

The Thirty-seventh

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

**FROM BLACK THEOLOGY TO
BLACK LIVES MATTER
AND BACK AGAIN**

delivered by

Professor Anthony Reddie

Director, Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture

at Westminster Abbey

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and

at Keble College, Oxford

on Friday 26 May 2023



The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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This Lecture is the thirty-seventh in the series, and details of previous lectures may be found overleaf. The text of most of these lectures can be downloaded for free from the website of the Dean's Office at King's College London (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/dean/eric-symes-abbott-memorial-lecture-archive>); if you are unable to download the text, please contact the office to be sent a hard copy. Audio recordings of the lectures since 2014 are also available on the same website.

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Tel: 020 7848 2333; Email: dean@kcl.ac.uk

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FROM BLACK THEOLOGY TO BLACK LIVES MATTER AND BACK AGAIN

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 lecture 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 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 real politicks, 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 £20million. 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 incipient 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 In other words, 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 real politick. 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 in the lecture 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 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. Yet in the subsequent interview, 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 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 the former, George Floyd's Black body, could be equated with predominantly White property, because this 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, 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 concerts 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; ie, you matter. 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 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 nature Mission Christianity has had on the nature and existence of Black bodies. In using the term 'Mission Christianity' I am speaking of an 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 slave-holding Christianity and Black bodies, outlining the levels of demonization 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

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 antiquity⁹ and practiced 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 favor of the abstract and the spirit) was used as a means of demonizing Black bodies.¹¹ She 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 sexualised.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 still symbolically is 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.

Black and Womanist theologies have focussed on the significance of Black bodies. In many respects, Anthony Pinn has been the chief protagonist in this emerging work exploring the theological significance of the Black body. Pinn has sought to assist Black religious scholars in interpreting the Black body for meaning, exploring the many ways in which dress, comportment, expressiveness all connote a

hermeneutics of style, by which the Black body seeks to refuse the limitations of double-consciousness.

In this regard, it is difficult to under-estimate the significance of WEB. Dubois' classic text *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903. Dubois detailed a phenomenon he termed 'Double Consciousness'. In using this term, Dubois articulating the psychological struggle at work in the consciousness of Black people seeking to reconcile two opposing realities at war within the Black psyche.¹³ This dialectical struggle was one between competing notions of truth, whether determined by a self-affirming internalised form of subjectivity, what Pinn calls the quest for 'complex subjectivity'¹⁴ against which, there is an externalised form of negation and objectification. Dubois' most memorable comment in this book that has, to a great extent, helped to define Black Diasporan discourse over the course of the last century, was that the "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line."¹⁵ Dubois argues that this dialectical struggle, between these two "unreconciled strivings,"¹⁶ have continued to fight their tumultuous struggle within the battlefield of the Black mind.

Pinn's theorising on the Black body as the site for theological reflection has been an intellectual transformation, that has created an alternate vantage point for assessing the agency of Black people. His acute dissection of the machinery of torture and oppression of Black bodies and its impact on Black subjectivity, is a dramatic scholarly breakthrough.¹⁷ Pinn's reflections on the transgressive nature of the Black body have opened vistas for later works that have focussed on the corporeality of the Black body and its theological significance. One can see this significance in the later developments in Womanist theology and ethics, in which Womanists such as M Shawn Copeland¹⁸ and Eboni Marshall Turman,¹⁹ for example, have developed scholarly work reflecting on the intellectual significance of Black women's bodies. My own scholarship as a Participative Black theologian seeking to reflect on lived experience, holding Practical theology and Black theology in tension, has been influenced by Pinn's intellectual focus on the Black body.

In my own work, I have argued that to belong to British society and that of the church, for a Black person, necessitates at some intuitive level, a denial of one's self. To be Black is to have one's experiences, history and ongoing reality ignored, disparaged, and ridiculed. It is to be rendered an insignificant presence, amongst the many who are deemed one's betters and superiors. The awful truth a so-called Christian country like Britain has to face is the extent to which its own Judaic Christian traditions have been and continue to be a source for violence and hatred against the other – the foreigner – those who are 'not of us' – ie, often Black people.²⁰

Rethinking Holiness

In the next section of my talk, 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; ie, 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 – 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 not tarnished.

Oftentimes, being Holy or pursuing Holiness is characterised by what we 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 thirty 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 in 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' – and those of a more Catholic persuasion remain 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 have people left the church. But witnessing hatred towards Black people and the concomitant systems of prejudice and power that have marginalised many and silence 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. 2020 saw the murder

of George Floyd. In two differing contexts, in two Black men 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.

