Black churches: contributing to cohesion or polarising Christians and other faith groups?

Introduction

I estimate that there may be as many as 500,000 committed Black Christians in the UK, and for better or for worse, I am one example, maybe even a shining example, of what the Black Church they have created in Britain produces. Since the autumn of 1968, this socio-religious space has provided me with somewhere of 'shelter and rescue', as Robert Beckford calls it. And because, as Beckford also says, 'at the heart of the Black Church is a desire to transform and empower',[1] I have been more than sheltered and rescued; I have also been coached and corrected, moulded and made, prayed for and anointed, until today I am what I am: someone abundantly clear about my identity as a Christian man of Caribbean British heritage. Please forgive me if in this presentation I am less than sublimely objective, dispassionate and coolly intellectual. Like Richard Reddie in his recent book, 'I cannot pretend to be a disinterested observer'.[2]

I want to take time to investigate this topic, from my own perspective, before inviting your observations, input, and even your contradictions. First, I will examine the notion of 'Black Churches', then I will turn my attention to the second question posed by my topic; namely, whether these churches contribute to cohesion or polarisation.

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[1] R Beckford, Dread and Pentecostal, SPCK 2000, p.5
[2] Richard Reddie, Abolition, Lion Hudson, 2007, p.16

Black Churches

Let me begin then by addressing what I mean by 'Black Churches'. Neither of the two terms 'Black' or 'Church' is easy to define, so let me set my own parameters. By Black, I mean people of African and Caribbean heritages, plus others who voluntarily describe themselves as Black, such as some Asians. The debate about the meaning of Black has been conducted with vigour in recent years, often viewed through sociological, political and theological prisms. Sociologically, Black has been synonymous with Ethiopian, or African; most specifically sub-Saharan African. Today, we generally use Black to refer to dark skinned people of African descent.

Politically, Black is used as a symbol of oppression and resistance to racism; a theme that has been teased out in great detail by Beckford and others.[3] Beckford goes as far as to suggest that even White people can be politically Black if they engage in anti-hegemonic resistance against White society. The sociological and political use of Black sometimes converge in the case of some Asians who because they are not White and experience racism at the hands of racist Whites, they align themselves with people of African descent as Black. Theologically, Black is used as a signifier by which to critique the human experience of racism; hence, the discipline of 'Black Theology'. Here it is felt that there is a particular theological expression that emerges because of the experience of suffering, at the hands of White people, the attempt to diminish Black humanity. As Jagessar and Reddie, the editors of a recent publication point out, 'we use the term 'Black' to identify ourselves as a

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[3] Beckford, Dread and Pentecostalism

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socially constructed 'other' when juxtaposed against the dominant Eurocentric discourses that dominate the normal picture and definition of what it means to be really 'British'.[4]

As for being churches, as distinct from being 'Black', it's worth listening to James Cone, in his seminal work, 'Black Theology and Black Power'. He describes the church as a 'people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man'.[5] If we accept this definition, then it stands to reason that the church owes its *raison d'etre* to the alleviation of a human condition of oppression. Indeed, Cone's main charge against White Christians in America, and, by extension, in other parts of North America and Europe, is that they somehow claimed to be church whilst simultaneously being condoners and perpetrators of oppression upon Black people. The bible reminds us that you cannot serve two masters; you must make a choice. And so, Church cannot both claim to serve God in holiness whilst at the same time serve Satan and his creation, racism, that denies the image of God in man.

Church then is first and foremost a people called into existence by God to glorify Him by liberating those that are bound and oppressed. 'Come to me', Jesus said, 'you that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest'. Liberation is at the heart of the remit of what it means to be church. And the usefulness of any suffix or prefix in addition to 'Church' must be judged by the extent to which it highlights this cardinal purpose. Black Churches in America,

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[4] Miahael Jagessar & Anthony Reddie eds., Postcolonial Black British Theology, Peterborough: Epworth, 2007, pxiii
[5] James Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, Harper and Row, 1969, p.63

as in Britain, emerged and became colour-coded at a time of difficulty for Black people, using the signifier 'black' to point to their primary mission field. And both there and here they have continued to find meaning even in what could be regarded as calmer waters, racially speaking.

