

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Being Human
(Theological Anthropology)



Justice and BLM...

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Black! Lives! Matter! These words have come to renewed prominence in 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic causing an eruption of protests across the globe. The public killing of George Floyd, and merciless death of Breonna Taylor, by law enforcement officers no less, only sparked further protests that demonstrated a stark division within United States over the place of Black bodies and Black lives.

Across the world racism was called into question, particularly within developed nations, and the UK also had to face its history of racism and the brutal and often unfair treatment of Black people. During these protests, political backlash came from groups, not necessarily homogenous, chanting, “All Lives Matter” as a critical response. All sides were and are seeking justice and all sides were and are seeking to be heard and taken seriously. While a biblically centred and theologically sound theological anthropology is necessary, how we frame these complex and often non-binary issues must be carefully handled. The following words or ideas are useful here: history; complexity; systems; and justice.

History

The BLM protests are not events happening in a vacuum and we must have a nuanced account of history to see a bigger picture. Protests and riots have been strengthening in a formal sense since 2013 with the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman who was subsequently acquitted. The UK has had its own lists of incidences and protests. We cannot talk about BLM without thinking about slave rebellions across the Caribbean and heroes such as Sam Sharpe, and emancipation across the British Empire. We must remember the Windrush Scandal as much as we remember the Civil Rights Movement. We must also reflect on the death of Stephen Lawrence and the MacPherson Report, the ‘Rivers of Blood Speech’ by Enoch Powell, and the Handsworth Riots. These are just a few incidences. In short, we are not talking about singular, spontaneous events, but a long history of the unfair treatment of Black and Brown bodies going all the way back to slavery and before, in a kind of world dictating that Black and Brown bodies, or non-white bodies, could be beaten, punished, and even killed, easily, and brutally, without justice.

Complexity

History is never black and white. It is complex. Black people are part of protests. Black people are also part of the police. We inhabit a world in which there are people of dual or multiple heritages and cultures. One of the amazing optics of BLM protests in 2020 across the globe was the presence of particularly younger people of all ethnicities fierce in their advocacy for equality for Black people. We must now contend with terminology such as 'White Ally', and protocol around how to advocate for Black lives in appropriate and effective ways, while not necessarily having the Black experience. Furthermore, the 'All Lives Matter' chants, when considered deeply, are trying to signify other forms of oppression that are not centred on race. For example, marginalised post urban industrial White communities have long experienced class oppression. Stating 'Black Lives Matter', does not suggest that 'All' lives do not matter, it only highlights a very pronounced and enduring oppression meted out particularly to Black people and communities. Ultimately, this is beyond a Black and White issue. This is about power, who has it, and then who is affected by it.

Systems

Yes, Black lives do matter, as do all lives. In an ideal world there would be equal opportunities for health, economic success, career flourishing, and legal support for people of all ethnicities. Sadly, this is not the case. In the very real-world, power structures have been in place to advantage some people and communities and directly disadvantage others. Often, those two groups follow a colour divide. For example, Black men are far more easily stopped and searched by the police than their White peers.

Socio-economic deprivation is more prevalent within non-White communities than White ones. While the reasons for these disparities are hotly contested, deeper questions must be asked. The MacPherson report brought our attention to institutional racism, and in 2020 the Archbishop of Canterbury declared that the Church of England is institutionally racist. In other words, there is something about the culture and power dynamics at work in British society and its institutions that continue to privilege a certain kind of representation, which is usually White. The Black Lives Matter movement is not inherently about or against White people, but about a system designed to privilege Whiteness at the exclusion of others who are no less capable or deserving.

Justice

This brings us back to justice. A biblically centred theological anthropology suggests that justice is about liberty and flourishing for all people, regardless of their ethnicity or culture. In fact, there is much reflection within scripture on when exclusion, marginalisation and oppression become so entrenched in religious and political systems that prophetic figures are dispatched to enact and declare God's judgment. A careful and consistent reading of the complex scope of Biblical literature suggests that there is one race, humans, who are made by God and for God, endowed, without exception, with dignity and worth. Justice then, the kind chanted in Black Lives Matter movements, is and should be about recovering this basic theological truth. It is about recognition, renewal, and reformation.

Questions to consider:

- How can we speak together about race and racism and all their complexities?
- How can we hear each other's stories, beyond the rhetoric or the biases?
- How do we deal with power, even the silent and unacknowledged kind?