other, was tantamount to the belief that George Floyd's Black body could be equated with predominantly White property, which is exactly what had happened in 1833 to secure the so-called freedom of Black people, those deemed to be enslaved Africans.

To concede that there was a financial transaction to be made in order to free those who were deemed to be chattel after all, after decades of denial and counter argument for the inviolate nature of being a sentient human created in God's likeness, was to concede the sacred ground on which their anti-slavery work had been predicated for decades, namely that commercial value cannot be placed on human beings.

One sees something similar in terms of the pulling down of the Edward Colston statue in central Bristol in 2020. Once again, to be clear, I am not condoning the actions of the crowd who pulled down this monument to a slave trader. The toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol occurred as part of a Black Lives Matter protest on 8 June 2020. It can be argued that the pulling down or removal of statues has become a distraction against the wider issues of systemic racism that need to be addressed more than the removal of historic artefacts often ignored by most people in their daily activities. And yet, the in the wake of this action, the central concern for many was the desecration of property, with little thought to the grievous offence this statue had inflicted on the psyche of countless generations of Black people living in Bristol. Can anyone imagine a statue to a Nazi sympathiser standing erect and proud in a place of prominence, the excuse for its existence being that the said person had given away millions of pounds in philanthropy, erecting schools and concert halls—more property—and this making his egregious actions as a colluder with terror and human misery, now socially acceptable? Who can imagine that ever happening? And yet it happened to Black people for well over a century in the city of Bristol, because the offence against Black bodies, was for many, no offence at all.

The 'Black Lives Matter' movement emerged in order to counter the patently obvious fact that Black lives do not matter. If they did matter, then we wouldn't have needed a movement to assert what should be blindingly obvious to any rational, human being, namely that all lives matter and that by virtue of being a human being, you therefore have an intrinsic and an innate value. And yet, even a seemingly innocuous and necessary absurdity—having to argue that Black Lives matter—demonstrates the absurdity of Black life in and of itself, because to be a Black human should matter, without the need for a movement to assert it. But even this innocuous and necessary absurdity has been challenged by the parasitic and often racist, reactionary counter White movement of 'All

Lives Matter'. Funny how 'All Lives Didn't Matter' until Black people began to assert that they had a right not to be killed as mere chattel like objects under the strictures of White hegemony. So, All Lives Matter becomes a repudiation of the attempt by Black people to seek agency and self-determination, factors that were inimical to their existence when money changed hands, colossal amounts of money, to supposedly set Black people free in 1833. The negotiations for this transaction did not involve any Black people. We were the objects over which bartering took place, to determine our fates without any recourse being made to our human subjectivity and our sense of self-determination. The contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, initiated in the United States in July 2013 in the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin, is but the latest iteration of a Black liberation movement that has been in the making for centuries. Black Lives Matter is but the latest in a long line of determined Black liberationist efforts to assert the ontological value of Black bodies as sentient beings, imbued with intrinsic value.

Problems with Black Bodies

One of the fundamental issues to which the Black Lives Matter movement has addressed itself is the problematic impact Mission Christianity has had on the nature and existence of Black bodies. In using the term 'Mission Christianity' I am speaking of a historical phenomenon in which there existed (and continues to this day) an interpenetrating relationship between European expansionism, notions of White superiority and the material artefact of the apparatus of Empire. This form of Christianity became the conduit for the expansion of Eurocentric models of Christianity in which ethnocentric notions of Whiteness gave rise to notions of superiority, manifest destiny and entitlement.[5]

A central feature of Mission Christianity was its construction of the Black body as other. To understand why Black bodies do not matter in postcolonial, post-Brexit, Britain, we have to remind ourselves that in Mission Christianity, the Black body and therefore the lives attached to those bodies were considered expendable. Anthony Pinn has undertaken detailed work investigating the dialectic of the existential, material realities of Black bodies and the phenomenon that is Christianity.[6] In *Terror and Triumph*, Pinn rehearses the contested and troubled relationship between White slaveholding Christianity and Black bodies, outlining the levels of demonisation and virulent denigration that provided the essential backdrop to transatlantic chattel slavery.[7] Outlining the apparent ease and the complicity with which Christianity colluded with the epistemological frameworks that underpinned the machinery of slavery, Pinn writes:

5. See T.J. Gorringe, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2004). See also John M. Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2014).
6. See Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). See also Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (eds.), *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Anthony B. Pinn (ed.), *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
7. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, pp. 1–80.