The people in Britain most closely associated with these churches are those and their descendants from the Caribbean who came and settled here since the post 1940s' Windrush era. To Caribbean people can be added Africans of direct African heritage and Asians from Africa and Asia, who have added their presence to the Black churches. These churches are, in the main, from the Oneness and Trinitarian Pentecostal and Holiness traditions; as well as from, for example, African and Asian Indigenous church traditions. As Roswith Gerloff makes clear in the first in-depth analysis of these churches, there is a wide variety of historical, theological, doctrinal and denominational traditions represented.[6] Being viewed through the prism of colour can only ever be one vantage point when relating to these churches.

But why call them 'Black'?

I remember reading an article that has been long lost, in which the writer roundly castigated those who supported the idea of referring to churches by skin colour. It is fair to say that he believed this to be divisive, even demonic in its divisiveness. I was never sure whether the writer's problem was unease with the term 'Black' or whether he genuinely worried that if some insisted on calling themselves 'Black Church' then others may start calling themselves

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[6] Roswith Gerloff, A Plea for British Black Theologies, Peter Lang, 1992, p.51

'White Church' and that that polarity might lead to racial confrontation or even a race war. However one views his and other people's reasoning, it is a fair challenge to ask, 'why call churches by colour'? Let me attempt something of a chronological response.

Back in the day, from the 1950s and onwards, Christians came to Britain from those parts of the world mentioned earlier, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. As is normal, these Black people, then as now, belonged to denominations of various types, including mainstream churches such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptists, Reformed. They also belonged to churches such as the Seventh Day Adventists and a wide range of Church of God, Holiness and Apostolic Pentecostal churches. The experience of those early migrants, at a time when the only churches were those peopled and operated by the White indigenous population was sobering. One historian, Adrian Hastings, makes the observation that 'immigrants found the existing churches mostly staid, elderly and very little interested in them'.[7] All the signs are that the reason for White disinterest was quite simply the dark pigmentation of the new migrants. Still today, colour prejudice feeds and informs the worldview of many. From early on, Black people in the post Windrush era, graphically describe from personal experience the context they found in Britain: for example, their experience on the bus, when looking for rooms to rent, on the job, in education, in fact anywhere they cared to look, their reception was as cold as the winter weather they had to get accustomed to.   Io Smith

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[7] Adrian Hastings, A History of English Christianity 1920-1990, SCM Press1991, p.559

complains, 'I was looking for love and warmth and encouragement. I believed that the first place I would find that was in the Church, but it wasn't there'.[8]

Not even Black Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and Baptists could find a home amongst their White brothers and sisters, and the plight of Black Pentecostals was no better. Not that coming from exclusivist Holiness/Pentecostal backgrounds there was likely to be many converts to what they viewed as 'nominal mainstreamism', even were those churches warm and welcoming. But the white existing churches could have offered a place to 'katch' or shelter for a while, whilst working out what to do next. The combination of a missiological desire to plant the Holiness/Pentecostal churches to which they belonged from home coupled with the icy cold rejection from mainstream churches meant that almost as soon as they arrived in Britain new churches began to be formed. They initially began in people's living and bed rooms, graduating on to school, community and church halls; then to the acquisition of redundant, often dilapidated, church buildings. In myriad ways these Black Christians demonstrated an intense aptitude to transplant their spiritual homes because of what Gerloff calls a 'sense of mission' to their own people and to wider society.[9]

Initial White reactions to these new Black churches was sociological, not theological. On the one hand, some thought that these people were forming their own churches because of their psychotherapeutic need to comfort them in their deprivation and alienation from White society. On the other hand,

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[8] Io Smith, An Ebony Cross, Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1989, p.40
[9] Gerloff, p23

some saw them as divisive and militant, an inappropriate response to exclusion and oppression, by engaging in Black struggle liberation. Hastings observed however that these churches were not 'Black' in principle, only in membership.[10] Hastings probably overstates the case, but he has a point and whatever the reason for these churches' emergence, one thing was clear to White observers, religious and secular; these were sociological constructs, which, if they had anything to do with religion at all, they were 'sects' not churches. The fact that all of the early Black churches were transplants from people's homelands, sometimes with White headquarters in the US, escaped virtually all onlookers. They saw them as manifestations of circumstance, 'bastardised children of rejection', as someone, Joel Edwards I believe, puts it.

