

Participative Black Theology: Interactive approaches to anti-racist Christian praxis

In this essay I will be addressing the issue of how a participative model of Black Theology has been utilised in order to assist predominantly white students training for public, authorised ministry in Britain to better understand the challenges and ethical commitments to being anti-racist Christian disciples and allies alongside their black brothers and sisters in the 'Body of Christ'.

Since the arrival of the Windrush Generation in the late 1940s, when 492 pioneers from the Caribbean coming to Britain on the *SS. Empire Windrush* ushered in a wave of black migration to Britain from the Caribbean (Phillip 1999), a self-professed 'Christian country' has had to deal with fact that its sense of welcome and acceptance of black bodies and people has been called into question. Namely, that the sense of unity that has meant to be a central feature of the Christian faith has often failed to be exemplified when applied to black people coming into the United Kingdom as migrants from the former British empire.

The notion of the Church as a body that is united under the Lordship of Jesus Christ is nothing new. And yet, the unity that is so boldly proclaimed as central to the self-understanding of the Church itself, has often proved more illusionary than real. While the Body of Christ has been fractured by arguments over doctrine, denomination, issues of class, gender and

sexuality, perhaps the most ongoing challenge and indeed the most persistent scourge has been that of racism.

Working as a participative black theologian

Participative-practical Black Theology involves the use of exercises and games that seek to enable participants to reflect critically on self, and through the enactment of the central activity, are enabled to explore aspects of the theory and practice of Black Theology in dialogue with others. In order to provide an embodied reality for the practice of performative action that lies at the heart of participative-practical Black Theology I have created a number of experiential exercises in which adult participants can explore the dynamics of encounter within a safe learning environment. The thrust for this work has emerged from previous pieces of research (Reddie 2006-2012). In using this approach, as a participative black theologian, my

work differs from many other scholars working in the area of Black Theology, as my underlying theological method is not provided by systematic theology or ethics. My particular methodological stance is one very much drawn from the field of practical theology. Leading scholars in the field of practical theology have theorised around the development of practical theology as a model of reflective activity in which the theologian interrogates the connections between the theory and practice of Christianity in a diverse range of contexts and settings. (Ballard and Pritchard 1996; Forrester 2000; Cameron et al. 2010; Cahalan et al. 2014; Graham 2002 and Swinton and Mowat 2006).

Practical theology is the overall framework or approach to the Christian faith that uses different models of disciplines, such as psychology, counselling, education, and sociology, for example, as ways of looking at God's action in the world. One of the central tasks of practical theology is to consider the relationship between how the Church and individual Christians have considered the meaning of faith in light of what individuals and the Church actually do in terms of religious practice, as opposed to the rhetoric of theological ideas and scholarly theorising alone.

My work as a participative black theologian seeks to develop models of black theological reflection and learning that encapsulate the central tenets of Black Theology within a liberative pedagogical framework. Black Theology is a theology of liberation that focuses on rehabilitating the demonisation of blackness. It is a theology that starts with the reality of black suffering in the world and the belief that the God revealed in Jesus Christ, represents the basis of the committed faithful fight

for liberation from racial oppression (Reddie 2020). My development as a scholar has been concerned with attempting to combine practical theology with Black Theology in order to provide an accessible framework for the radical re-interpretation of the Christian faith for the transformation of ordinary people. In effect, my work is concerned with the conscientization of ordinary people, shaping their Christian formation through an exposure to a black theological re-articulation of the central ideas and concerns of the Christian faith.

In talking about conscientization of ordinary people, I am speaking of two concurrent intellectual moves. The first, is the attempt to

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enable ordinary people to become critically aware of their agency as historical subjects caught up within interconnecting webs of illegitimate power, discrimination and racial injustice. Second, conscientization speaks to a process of the radicalization and politicised self-understanding of the Christian faith, in which solidarity with the poor and the marginalised becomes the radical intent of faith as opposed adherence to abstract doctrines and Church dogmatics.