> In short, Scripture required that English Christians begin their thinking on Africans with an understanding that Africans had the same creator. Yet they were at least physically and culturally different, and this difference had to be accounted for. As we shall see, a sense of shared creation did not prohibit a ranking within the created order, one in which Africans were much lower than Europeans.[8]

The sense of a deep prevailing anti-Black sentiment replete with notions of Greek antiquity[9] and practised within Western (particularly English), Missionary Christianity was given added piquancy in the deliberate attempt to use the developments of early Christian theology as a means of reinforcing the essentially depraved and base status of the Black body.[10]

Kelly Brown Douglas demonstrates how a particular outworking of Pauline, 'platonized' theology (one that downplays the concrete materiality of the body in favour of the abstract and the spirit) was used as a means of demonising Black bodies.[11] Kelly Brown Douglas writes:

> Accordingly, it is platonized Christianity that gives rise to Christian participation in contemptible acts and attacks against human bodies, like those against Black bodies. Not only does platonized Christianity provide a foundation for easily disregarding certain bodies, but it also allows for the demonization of those persons who have been sexualized.[12]

The Continued Challenge for Black Lives Matter

Slavery is long gone but anti-Black racism has long outlived the institution that helped to breathe it into life. In our contemporary era, the underlying framework of Blackness which is still symbolically seen as representing the problematic other, finds expression in a White police officer placing his knee on the neck of a Black man and despite the plaintive pleas of 'I can't breathe', the officer remains unmoved and maintains his violent posture until this Black man dies. One cannot understand the futility of this death unless you understand that this is no new phenomenon. White power has viewed Black flesh as disposable for past 500 years. The reason why Black theology came into being was simply to assert that our lives mattered in an era when we were viewed purely as chattel and objects to be placed on a financial ledger.

8. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, p. 6.
9. This phenomenon and theme have been explored by Robert E. Hood, *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).
10. This idea is taken from Kelly Brown Douglas's excellent study on Black bodies and how they have been policed and controlled within the religious framework of Christianity. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).
11. Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, pp. 3–38.
12. Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, p. 37.

Rethinking Holiness

In the next section, I want to rethink how we conceive of holiness and what we mean by being Holy. I am asserting this because I am arguing that if we imbued Black bodies with the sense of preciousness and being set apart, that which we reserve for inanimate objects like bread and wine or water, then perhaps we may come to see Black bodies as being far too valuable to be rendered as valueless and disposable, reduced to an economic equation when juxtaposed with material commodities of worth.

'Holy' is seen as a key characteristic of God. God is worthy of our devotion. The transcendent quality of God is found in God's awesome presence that is determined by God's holiness. When Moses encounters God in the form of a burning bush, Moses is asked to remove his sandals, because he is standing on Holy ground. The ground itself is not intrinsically Holy. The ground becomes Holy because it is infused with God's presence. To be identified as Holy is to be set apart for God's purposes alone, i.e. Holy isn't meant to be ordinary. When we identify people as pursuing 'Holiness' we often have images of individuals withdrawing from the world, often leading secluded and separated lives, as a means of remaining faithful and committed to a Holy God, i.e. to not be contaminated by the ordinary, the mundane and the tainted. Holiness is often linked to notions of purity and being without blemish or untarnished.

Oftentimes, being Holy or pursuing Holiness is often characterised by what we often do not do as much as what we partake of and partake in. Growing up in the Methodist tradition, there were strict prohibitions against gambling and drinking. I didn't take up the latter until I had left home to study at the University of Birmingham. The tradition has changed over the years and the presumption that most Methodists are teetotal no longer appears to be the case. I still do not gamble, however. I did buy National Lottery tickets when the lottery first started but soon stopped doing so, believing this to be an inequitable tax that fell disproportionately on the poor. Plus, my prevailing sense of incipient Methodist guilt soon got the better of me. I have not bought a lottery ticket in over 30 years.

As I have grown older, I have increasingly come to see Holiness as a social phenomenon that is embedded in the world, seeking to transform structures and systems for God's purposes, as opposed to removal from it. Seeing a Holy God as connected to the world, seeking to transform it into the likeness of God requires that those who profess to be committed to God are deeply engaged and embedded in the world.