From this sociological stand point then, analysts sought not to label these pseudo churches based upon their official denominational names or ideology, but according to the sociological phenotype of their followers. Suddenly, it mattered not what denomination you were from, New Testament Church of God, Church of God of Prophecy, Cherubim and Seraphim, Seventh Day Adventist, Shiloh Apostolic, et al., you were from a Black Church. Bishop Wilfred Woods points out in the first Directory of these Churches in 1984 that the term 'Black-led Church' was first coined and applied by White Church leaders.[11] Indeed, when this first was used, Black leaders rejected it, one saying 'this is not how we see ourselves'.[12] All indications are that the early pioneers of these churches understood their churches as universal in

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[10] Hastings, p621
[11] Wilfred Woods in AWUCOC Directory, 1984.
[12] Gerloff

missiological scope, and they sought to minister so. They focussed upon establishing the churches they knew as the vehicles for rescuing their own people from the ravages of a racist society, but at the same time they reached out to the wider community; often holding meetings in the markets, and leafleting the neighbourhoods where they met for worship. All to no avail, as the few Whites who responded, quickly went away once they found that the congregants were Black and for the most part culturally different. I have concluded that a key reason whey Black Churches have remained Black is due to the colour prejudice of Whites, Christians and non-Christians alike. What is it about the white psyche that makes it feels it cannot come under black leadership?

Alongside the socio-political-theological discourse about Black and Church, there has been a lively parallel discourse within the Black Church as to the legitimacy of terms like 'Black', 'Black-led', or 'Black-majority' Churches. A corresponding question was raised by the editor of the very first issue of Black Theology in Britain in 1998, when Emmanuel Lartey asked, 'what is it about colours in theology?'[13] The first serious interrogation of this was by Arlington Trotman in 1992.[14] Trotman cited one Black Church leader, Malachi Ramsay saying that such practice was 'degrading and lacking in respect'. Trotman concluded that 'it would be more precise if these churches were named according to their historical and theological foundations'. This is because, according to Trotman, 'the Body of Christ has not been caste in colour, class or creed, but the word was made flesh for all and racial barriers were broken

[13] Emmanuel Lartey ed, Black theology in Britain, issue 1, 1998, p7
[14] Arlington Trotman, Black, Black-led, or what? In Joel Edwards ed., Lets Praise Him Again, Eastbourne: Kingsway, p12-35

down in the crucifixion and resurrection'. Trotman's preferred classification for the churches so-called Black Church, was 'Holiness-Pentecostal Church'.

The debate over the colouring of these churches was reignited recently by Mark Sturge who argued that the term 'Black Majority Church' was a more excellent name.[15] For Sturge, Black majority focussed on the ethnicity of the majority of members rather than leaders, and was self-naming; better therefore than the Black-led imposed my White liberals, and better also than Holiness Pentecostal because that term had foreign roots in an unsavoury racist past. My own views, teased out in my recent book, Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity, argues for objectivity and pragmatism.[16] The sociological, political and theological use of Black, even when applied to church, is fine when used with clear reasoning and purpose. However, what is far better is to use the names churches give themselves, rather than the short-hand social classification of the use of the term 'Black' to identify them. I recognise however that without a signifier like 'Black' the liberative nature of the churches in question may not be as clear as it might be.

Are Black Churches contributing to cohesion or polarising Christians and other faith groups?

The term "community cohesion" has been popularised by the governmental in recent times. This has been so particularly since the disturbances in places like Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001. A report published by the

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[15] Mark Sturge, Look what the Lord has done, Milton Keynes: Scripture Union
[16] Joe Aldred, Respect, 2006

government highlights their findings into the underlying factors hindering or enabling community cohesion.[17]   Among the key factors identified as hindering community cohesion is that communities tend to, metaphorically, live in silos, or run along parallel lines; with the effect that different peoples' 'lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful exchanges'. The report found that issues of importance in effecting and maintaining cohesion are empowerment, participation, associational activities and common purpose, supporting networks and reciprocity, collective norms and values, trust, safety, and belonging. In these matters, the Home Office takes a lead, followed by the department of Communities and Local Government, but cohesion is meant to be at the heart of all departments, as the Government attempts to make a multi-faceted society, what used to be called a multi-cultural society (until Trevor Phillips told us the term is bad for us) cohere across cultures, faiths, class, gender and race/ethnicity. The report states that 'community cohesion is not something that is achieved once and for all; it is an ongoing process that requires sustained commitment' at all levels. The very reason why cohesion is necessary, i.e. diversity, militates against achieving it.