Conscientization is a process where poor and oppressed people become politically aware of the circumstances in which they live and the ways in which their humanity is infringed upon and blighted by the often dehumanising contexts that surround them (Freire 1990, 18-

20). The development of my work as a practical theologian comes from within the more specific discipline of Christian education, which provides the practical theological means of conscientization. The term 'Christian Education' can be defined and understood in a variety of ways. Jeff Astley and Colin Crowder provide a helpful starting point for a definition and a rationale for Christian Education. The authors describe Christian Education as:

The phrase ... often used quite generally to refer to those processes by which people learn to become Christian and to be more Christian, through learning Christian beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions and dispositions to engage in Christian actions and to be open to Christian experiences. (1996, x)

For those wishing to undertake preliminary studies into the theory and practice of Christian Education, I would also recommend Astley's *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*. Chapters one and two deal with questions of definition, philosophy and the rationale for Christian Education (Astley 1994).

My work as a Christian educator underpins the pedagogical approach to practical theology that is concerned with transforming the critical consciousness of predominantly lay learners within a workshop context. In using Christian education as a means to explore anti-racist discipleship, I am concerned with providing an accessible framework for the radical re-interpretation of the Christian faith for the transformation of ordinary people.

In undertaking the bulk of this work in relatively informal workshops, I have developed a creative and participative method for teaching Black Theology via the interactive and inter-

disciplinary lens of practical theology. I have identified this form of Christian education to work as a form of 'performative action'. I will say a little more on what I mean by this term shortly.

The nexus of Black Theology and practical theological methodologies is what I have termed as 'Participative Black Theology'. My own approach to linking transformative religious education and Black Liberation Theology has given rise to an interactive and participative mode of scholarly engagement. The roots of my approach to undertaking theological work was grounded in my formative development as a community educator working with poor, working class black communities in Birmingham, in the West Midlands region of the United Kingdom.

My initial development as a scholar arose from an interdisciplinary research project, during the course of which I gained the confidence to devise improvisational techniques and approaches to theological reflection that intersect with the lived realities and subjectivities of predominantly ordinary black people (Reddie 2006c). This formative black theological work was one that was conscious of the cultures, identities, historical and contemporary experiences and expressions of Christian faith within the socio-political and economic realities of inner-city life in Britain. I have developed a form of scholarship that I have named 'Participative Black Theology'. Participative Black Theology is the creative nexus between 'traditional' Black Theology and Christian education. This approach to critical pedagogy has been refined over the years and has developed into an interdisciplinary mode of practical, black theological reflection.

At the heart of my Participative Black Theology is the use of exercises and games that seek to enable participants to reflect critically on self, and through the enaction of a central activity, they are enabled to explore aspects of the theory and practice of Black Theology in dialogue with others. In order to provide the grounding for the interactive, embodied, pedagogical engagement that lies at the heart of Participative Black Theology, I have created a number of experiential exercises in which adult participants can explore the dynamics of encounter within a safe learning environment. The thrust for this work has emerged from previous pieces of research (Reddie 2006b; 2006c).

My work as a participative black theologian seeks to develop models of black theological reflection and learning that encapsulate the central tenets of Black Theology within a liberative pedagogical framework. My development as a scholar has been concerned with attempting to combine Christian education with Black Theology in order to provide an accessible framework for the radical re-interpretation of the Christian faith for the transformation of ordinary people.

The ongoing development of this work is one that I have termed as a form of 'performative action'. Performative action requires that we creatively engage with the 'other' in the socio-constructed space within the classroom, in which all participants promise to engage with the 'other' in a fashion that affirms mutuality, cooperation and a shared commitment to the production of new knowledge (Irizarry 2003; Apt 1970). The production of new knowledge is not simply for the purposes of passing exams or writing term papers; rather, the desire is to create new forms of knowing for the expressed

purpose of changing behaviour and developing better praxis in terms of the experiential skills of engaging with the 'other'. The central thrust of this work is the creation of anti-racist, anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory forms of Christian discipleship that sees difference as a gift of grace and not as a problem to be avoided or solved.