Stephen Lawrence

As I said, this year marks the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Stephen was brutally murdered on 18 April 1993, in the south-east London borough of Eltham. This was a horrific racist assault by a group of White youths. Two of the suspects - Neil Acourt, then 17, and Luke Knight, who was 16 - were initially charged with the murder but the Crown Prosecution Service dropped the case citing insufficient evidence.

Following Stephen Lawrence's death, his parents led a vigil and prolonged anti racist campaign, in their efforts to attain justice for their murdered son. This faith based campaign (in conjunction with other Black-led social and cultural organisations) challenged the might of the British establishment. The Metropolitan Police Force²¹ was specifically targeted due to their role in the initial investigation.

Stephen Lawrence's close friend, another young Black British youth, had initially phoned for the police, after Stephen and himself had been attacked. The lengthy (and largely unexplained) delay in arriving at the scene of the crime, coupled with their decision to initially arrest the young Black victim, was cited as being instrumental in the later failure of the case in court. Monumental mistakes were made in this case, as a largely White-run and -staffed police force displayed inherent racist practices in their investigation. Crucial pieces of evidence were overlooked and key people not interviewed.

The ongoing political agitation of the Lawrence family finally led to a government-commissioned inquiry, which was overseen by a notable member of the establishment, Sir William MacPherson, a retired High Court Judge. MacPherson's report, published in February

1999,²² was a landmark publication because it enshrined in the British lexicon the term ‘institutional racism’. The British police and other members of the White-controlled establishment (including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other public state-run bodies) were forced to concede that systemic and systematic racialised practices were endemic to their corporate ways of working. The MacPherson report curtailed, once and for all, the commonsense subterfuge and denial of White authority to their complicity in terms of racial injustice as it collides with Black bodies in Britain.²³

I believe that Neville and Doreen Lawrence have been the prophets of our age. They are Holy people. I believe that through the unrelenting pain and grief at the murder of their son, Stephen, the Lawrences have been inspired, at great personal cost, to proclaim the liberative and prophetic challenge of the Gospel.

For many in Britain, Stephen Lawrence’s death has become an iconic and paradigmatic moment not unlike the death of Emmett Till in the USA in 1955. The death of Stephen Lawrence galvanised the Black community in Britain like never before. It brought into existence a radical and relevant form of Black theology that has forced major concessions and apologies from the White run power structures in Britain. The redemptive forces of God’s prophetic word, coursing through the bruised and emotionally battered lives of the Lawrences, have given rise to a seismic change within the body politic of this country and her relationship to Black people. In colloquial terms, the ‘cat is now out of the bag’. White hegemony can no longer deny the existence of institutional racism in this country.

Theologically, I am arguing that God’s spirit has infused Black bodies, so enabling us to become prophetic figures whose presence signals the values of somebodiness for all those who have been cast to the margins as disposable and inconsequential entities. In the Prologue to John’s gospel, it states “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Hence, the flesh matters. Context, social location and geography matters. Jesus dwelt amongst the landless poor of Galilee.²⁴ His movement located itself amongst the artisans far removed from the theocratic centre of Jerusalem.²⁵ Jesus has more to do with beaten and

broken bodies of those deemed irrelevant and disposable than he does with grand monument to the forces of empire and White power, or with decorated Bishops and Archbishops crowning an elderly White man of privilege.

Black theology aligns itself against the structural and systemic forces that stalk this world, and not relegate them to a brief prelude before the 'Eschaton'. In using the term 'Black Theology', I mean a radical rethinking of how we conceive of God and Jesus in light of the ongoing suffering and oppression of Black people in a world run and governed by White people. Black theology identifies the God revealed in Jesus as committed to the liberation and the freeing of Black people from racism and oppression.

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 every day, 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. In other words, 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 chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles 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 Acts text 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.²⁶ The Jerusalem that hosted pilgrims, following the festivals of Passover and the Feast of Weeks, was a cosmopolitan affair. 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.

At the very heart of the God-inspired transformation of human persons, is the clear sense of God’s love and commitment to diversity and difference. In the account, we hear of people speaking in their mother tongue. There is no presumption of pre-eminence in terms of language, culture or expression. To put it bluntly, the class-based notions of high European scholasticism that seems to pervade western Christianity²⁷ cannot be justified on Scriptural grounds. These are cultural appropriations (which, of course, have their value if we do not become slaves to them, or if they are not used to enslave and diminish others) that are human constructs, not Divine precepts.