I beg to suggest that the government is a 'Johnny come lately' to the cohesion debate. From the early centuries of the first millennium the church was already thrashing out how you can make the concept of Trinity work. How do three persons make one God and one God three persons in a 'Blessed Trinity'? Although not all Black Churches are Trinitarian, cohesion has been a

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[17] Community Cohesion: A report of the independent review team chaired by Ted Cantle. http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/communitycohesionreport.pdf

major preoccupation for all of them, though expressed differently. Almost from their point of initiation in this country these churches began to seek to work on cohesion projects. These attempts can be seen in the work of the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership, the Zebra Project, IMCGB, AWUCOC, ACEA, CBLC and a host of other 'ecumenical' projects aiming to bring coherence to their diversity. There is a natural tension between diversity and unity and to discuss whether Black Churches have been a help or a hindrance in cohesion we may need to look at whether they have encouraged and enabled the qualities identified in the government report mentioned above: empowerment, participation, associational activities and common purpose, supporting networks and reciprocity, collective norms and values, trust, safety, and belonging. Again, I beg to suggest that Black Churches do.

Black Churches and agencies have been better at relating to their own communities and other churches and less adept at relating to other faiths. This is not surprising given that these churches are relatively new and preoccupied with securing their existence. The complexity of interfaith relations has almost inevitably been put on the back burner and is only in recent times receiving some attention. For example, this writer represents the Black Churches locally on the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group; the Council of Black Led Churches has a representative on the Birmingham Council of Faiths; nationally I represent the Black Majority Churches on the government's Faith Communities Consultative Council; and the Minority Ethnic Christian Affairs department of Churches Together in England has a representative from the Black Churches on the Interfaith Network. This may

not as yet represent 'cohesion', but there certainly is the beginning of relationships.

To further answer this question, we need to look behind the term 'Black Church' to what more these churches do and what more they symbolise. I have already shown that Black churches have theological and historical existences. Also I have shown that these churches did not seek to identify themselves as Black churches, rather, they have been contextually named so, and ultimately have embraced the notion of colour-coding in a racialised British context. It is worthy of note that many of these churches exist in other parts of the world where they are not colour defined. For example, can we imagine referring to the New Testament Church of God in Jamaica as a Black-led, or Black-majority Church? Probably not. So, what more do these churches do and what more do they signify? Here, it's probably important to say that Black churches in Britain are at least as significant for what they do as for what they signify.

In the social sphere of education, employment, housing, health and culture, Black churches have performed a crucial role for Black people and increasingly for wider society. Yet, from the inside, Selwyn Arnold criticised the Black Church for over-emphasising its spiritual ministry while neglecting the socio-economic needs of its members.[18] However, it is clear that the issue is not one of the absence of social involvement, but, about the depth and breadth of that involvement. One observation of hindrance to effective

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[18] Selwyn Arnold, From Scepticism to Hope, Grove Books, 1992, p53

social engagement is that initially, at least two of the key Black Churches, though Black in membership here, owed allegiances to White headquarters abroad whose programmes they ran without due regard to local needs. Responding to organisational demands that were often packaged not as obedience to the church, but to Christ, whilst responding to social needs presented a dichotomy that was not often well managed. It has therefore taken time for these churches and newer expressions of them to emerge with a clearer understanding of how a radical commitment to Jesus Christ's gospel can also mean radical commitment to social justice.

To the extent that they have embraced a social gospel agenda, they have been a signifier of hope to a hard pressed people. One Black person I spoke to recently said that although not a regular church goer, knowing that there is a Council of Black-led Churches in Birmingham makes her 'feel good'. These churches have provided culturally-sensitive spaces and places for Black people through Sunday Schools, Saturday Schools, other Education programmes like Black Boys Can; Housing Associations like Nehemiah, nurses in the Health Service and as volunteers to check people's blood pressure at luncheon clubs; and the list goes on. In the social sphere the Black Pastor has emerged as a community worker, advocate and friend in an often friendless world. Holding communities together, helping them to cohere, by strengthening the weak, they and many in their congregations have been the social workers that Social Services don't pay.