In effect, this work combines ministry and scholarship, establishing the connection between the two by means of the attempt to create new knowledge whilst resourcing people in their ongoing attempt to live out their faith as progressive, anti-racist Christian disciples. The form of teaching and learning in this interactive, participative pedagogy is one that often occurs outside of formal classrooms, more often in workshop settings in local churches.

This process of performative action operates within safe, but often contested spaces in which religious participants are invited to adopt particular roles in various exercises as a part of an imaginative role-playing framework, in order to test out their motives and positionality vis-à-vis the 'other'. In this constructive approach to Black Theology, I have used a variety of exercises and activities for enabling participants to find a means of exploring their feelings and emotions in a safe space. The exercises allow them to adopt imaginary roles and to 'park' their experiences within a comparatively safe 'rest area' where they can notionally ascribe responsibility for their anger, frustration or tension to the performative character they have exhibited within the shared activity in which they have been working with others.

The exercises or games have been developed over the course of time in which I have been undertaking this work in order to assist pre-

dominantly white students training for ministry to understand the central tenets of Black Theology, and in so doing, to develop models of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices to Christian ministry. Given that time is often limited on occasions such as these and that one is also dealing with people who have never had to think about 'Whiteness' and what that contributes to the task of doing theology; I have learnt that it is essential to 'attack' the affective domain in one's learners. By 'affective domain', what I mean to say is that one has to find ways in which you can address the emotional and feeling centres of the student as opposed to their cognition. The exercises and games are often used as form of heuristic, where tentative standpoints and commitments can be tested out alongside others for their essential veracity.

The use of a performative action within the context of a participative approach to Black Theology has been developed for the purposes of encouraging adult learners to learn from this discipline in order that their concomitant Christian discipleship is committed to the practice of racial justice. Performative action consists of the educator using a variety of exercises, drama and role play in order to get adult learners to reflect within the hospitable and safe space of the classroom or the workshop setting on their sense of agency of white Christians training for ministry. The topics and themes of participative exercises are drawn from the agenda set by Black Liberation Theology.

In the various exercises, participants, by means of conversation and interaction, have the opportunity to reflect on their action within the context of a central activity, and to assess their agency and responses to it for its truthfulness to God's gracious activity in Jesus

Christ, when juxtaposed with the historical and contemporary experience of racism and oppression.

Performative Action 'in action'

At this juncture, let me explain briefly the workings of one exercise as I have used with students training for ordained, public, authorised ministry. In this exercise entitled 'Who is Jesus for me?', I give the students a variety of images of 'the risen Christ'. The material is taken from an educational resource entitled *The Christ We Share* produced by the Methodist Church, The Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the United Society for the Partnership in the Gospel (USPG). The various images of a 'contemporary risen Christ' range across many cultural, ethnic and national contexts and boundaries, including a 'naked Christa', 'Latin American liberationists' depictions of Jesus and black depictions of Jesus as well. Students are asked to choose two images that most resonate with them and two that are the least attractive. In each case they are invited to reflect on what these images do to them and for them.

After a period of sharing the four images they have chosen, students are then invited to take part in a follow-up exercise. One of the images in the pack is of a very blonde, blue-eyed Jesus from the latter part of the 19th century, a 'Jesus of Empire'. I inform the group that in the context of the British empire and the wider missionary movements coming from Europe (which no doubt included missionaries from the Netherlands as well), 'this is the *real Jesus Christ*', i.e. the Christ of Empire. This Christ – the one who buttresses white hegemony and European expansion and colonialism – has often become the default model for what an 'authen-

tic' representation of Jesus Christ looks like in the minds of many who were the architects of the missionary movements that conferred a Christian identity on nations like Britain or the Netherlands (Cone 1990, 110-128).

