

# THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Being Human  
(Theological Anthropology)



# Anthropological Reflections on Race and Identity

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**L**et me start this reflection by attempting to highlight some of the key questions that coronavirus raises in relation to human identity. Some of these questions are framed in the light of theological responses. Some of these theological responses are not particular to people of faith, but common to us all (faith or no faith). In essence, it applies to civil society as well as the Church. But perhaps because viewed through the lens of faith this gives a different meaning to theme of anthropology, that is theological reflection on anthropology.

The pandemic has made many of us reflect on our mortality. If human life is by nature finite, then what makes us human? Another way to frame that question is, if our lives are temporal, what makes them valuable or useful? The Evangelical Alliance have dedicated a series of podcasts to explore what it means to be human in today's world.<sup>1</sup> However, questions about our humanity are not new.

So, what sort of questions about our human identity are we asking today? There are questions around sexuality, gender, disability and race. The latter is the one I want to narrow down on in this discussion/paper.

The murder of George Floyd led to the resurgence of Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). This has become politicised. Some people view it as controversial because they think saying that Black lives matter means saying other lives do not matter.

Let me start to unpack this by reflecting on the issue (of what? Humanity? Identity?) theologically. Firstly, an anthropological view of scripture affirms that everyone is created in God's image (See Genesis 1:26; 2:7). We are all bearers of God's image irrespective of colour, nationality, social status, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion or culture. This means, that our human identity is derived from God. We bear God's image because we are the signature stamp of his creation therefore all lives matter. All lives matter to God and are valuable because we are his handiwork. This is in contrast to other ancient accounts that pictured humans as either slaves of the gods manipulated and used, or that human beings were created as an accident of the gods.



Our humanity also bearing semblance to God also reveals a collective human identity therefore a shared identity. African philosophy of Ubuntu makes this point clearer when it says: My humanity being caught up, is inextricably bound up to, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'a person is a person through other people.' It is not 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong.' I participate, I share.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of the virus is making us to realise more than ever before that if we are going to survive we have to do it together in the face of our mortality.

Having established this collective human identity, affirming that all lives do indeed matter, how does the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter factor into this? If we agree that all lives do indeed matter and we share this understanding that we have a shared humanity rooted in God, then it should concern us all when Black lives are made cheap. Black lives are made cheap when not seen as human, when enslaved, colonised, indentured, raped, exploited, seen as inferior, marginalised, oppressed, lynched, segregated, disproportionately imprisoned, murdered, and neo-colonised. The best way to understand the message of Black Lives Matter theologically is through Paul's body metaphor, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26 NRSV). Black Lives Matter contends that people of African descent worldwide are suffering from various forms of injustice and as part of the human race their pain matters. Will our collective humanity seek to understand this pain and respond, or we will neglect that part of the human family? For the Church, this is even more pressing issue, because if we fail to address the hurt in God's family, that is the body of Christ, we are inadvertently neglecting ourselves.

But some will say, how can we engage Black Lives Matter which uses Marxist ideology and critical race theory? This is a question of what we use as our sources of theology and how we engage them. It is not good enough to reject Marxism as a social theory because it has roots in communist thinking, neither is it right to dismiss critical race theory because of its worldview of oppressed and the oppressor.

If the Church is going to be relevant today and be able to speak into issues of racial inequalities, we must seek to engage Black Lives Matter intelligently despite the fact that they use Marxist ideology and critical race theory. The Church cannot afford to engage Black Lives Matter from an arm's length. It is important for the Church to engage Black Lives Matter because it raises the question around the issues of race and identity for many, particularly young people. If the Church is going to make the gospel relevant to millennials and Generation Z, then we have to engage some of the concerns of Black Lives Matter. During the Windrush period (1940s-1960s), the UK Church lost a generation of African Caribbean youth because they saw how the church mistreated their parents therefore many of them turned away and embraced for example Rastafarianism which speaks to many of their identity issues. If the Church does not engage the concerns of Black Lives Matter, we will not only lose black youth, but also white youth and other young people, because Black Lives Matter is a multicultural international movement.

### Questions for Reflections and Group Discussions

- How has Coronavirus forced you to think of your own humanity?
- How is your church or organisation creating safe spaces for people to lament about justice issues?
- How will you or your church (mission agency, workplace) participate in tackling issues of racial justice?
- How should the church seek to engage Black Lives Matter?

<sup>1</sup> Being Human Project <https://www.eauk.org/what-we-do/initiatives/being-human> (Accessed 31st December 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Random House, 1999), p.35.