

Temple Tracts: Issue 1, Volume 4

The Revenge of the Racists and the Silence of those who Worship the Lamb

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William Temple
Foundation

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Introduction

I begin to write this paper on October 4th 2017, the 79th anniversary of the battle of Cable Street when a brave phalanx of East London socialists and Jewish community organisations barred the way to a provocative march of Oswald Mosley's fascist black shirts. The defiant cries of 'they shall not pass' have gone down in history as a turning point in the struggle against anti-democratic extreme right wing politics. However the populist turn in European and North American politics over the last few years suggests that this struggle is an unending one. Ten years ago who would have thought that patriotic nationalist right wing politicians would have gathered enough votes to put Donald Trump in the White House, to trigger the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union and to have over 90 representatives of a neo-nazi party in the German Bundestag? While it would be wrong to concede that the extreme right is sweeping its way to power across the globe, (there have been setbacks in France, Holland and other countries), such parties have come to power or have major influence in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. More generally political discourse which is anti-immigrant, xenophobic and downright racist has become more legitimate and mainstream in many places. It feels as if the progressive multiculturalism and anti-racism movements of the 1970s and 80s in which I expended much youthful energy have been rejected, dismissed as 'political correctness gone mad' and that the racists are taking their revenge. Significantly some elements of this discourse have taken a religious turn with an explicit contrast between the concept of indigenous European Christian culture ("civilisation") and the external threat of Islam, as documented in the volume edited by Marzouki et al. (2016).

This paper therefore is a sociological and theological reflection on populist nationalism, religious prejudice, xenophobia and racism in the contemporary context of the United Kingdom and especially England, with some comparisons with the USA and Europe. It seeks to dissect the elements of white male privilege and personal and institutional racism in church and society in 2017 and to ask the question whether any progress has been made since the high point of the anti-racist and multicultural movements in the 1980s. It draws on some empirical evidence from surveys about religion and the Brexit vote and about British evangelicals' views on ethnic and religious diversity.

In all the economic and social hierarchies in church and society, being Male, White, English, over 50, university (especially Oxbridge) educated, affluent, Christian (ideally Anglican - or possibly secular

atheist) and London-based, gives a person significant privileges over all others. No writer can occupy a neutral objective position in these hierarchies and the debates about them. Therefore from the outset I will make clear that I score on all these indicators, other than that it is now 15 years since I moved from the capital to the North of England. And though for the last forty years I have lived, worked and worshipped in multi-cultural communities and churches, and been an advocate of racial, economic and social justice I still feel ashamed that so little has been achieved in the struggle against oppression and the legacy of colonialism and slavery, and that people like myself have remained silent when there are signs of the re-emergence of racism in its many forms.

Political resurgence of the populist right and its religious correlates

The growing political science literature on populism and the varied definitions and range of interpretations is reviewed by Gidron and Bonikowski, albeit before the Brexit and Trump votes. They point out (2013: 4) that:

In Europe, an exclusionary right-wing variant of populism emerged in the 1980s—and has intensified since—targeting mostly immigrants and national minorities (...) In Latin America, on the other hand, populism in recent years has been mostly associated with an inclusionary vision of society, bringing together diverse ethnic identities into shared political frameworks.

In Britain, this may be paralleled with the populist appeal to different demographic groups of Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn.

One of the few works in political science to address the link between populism and religion is the volume edited by Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy (2016). Various chapters, especially those on Europe, and most especially the nations of the East, highlight that many of the exclusionary right-wing variants of populism seem to focus on the widespread discontent with globalisation and specifically with the perceived threat of Islam overwhelming the “native” culture of Christendom. This is not very strongly linked with Christian religious belief or participation in church worship; indeed in some countries such as France the secular language of *laïcité* is equally deployed. In fact, the case study from Britain (Peace 2016) includes analysis of the Respect Party, which grew out of the Stop the War movement and appealed greatly to Muslim voters, alongside UKIP and the BNP (British National Party). The BNP, which inherits a fascist and racist tradition dating back to the pre-war ‘Black-shirts’ of Oswald Mosley had little

time or love for Christianity and was repeatedly and forcefully condemned by the leaders of the major British churches. With the electoral demise of Respect and the BNP since 2015 and the growing irrelevance of UKIP since the referendum, Peace's chapter seems somewhat dated, and fails to notice the emergence of the EDL (English Defence League) and Britain First (as populist movements rather than organised political parties) where the extremist rhetoric is openly anti-Islamic, and from time to time seeks to mobilise the symbolism and identity markers of 'Christian England' such as the Cross and the legend of the (Libyan) St George.