I then ask the students to rank the images of Jesus they have chosen in a hierarchical list in which the White Jesus stands at the top and the other images they have picked are judged by the extent to which they correlate with the foundational picture that is now the default norm. Then, finally, I ask individuals in the group to themselves into that list. Where are they placed in response to the White Jesus Christ of Empire? For example, those who are white, male, professional, well-educated, able-bodied and heterosexual will have more in common with this depiction of Jesus Christ than, say, a poor, working-class woman with physical disabilities. The critical question is, 'in what ways does the Jesus we follow legitimate our own sense of identity and agency?' The issue at hand, is not whose version of Jesus is better, as I am at pains to explain to the group that every image has some theological legitimacy, but is not exhaustive of the broad, expansionist terrain of Christology and how we understand the person and work of Jesus. The salient issue, however, is the ways in which a White Jesus Christ of Empire has been used to legitimate notions of white superiority and entitlement, when juxtaposed with black bodies from far-off 'heathen lands' amongst those depicted as 'simple natives' (Troupe 2021).

In the exercise I am at pains not to critique or challenge the choices made by the participants. I explain that Christologies work in a variety of ways, from the very subjective and personal to the socio-political and, ultimately,

the cosmic and transhistorical. The point of the exercise is to problematise what might seem normative to some and render acceptable and legitimate those images that on first appearance seem to be subversive, provocative or even dangerous.

The participatory element of the work challenges learners to decide how they will inhabit particular spaces and places, in order to assess in what ways they are playing out learnt pathologies that are often informed by the specious binaries of 'them' and 'us' (Brown Douglas 2005).

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In this case of this exercise, what are the challenges of adhering to certain images of Jesus that have been used to oppress others, like the 'White Jesus Christ of Empire', whom I have deemed to be normative for most of the epoch of Christendom? To what extent would their experiences of engaging with others whose ranking in the follow-up exercise saw them in lower positions than themselves force them to rethink their agency and identity? For example, I have seen a number of white, middle-class, well-educated men express concern at the high vantage point given them due to their resonance with the White Jesus Christ of Empire. Many can see and acknowledge the position in which they have been placed, but this does not mean that they are mandated, enjoy or feel comfortable in the location in which they have been placed. These experiences can often change their subjective self and their concomitant consciousness. What does it mean to be an ally

to a black person whose own embodiment has been traduced and the visual image of Jesus as black like them has been relegated to a lower or sometimes the lowest part of the hierarchy as constructed by the group?

The challenge of conscientizing participants is central to the intent of this constructive mode of black liberative theologising, within formal and informal learning contexts. Black liberative theologising is that which is committed to the human flourishing of all peoples, with the accent on human liberation, which is not compromised by a fixed adherence to the Bible or to neo-liberal capitalism often found in prosperity forms of Black Christianity. It is worth noting that my work operates within formal teaching and learning contexts for assessed degree awards and within informal contexts working with ordinary people in community and church-based settings.

In the methodological formulations of participative Black Theology, the pedagogical process is as important as the emerging theological content. In the context of performative action, one is constantly challenging students to question one's assumptions on what is deemed to be 'normative' and that which is termed as 'unacceptable' or considered 'dangerous' a threat to 'normality'. The purpose of this approach to undertaking Black Theology for the purposes of instilling good practice in the quest for racial justice lies in the belief that internalised change (spiritual and psychological) can be a conduit for externally verified changes in behaviour and practice. Both of these modes provide the subjective, experiential basis for liberation, at an individual, inter-personal, communal and, ultimately, a systemic level.

In the various exercises, the different partici-

pants are challenged to determine their individual agency and positionality in this pedagogical process. How will they engage? To what extent can they deconstruct their past, with all its attendant learnt behaviours? In what ways will their resultant new learning have an impact on their subsequent Christian discipleship? What are the challenges of attempting to take any resultant learning into the practice of ministry, as it confronts them in their future work, be it within church or community?