Central to Christian practice over centuries has been that of 'Holy Communion'. Whatever our differing theologies surrounding what we think happens when we pray over bread and wine, what is commonly agreed is that something happens to these ordinary material things. We believe that for us, God is amazingly present in the ordinary things of the world. The whole notion of a sacrament is predicated on the action of God that transforms for us, the ordinary and the mundane, into the divine presence of God, made manifest in and through ordinary matter.

Several weeks ago, I was conversation with my brother Richard, who is the Director of Justice for Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). As we spoke, Richard made the following observation. He noted how schism in the Christian church has occurred over a number of concerns. People have left the church over gender—by people, I

take that to mean 'White people'—those of a more Catholic persuasion remaining unconvinced about women in priestly and episcopal roles. White people have left over sexuality and certainly over the sacraments. But to the best of his knowledge Richard had never heard of White people leaving the church because of their disgust over racism. Some sins are tolerable at best and of little consequence at worst. Women holding the host in the Eucharist is intolerable for some. People of the same gender engaging in intimate sexual activity is equally abhorrent. On both accounts people have left the church. However, witnessing hatred towards Black people and the concomitant systems of prejudice and power that have marginalised many and silenced them, has not resulted in thousands of irate White people leaving the church. In fact, like my brother, I cannot think of one White person who has ever left the church on account of their outrage at the treatment of the institution to their Black brothers and sisters.

As a Black liberation theologian, I am firmly committed to a belief that God infuses humanity with God's presence, so rendering humanity Holy. This is particularly the case for those bodies that have historically been considered 'less than', disposable, as chattel, as commodity. If God can transform bread and wine into something special and Holy, into a sacrament, then I believe that this God is committed to doing the same for those bodies considered wretched. Black bodies are sacramental.

Black liberation theology asserts that Black bodies are Holy. That our dark skin, which has often marked us out as something to be pitied or attacked, is special, something through which God's presence is to be found. James Cone describes this as ontological Blackness. A symbolic form of Blackness in which God in Christ is revealed through the prism of Black suffering, precisely because God's righteousness is revealed through weakness, marginalisation and persecution, often indicated in the historic presence of the cross. As James Baldwin once opined, 'White people discovered the cross through reading the Bible. Black people discovered the Bible through their encounter with the cross'.

Once we believe that despised Black bodies are Holy, that they are sacramental, then our attitude to Black people and indeed the very concept of Blackness, must change. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The year 2020 saw the murder of George Floyd. In two differing contexts, in two Black men who were very different in personalities and life experiences, we see the casual disregard for Black bodies. In both contexts, we also see some conservative White Christians happy to pronounce their commitment to the symbolic power expressed in ordinary elements changed by the actions of a priest, but have no commitment to sentient Black bodies who have also been created by God.

There is no holiness that is not social in its implications. There is no way we can be Holy in the abstract. Rather, being Holy requires us to be connected to the ordinary and everyday, including and especially connected to those bodies and people the world considers disposable and of little or no use, unless their value is connected to commodity or they themselves are viewed as commodity. One cannot be considered Holy or committed to following a Holy God if we believe that asylum seekers can be disposed of, sent off to other poor countries because we are somehow too good to take them. Holy is a deeply political and social enterprise and not a singular, abstract and remote concept. Inanimate objects cannot be Holy if we do not consider flesh and blood can be also!

Embodied Pneumatology

If we believe that God's spirit can animate and change the ontological value and status of ordinary things, then Black theology believes that God does and continues to renew Black bodies. A Black theology re-reading of the narrative of Acts of the Apostles, chapter two, is one that is bound up with the death of Stephen Lawrence. When, in verses 22–25, Peter speaks of the means by which Jesus was released from the chains of death, in order that a new humanity could emerge, it is my belief that Stephen's death is the catalyst that can and should bring about the possibility of a new Britain.

Can the UK, which still carries the scarlet stains of sin and oppression that is the collective blood of the faceless millions who were butchered in the name of Christ, move onto a higher plane, to renounce that past and embrace a new paradigm for the future? Are we willing to acknowledge the sins of the past? Is Britain willing to admit its faults, in respect of its treatment of Black bodies, especially those who are the descendants of enslaved Africans?

Within the Pentecost narrative, we witness a number of people being transformed and energised by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:17, Peter, quoting the words from the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32), states that:

> 'Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams'.