Brexit and Religion

On June 23rd 2016 a referendum was held on the United Kingdom's continuing membership of the European Union. The key issues in the campaign were immigration, national sovereignty and the advantages and disadvantages to the British economy. This followed many decades of difficult debate on the politics of the European Union, which had divided the Conservative Party, tested the unity of the Labour Party and birthed an insurgent nationalist and populist party (UKIP) which made 'taking back control of our borders,' reduction of net immigration and withdrawal from the European institutions the keynote items of its agenda. Led by Nigel Farage, a stereotypical white, English, middle aged "bloke", invariably pictured with a pint of warm ale in his hand, and who ironically was a privileged stockbroker and married to a German woman, UKIP pitched its appeal to the traditional, but now insecure, white, provincial, working class male. In the referendum the turnout was high at 72% (47m), with more people turning out to vote than in the previous year's general election. The result was that the British voted to leave the EU by 52% to 48%. In Scotland 63% voted to remain, in Northern Ireland 56% (and in London 60%), but in Wales and every other region of England there was a majority for leave of between 52% and 59%. In England, older generation, white, working class respondents living well away from London and other metropolitan areas were the most likely members of the electorate to support Brexit (Swales 2016).

Recent work by Smith and Woodhead (forthcoming) based on YouGov's referendum exit poll of 3243 voters in England ($n=2,769$) shows the proportions of remain and leave voters for five religious categories.

Table 1. Brexit Vote by Religion (England) (Woodhead/YouGov June 2016).

Faith group	Remain	Leave	N
No religion	53%	47%	1224
CofE	34%	66%	733
Roman Catholic	45%	55%	200
Other Christian	46%	55%	146
Other faith	51%	49%	136
			2439
Total	46%	54%	

While it is evident that a majority of those whose religious affiliation is Christian voted to leave the EU (and in slightly greater proportions than the English electorate as a whole) and that those who had no religion or were from another faith voted by a slight majority to remain, what is most striking is that those who identified as affiliated as ‘Church of England, CofE, or Anglican’ (synonyms on the survey) voted by two to one for Brexit.

Before drawing conclusions, it is necessary to control for the influence of other demographic variables, including age and area of residence which proved such important factors in the Referendum. This is important because we know, for example, that the age profile of Anglicans is older than that of the population as a whole, whereas ‘nones’ (those reporting “no religion”) are typically younger (Woodhead 2016).

Table 2 breaks down Brexit-voting Anglicans and nones by various demographic variables, and by how they voted in the 2015 General Election. It compares them with the population of England as a whole. The figures confirm that gender, age, political orientation, living in or outside the London region, social class and previous voting preference are all associated with the referendum vote. Nevertheless, what is so striking is that in every group, Anglicans are more likely than average to vote leave, while nones are were significantly more likely to vote to remain.

Table 2. Percentage of Anglicans and ‘Nones’ voting Leave by demographic characteristic and 2015 vote (Woodhead/YouGov June 2016)

	All (England)	CofE	None
All	54%	66%	47%
Gender			
Male	51%	64%	45%
Female	57%	68%	50%
Social Class			
AB	45%	63%	36%
C1	47%	63%	39%
C2	63%	70%	59%
DE	66%	71%	66%
Age Group			
Born since 1980	37%	49%	35%
Born 1960s-70	57%	66%	53%
Born before 1960	66%	72%	60%
Region			
Out of London	55%	68%	49%
London	41%	57%	35%
Leave by voting preference in the 2015 General Election			
Voted Conservative	60%	66%	58%
Voted Labour	33%	49%	26%
Voted Liberal Democrat	35%	40%	28%
Voted UKIP	98%	99%	96%
Voted Green	20%	25%	19%

Frequent church attendance reduces the likelihood of voting to leave, though a majority of Anglicans who attended church at least monthly (55%) still say they would vote this way. In contrast, EU referendum voting intentions expressed by the Evangelical Alliance¹ panel survey of spring 2016 shows a small absolute majority (51% of 1423 respondents and 65% of those who had already decided) were intending to vote remain with only 27.5% (35% of already decided) intending to vote leave. Even though this question was asked at least two months before the actual referendum it is highly implausible that a late swing among these English evangelicals would have brought them into line with the electorate as a whole. They appear to be considerably more internationalist than average in their outlook, which is remarkable given their age profile.

My opinion that the most important factor behind the pro-Brexit vote in England and among Anglicans is a form of 'nativism', resonates with Mudde's view, expressed in a recent [Guardian](#) article (17 Dec. 2017):

The populist radical right combines populism with two other core ideological features, authoritarianism and nativism (...) If anything, 2017 was the year of nativism, or more correctly, yet another year of nativism, as we have had many of these years since the turn of the century. Nativism is an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation"), and that non-native people and ideas are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state.

While there are undoubtedly elements of xenophobia and Islamophobia in some of the discourse in England in favour of Brexit, it would be hard to substantiate from our data the notion that this plays an important part in the specifically Anglican referendum voting pattern.