Politically, Black churches are only now beginning to carve out a role for themselves. There is a good reason for this. As I have pointed out earlier, historians and sociologists, Black and White, often assume and attempt to prove in theses, that the reason Black churches exist in Britain is because of racism. Based on this hypothesis, they then go on to parallel British Black Churches with US ones, which in the main emerged as a 'Freedom Movement', as is described by Gayraud Wilmore in his work 'Black Religion and Black Radicalism'.[19] However, as I have pointed out in my own work, the emergence of Black Churches in Britain was not primarily in response to racism, which was a contributory factor, but not a central one. The central rationale in Britain was missiological. This mission/evangelism model lacked the political and economic radicalism of the Black American churches that had this in their DNA. British Black Churches were largely transplants from the Caribbean and later Africa, rather than the indigenous and organic ones in the US responding to Black dehumanisation by Whites. Ironically, although not built for the purpose, the experience of racism in Britain means that it is a matter of when, not if, the Black Churches will turn their attention to how political they can be. In a recent meeting between Baroness Amos and Black Church Leaders, she pointedly remarked, 'you don't seem to know how much political power you have'. As Robert Beckford has pointed out, the Black Church in Britain needs to develop a political theology to accompany its emphasis upon mission and social engagement.[20] The signs are good, but still the Black Church in Britain is more in potential than actualisation mode, politically speaking.

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[19] Gayraud Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, New York: Orbis, p74
[20] Beckford, Dread and Pentecostalism

Theologically, Black Churches in Britain have stuck uncritically to a mainly Pentecostal code that owes its existence to the modern non-conformist revivals that emerged in the US around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Century. Again, because these were transplanted churches, they came doctrinally pre-packaged and often 'theology averse'. This is not very helpful because as Gustavo Gutierrez suggests, theology is 'the critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word of God'.[21] And as James Cone insists, a church without theologians is likely to fall prey of extremisms and shortcomings due to the paucity of reflection on its life in light of the Word of God and its social, economic and political context. As I indicated earlier, in recent years a Black Theology has began to be articulated in Britain, particularly through the Journal of Black Theology. Its main drivers are not however from the traditional Black Church, but are Black Christians from mainstream churches. Clearly then, the Black Church in Britain has much more to do, particularly in the political and theological spheres if it is to reach its potential for good.

The answer to our question is not therefore a simple case of Black or White, yes or no; it's much more complex than that. On a positive note, these churches have provided a space for Black people to develop their complex identity and feel included in a country where they often are excluded; and to be in a majority when their day to day experience is of being a minority. They have provided nurture and confidence building space; coaching, mentoring

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[21] Gustavo Gutierrez, The Power of the Poor in History, London: SCM Press, 1983, pvii

and role modelling by Black people for Black people. 'Black' has provided a motif for cultural and even spiritual identity where multiple denominational rivalries might prevail. It has spiritually fed, educated, empowered and raised Black people's self-esteem, and as Yvonne Channor has shown from her work in Sheffield, Black youngsters brought up in church behave better and do better educationally and professionally. Black Churches have demonstrated to the Church of England, for example, and other mainstream churches that Black people are not leadership averse. In these and myriad ways Black Churches have been a force for good and made its contribution to church and community cohesion.

There is however, a downside to Black Church existence in Britain, which may deter cohesion. It could be argued that there is present what someone calls 'colonial baggage'.[22] This sense of looking elsewhere for legitimisation, for authentication, for direction which is rooted in the origins of the Black Churches in Britain has led to a degree of passivity in key areas; stymieing self development and self understanding. Whilst Black churches have done well in addressing the social needs of their constituency and even wider community, they have not been as effective in challenging the political root causes of these social ills. Ecclesiologically, it may well be the case that some would-be partners fail to look beyond the colour coding of these churches to the social, spiritual, economic and political areas of commonness and partnership. And until Black Churches liberate themselves from their inhibitions in the political and theological areas of their existence, and sharply

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[22] Maxine Howell-Baker and Tonya Bolton, Am I my brothers and sisters keeper?, Christian Aid

focus on their context, their contribution to cohesion will have an unnecessary deficit. This has been argued since the 1970s by such as Ira Brooks of the New Testament Church of God.[23]

Conclusion

It is not my belief that Black Churches polarise other Christians, churches, and faiths. Rather, by their presence they provide clear points of cultural and sociological, political and theological engagement. Concluding where I started, the fact that these churches have grown several of us who now occupy important positions in the world of ecumenical and interfaith affairs, and who regularly liaise with government and other key aspects of British society is evidence of a significant contribution to cohesion and the building of greater understanding and mutual regard. As Black churches develop theologically, politically and socially, I believe they will become an even greater force for good. And who knows, maybe one day, these churches will be as well known for their other virtues in at least equal measure to their identity as Black Churches. Dare we, like Martin Luther King did, dream of such a day? I do.

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June 2007

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[23] Ira Brooks, Another gentleman to the ministry