An important element of my use of a performative, participative methodology for engaging with adult learners is the belief in the importance of practice as a legitimate basis for knowledge construction. In some respects, this is the key element of my scholarship, in that procedurally, my starting point as a constructive theologian is the significance of religious practice and in the desire to attempt to refashion and rethink Christian praxis. In shaping my research and scholarship in this form, one is seeking to conscientize ordinary people, which can also create new forms of intellectual development, which, in its turn, can influence the academy. One of the established ways in which predominantly western epistemologies have operated has been by means of a hierarchical and binary framework in which our knowledge of human affairs is often predicated on the notion of moving from theory to practice (Willows 2001). It is assumed that once we have our thinking or ideas worked out then we can move to applying them to the concrete areas of life at a later point. At this point, I have to acknowledge the development of 'practical theology', which in its examination of the relationship between theory and practice seeks to outline a more reciprocal relationship between the two

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often competing realities (Woodward and Pattison 2000; Ballard and Pritchard 1996; Cahalan and Mikoski 2014).

This practical-participatory Black Theology-led approach to conscientization is one that seeks to elevate the importance of practice as a means of creating new knowledge and critical insights into the transformative praxis of Christian ministry. This approach to critical learning arises from the embodied encounter between adult learners within the teaching and learning moment in workshops and also in the classroom.

Conclusion

The model of pedagogy and scholarship is the nexus of Black Theology and Christian education, which are brought together to form what I am terming a Participative Black Theology. This mode of inquiry and pedagogy utilises the methodology of performative action in which predominantly white ministerial students are challenged to engage with one another and with interactive forms of teaching and learning that seek to change their consciousness as it pertains to anti-racist forms of Christian discipleship.

Since the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, we witnessed an increased appetite in white people willing to engage with issues of systemic racism and discrimination faced by black people and others from minority ethnic communities (*Practical Theology* Vol. 15; Barrett and Harley 2020; O'Donnell and Cross 2022). This work, in seeking to use interactive and participative ways of exploring Black Theology related discourse, aims at encouraging ministerial students to rethink what they conceive as normative when engaging with others, and self and the Christian faith.

The exercise of exploring Christologies has

been used to engage with the ideas of Kelly Brown Douglas (1988) and Robert Beckford (1998) as two examples of how Black Christology can be used to challenge whiteness. This provides the experiential basis on which ordinary participants can gain insight into the cultural and socio-political issues replete within postcolonial communities surrounding notions of internalised whiteness and how it has shaped hierarchical constructions of identity, its utility extending to the very historiography of Black Theology itself.

The exercise assists in providing an experiential model of Black Christology and the means by which sublimated blackness is given agency when juxtaposed with the seeming normativity of whiteness and the power of the 'White Jesus Christ of Empire'. In developing a participative model of Black Theology by means of this form of interactive, performative action mode of theological engagement, the identity of the discipline as primarily a subset of systematic theology within the theological academy developed and controlled by white Euro-American hegemony, is challenged. The exercise, along with the many others I have developed, have become a means of undertaking black theological work, but it is also a form of critical pedagogy that can be used to conscientize Christian learners.

In this regard, the work of Chas Howard (2012) and later Jawanza Eric Clark (2014), are hugely significant in providing a critical nexus between epistemological innovation and praxiological change. Both scholars have sought to combine intellectual engagement in the furthering of the discipline with the commitment to root their ideas within the popular religio-cultural mass movements that represent the active engage-

ment of ordinary black people in their respective milieus. In both of these respective studies, we see an expressed commitment to praxis-based contemporary movements that seek to move Black Theology beyond its often-myopic reified obsession with its own intellectual status within the academy, rooted in the identity politics of the 1960s (Clay 2010).

The exercise described in this essay has been used as a means of encouraging predominantly white people training for authorised, public ministry, to reflect on their identity and agency as potential anti-racist Christian disciples, working in solidarity alongside their black brothers and sisters. My participative work, which can be seen in several books, has given rise to creative and constructive ways of talking about God in the light of black religious experience. The participative model of Black Theology that I have pioneered, utilises the insights of transformative Christian education, as a means of conscientizing ordinary Christian learners on the importance of engaging in anti-racist Christian praxis. <

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