And across the pond

Five months later in November 2016 the United States of America held a General Election for the Presidency and the members of Congress. Following a long selection process the Republicans nominated a maverick outsider candidate who had never before held any elected public office, Donald

¹ From 2011 to 2016 the author worked for the Evangelical Alliance and was responsible for the design and analysis of surveys in the 21st Century Evangelicals research programme. The data from these are used with thanks and permission and are publicly available to students and scholars through the ESRC Data Archive [here](#).

J. Trump. Running against the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, a career politician and former First Lady and Secretary of State, on a turnout of 54%, he gained 62,979,636 votes (46%) of the popular vote nationwide compared with her 65,844,610 votes (48.1%). However, because of the structure of the Electoral College, mandated on a State by State basis, and as a result of his strong showing in important key “swing” states, Trump was elected President by 306 College votes to 232 and was inaugurated as President on January 20th 2017. As in the UK, much analysis of the breakdown of the voting, largely based on exit or post-referendum polling, has been carried out examining in detail the geography, demography and political loyalties and attitudes of voters on each side. Compared with the UK, increased attention and commentary has been given to religion.

In the US presidential election the geographical distribution of the vote suggested that Clinton and Democratic voters were concentrated in the metropolitan areas of the east and west coasts while the Republican victory was secured by majorities in mainly rural, small-town and post-industrial areas of middle-America (Brilliant Maps 2016). Exit polls reported by the New York Times (2016) and the Pew Foundation (2016 a and b) show that race, gender, age and education were key factors. White non-Hispanic voters preferred Trump over Clinton by 21 percentage points (58% to 37%), women supported Clinton over Trump by 54% to 42% while men supported Trump over Clinton by 53% to 41%. College graduates backed Clinton by a 9-point margin (52%-43%), while those without a college degree backed Trump 52%-44%. Young adults preferred Clinton over Trump by a wide 55%-37% margin while older voters (65+) preferred Trump over Clinton by 53%-45%. All these patterns find some echo in what happened in England over Brexit.

As for religion, regularly-practicing Christians supported Trump in greater proportions than average with support rising to over 80% among white evangelicals or “born-again” believers (Pew 2016 b). Both before and after the election a large number of Christian leaders within the white evangelical or “born again” constituency such as Franklin Graham (Billy’s son – who incredibly, unwisely and divisively has recently been invited to lead a “crusade” in Blackpool), Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, Michele Bachmann and Robert Jeffress implicitly or explicitly endorsed Trump and his policies, comparing him with [Moses and David](#) and claiming God had worked a miracle to secure him the presidency and that he was “divinely anointed” for that office. They have defended him on issues that have arisen over the influence of Russia on his campaign. They support his mission to “make America great again”, his idea of building a wall on the Mexican border to curtail immigration and his hard line threats to North Korea.

Much of this conservative rhetoric is consistent with the politics of the religious right which emerged during the 1980s, resisting abortion and women's reproductive rights, opposing same sex marriage and LGBT rights and the mere notion of transgender identities. Theological disputes between Christianity and Islam are amplified into a rhetoric which conflates Islam with the enemy on the “war on terror” and can only be seen as Islamophobic. Such religious politics (although it is opposed or nuanced in the preaching and writings of many other US evangelical or “post evangelical” church leaders and theologians such as Tim Keller, Richard Mouw, Jim Wallis, and Brian McLaren (Fitch 2011)), is consistent with its roots in the populist revivalist Christianity of Middle America and the Deep South, and cannot be understood without reference to the history of the 18th Century Atlantic middle passage, plantation slavery, the war against the Confederacy, segregation and the Jim Crow era, the Ku Klux Klan and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Since the recent events in Charlottesville, North Carolina when neo-nazis and white supremacists demonstrated against the proposed removal of a statue of their Confederate hero, Robert E. Lee, there has been much outrage on both sides of the Atlantic. We have heard widespread condemnation of President Trump and of many of his white evangelical supporters for their failure to condemn and stand up against this revival of ugly racism. The ‘Black Lives Matter’ campaign has made the point that although all lives do indeed matter, that in the historical context of slavery and colonialism and the present context of discriminatory police violence, it is important the name the issue for what it is.

If the assessment by Gidron and Bonikowski is to be believed, Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964: 9) appears strangely prescient, if not indeed prophetic.

The central feature of the paranoid style is the concern about an all encompassing conspiracy that threatens to take control of America and change its most foundational values. For Hofstadter, the prominence and persistence of the paranoid style in American politics is at least partially “a product of the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life and, above all, its peculiar search for secure identity.”

This comment seems a particularly apt description of the current “culture wars” in the USA and the language of many of the white evangelical Christians who overwhelmingly voted for Trump and support his populist, nativist political agenda.