The ability to have visions and dream dreams are the preserve of all human kind. Let me reiterate – Black bodies are Holy. The God of all, in Christ, has called all humanity into an unconditional relationship

with the Divine. The need to be inspired, coupled with the possibility of transformation, is the potential that reside within every human being, especially within Black bodies.²⁸ Any society that prevents or precludes certain members of its citizens from realising the true extent of these possibilities will have to answer to God.²⁹

A society that has constricted and restricted the opportunities afforded to Black people, is one that needs to acknowledge its faults and be redeemed by the power of God. As the 21st century begins to take shape, we need, more than ever before, an affirming and respectful society. Not one that 'tolerates' people who are perceived as 'different' or 'other'.³⁰

This new century should be one where all societies and nations acknowledge difference and understand the ways in which one's own individual identity can be enhanced through an engagement with others.³¹ We need societies and nations where all people are recognised and acknowledged as possessing the spark of genius and being comprised of the raw materials from which brilliance can be mined.³² One that recognises problematic bodies as Holy. One that can invest as much commitment in bodies and people as it does in terms of objects and materials.

The dreams and visions of Pentecost remind us that God is bigger and beyond the inherent bias, prejudice, clan or ethnic loyalties that bedevil this and previous eras. The visions and dreams that arise from my Black liberationist reading of Pentecost are related to the concerns and hopes I carry, as a Black person of African descent, a descendant of enslaved Africans.³³ They are inseparable from my existence, and those of my forebears. It is my hope, that the Spirit of God, as manifested in Acts chapter two, will enable Black people, to realise their innate, God-given talent, for the benefit of all peoples, in this and every nation in God's creation. In the final analysis, it is nothing less than a hope in the fuller realisation of the Kingdom of God.

In the final few minutes, 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.

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 I 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 had disagreement 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 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 19th 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 refusnik, 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 had they been greatly in evidence some twenty years ago, he would have despised them as well.

To reiterate, until we can view all bodies, including and 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 battle to mark Black bodies as Holy and beyond capitalistic and materialistic value, is an ongoing one. As a Christian theologian, I remain 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.

Thank you!

¹ See David Olusoga, *Black and British History: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Books, 2016), pp. 216-232.

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: Orbis, 2015), pp. 4-11.

⁴ Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, pp. 48-89.

⁵ See TJ Gorringer, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2004); and 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); and 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.

⁸ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, p. 6.

⁹ This phenomenon and theme has 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' excellent study on Black bodies and how they have been policed and controlled within the religious framework of

Christianity: Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With it? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

¹¹ Brown Douglas *What's Faith Got To Do With it?*, pp. 3–38.

¹² Brown Douglas *What's Faith Got To Do With it?*, p. 37.

¹³ See WEB Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Press, 1989; 1st published 1903), p. 3

¹⁴ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, pp. 82-107.

¹⁵ Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. xxxi.

¹⁶ Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, pp. 27-77.

¹⁸ See M Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2009).

¹⁹ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁰ See Anthony G Reddie, *Working Against The Grain: Reimagining Black Theology in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 9-34.

²¹ The overarching authority for over-seeing policing in the capital city, London.

²² *Report of An Inquiry by Sir William MacPherson of Cluny, Advised by The Right Revd Dr John Sentamu and Dr Richard Stone: Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO), 1999).

²³ I have challenged notions of this 'Commonsense' refusal by White authority to engage with racial injustice in a previous piece of work; see my exercise entitled 'The Quest for Racial Justice' in Anthony G Reddie, *Acting in Solidarity* (London: DLT, 2005), pp. 109-119.

²⁴ See William R Herzog III, *Jesus, Justice and The Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 191-216.

²⁵ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989), pp. 195-230.

²⁶ Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 91-110.

²⁷ See Mukti Barton, 'I am Black and Beautiful' in *Black Theology: An International Journal* (Vol.2, No.2, July 2004), pp. 167-187

²⁸ Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation*, pp. 30-35.

²⁹ James H Cone, *Risks of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 130-145.

³⁰ Bhikpu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

³¹ Nancy Lynne Westfield, 'Teaching For Globalized Consciousness: Black professor, White Student and Shame' in *Black Theology: An International Journal* (Vol.2, No.1 January 2004), pp. 73-83.

³² See my analysis of the psycho-social dimensions of liberation in the dramatic sketch 'Love Is The Answer' in Anthony G Reddie, *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God-talk* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2006).

³³ See Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal* (London: SPCK, 2000). Beckford identifies Pentecost as the key theological motif for Black British theology, for it encapsulate the vision of a pneumatologically-inspired ideal for community and belonging - one in which difference and racialised categories are exploded.