I assume, of course, that this includes young women and old women! The dreams and visions that seem to abound within the book of Acts are ones that are not the exclusive preserve of any particular group of people. The ability to be transformed and to prophesy, and to see visions and dream dreams is not restricted to any one ethnic or cultural group.[13] The Jerusalem that hosted pilgrims, following the festivals of 'Passover' and the 'Feast of Weeks', were cosmopolitan affairs. The emphasis that is given to the list of peoples and locations in Acts 2:5-13 indicates the diverse, pluralistic nature of the Pentecost event.

In conclusion, I want to recount what is at stake as we think about Black bodies, Holiness and the transformative nature of God's spirit that continues to inflame and animate and transmute the very nature of matter, so that what was once in evidence is changed and irrevocably made new and Holy, by the creative dynamism and genius that is God's very self.

I was born into a form of low evangelical Methodism where Holy Communion was the Lord's Supper, largely understood as a memorial to what our Lord Jesus Christ had done, without any huge presumptions on the part of the majority of the congregation that it was imbued with metaphysical properties that rendered it as of particular or a special sense of Holiness. For the most part, we took the elements only once a month and, on the occasions when it was celebrated, usually after an act of worship and not within it, the majority of the congregation would go home and not take the bread and wine.

13. Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 91–110.

Once I moved to Birmingham to undertake my undergraduate studies in Church history, I was soon exposed to diverse and many different understandings of what holiness looked like, especially within what many were now calling the Eucharist. By the time I began to work at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education as a Methodist funded Research Fellow, I was aware that there was such a thing as Anglo-Catholics, for whom the host was treated with extreme reverence.

So, I remember the occasion when I was asked to distribute the wine at a High Anglican service in the Queen's chapel at which the then Bishop of Birmingham Mark Santer was presiding, when I suddenly realised I was running out of wine. A student close by quickly topped up the receptacle in which the wine was held. Before I could gesture to the next person to come forward to receive, an ageing, White Anglican priest, moving with the speed and the precision of a stealthy panther, leapt in front of the person and issued a prayer over the elements so that they would maintain the properties of Holy elements. I was somewhat taken aback at his actions, not because I disagreed theologically with what he believed he was doing, but more at the speed with which he acted, which to be blunt, looking at the somewhat less than athletic appearance of his body, seemed highly unlikely. Clearly, a great deal was at stake in terms of what should happen to these elements and why his prayer was necessary in order to ensure the holiness of these elements.

Several months later, through a series of events that need not detain us at this juncture, it soon became clear that this same White priest was the one who presided over his largely Black Caribbean congregation with all the grace and subtlety of a colonial apparatchik ruling over backward natives on the so-called mission field back in the late nineteenth century. His racism, arrogance and seeming contempt for the subjectivities of his Black congregation was manifest.

My dealings with him were invariably fraught and extremely difficult. His congregation respected him as their priest because of their sense of devotion to the Anglicanism in which many of them had been formed back in the Caribbean. A few years after this initial encounter he left the Church of England for Rome, unable to countenance the existence of women priests in his Deanery.

At this juncture, I need to acknowledge the intersectionality of all the many bodies that are deemed transgressive by someone like this man. He clearly loved, indeed could imbue inanimate objects such as bread and wine with a ferocious devotion that I, as a continued low church, non-conformist, postcolonial refusenik, still don't get—although I do respect it—but he could not bring himself to dispense even an ounce of that same devotion to human beings, certainly not Black ones and certainly not women. I dare say the same of trans bodies that had they been greatly in evidence some 20 years ago, he would have despised them as well.

To reiterate, until we can view all bodies, including especially Black bodies as Holy, then I refute the notion that anything else is Holy. As a Black liberation theologian, I am never going to countenance mere things as Holy but not sentient beings, Black flesh and blood, Black spirit and matter, that has been infused and transmuted with the spirit of liberation that is God revealed in Jesus Christ, in the power of Holy Spirit. Black bodies are sacramental.

As we mark the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence and continue to live in the shadow of the murder of George Floyd, we are reminded that Black Lives Matter. We are reminded that the ongoing battle to mark Black bodies as Holy, and beyond capitalistic and materialistic value, is an ongoing one. As a Christian theologian, I remained convinced that all lives matter—that all of us are created in the image and likeness of God—but until Black Lives Matter, until Black bodies are viewed as sacred, then our talk of seeking holiness and indeed our construal of what is Holy remains a form of cheap grace, a blasphemous outrage to the God that created Black bodies in the first place and whose presence continues to be revealed most visibly through the lens of all those who suffer and are arraigned on contemporary crosses of White supremacy.

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