Persistence of white male privilege and institutional racism

On both sides of the Atlantic it is clear that white privilege and racism persists, and since the recent populist turn in politics, has been discussed afresh in many places. The multidimensional nature of disadvantage and privilege is neatly captured in a popular online [video](#). In the UK even a right-wing conservative government has recognised that structured inequality and discrimination persists with its recently published ethnicity audit.²

The picture is more complex than it was three decades ago as it varies in different spheres and indicators and between minority ethnic groups. However, as the audit shows, black people are still more than three times as likely to be arrested as their white peers. Less than two-thirds of people from ethnic minorities are in work, compared with three-quarters of white people. While working age people with an Indian background are nearly as likely to have a job as white people, those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are the least likely to be in employment. One significant trend that favours BME groups is that among poorer children (qualifying for free school meals), those of BME backgrounds have higher educational attainment levels than white pupils. Some groups, for example those of Chinese and Indian heritage, do particularly well in terms of education.

Despite all the enquiries and reports (From Scarman 1981, to Macpherson (1999) on the murder of Stephen Lawrence, see also Foster, Newburn and Souhami, 2005), and equality and diversity policies, institutional racism remains in place. Life chances in education, employment, income, the criminal justice system, health and housing are significantly higher for white middle and upper-class people living in the south of England than for any of the minority ethnic communities. Violent hate crimes are frequent and tend to peak when political events (such as Brexit) give permission for racist thuggery, verbal and online abuse goes on unchecked and subtle forms of racism expressed in a look, body language or unfavourable customer service are an everyday experience.

Last month trans model Munroe Bergdorf was fired from L’Oreal for a Facebook post she composed on racism and white privilege in the fashion industry. In an [interview](#) discussing her post she said:

² The ethnicity audit can be found [here](#), and two Guardian articles offer some nuance and critique of the government audit [here](#) and [here](#).

I can wholeheartedly say that the dictionary definition of racism was written a very long time ago and not by a person of colour. It doesn't allow us to have a conversation about modern-day racism. If you're not aware of it, then make yourself aware of it. Racism isn't just calling someone something, it's a whole system. If you think we live in an equal society, you're living in a daydream. You need to recognise that there is such a thing as white privilege and you can be homeless and still have white privilege, because you can still have a better chance of getting out of homelessness than a person of colour in the same position. We do have the language (of racism) but it needs to be out there: unlearning, micro-aggressions, being complicit, unconscious bias, privilege – these need to be taught, we need to address why syllabuses only teach white history, we need to speak about slavery and the brutality of colonialism.

It is true of course that there has been some progress over the last 40 years. In the UK we now have equalities legislation, significant numbers of black and ethnic minority people have risen to positions of leadership or prominence in politics, business, sports, the media and even in the church. Some of the earlier forms of prejudice, discrimination and representation of minorities are no longer tolerated, and racist remarks such as the [recent](#) ones by Geoffrey Boycott are publicly challenged, even if as in that case, they do not lead to disciplinary action.

There is a strong public narrative, especially among younger people in urban areas, that Britain is a happily thriving multicultural society. Equality and diversity policies are promoted in every institution and the mass media and popular culture purport to present inclusive representations of social reality. Even the version of [advice](#) on promoting basic important British values as part of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development includes:

- *an understanding that the freedom to choose and hold other faiths and beliefs is protected in law;*
- *an acceptance that other people having different faiths or beliefs to oneself (or having none) should be accepted and tolerated, and should not be the cause of prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour; and*
- *an understanding of the importance of identifying and combating discrimination.*

Changing dimensions of diversity: globalisation and intersectionality

Despite these expressions of positive change, the new Millennium, within the context of “the war on terror”, the economic crash of 2008, the free movement of labour within an expanded EU and the refugee crisis resulting from the conflict in Syria and Iraq, has hardened views on immigration and emboldened racist voices.

The new racism takes some more cultural forms replacing the old binary distinctions between white and black. It is more complex because of greater diversity that has resulted from globalisation and more recent immigration from countries that have never been under British rule. It is further complicated by the multi-layered nature of identity politics, where religion, gender, sexuality and most recently the “somewhere-ness” of marginalised, post-industrial English working class (Goodhart 2017), make competing claims for recognition, equality, justice and victim status. In academic literature this is often referred to as intersectionality.

As long ago as the early 1980s (Smith 1983) I was writing about identity formation in terms of ethnic groups and boundaries (following Barth ed. 1969) and identified religion as a possible boundary marker, which could be mobilised alongside or as an alternative to race, ethnicity, nationality and (heritage) language. Up to that point identity and discrimination studies had measured almost everything in terms of skin colour; white v black (or ‘coloured’ as it was termed in the vocabulary of the 1960s) with occasional footnotes about brown and yellow skinned groups. I was also suggesting practices of bilingualism involving code switching and code mixing was an indicator of fluidity and hybridity of social identities. All of this was, of course, grounded in a social constructionist approach which refused to reify categories or essentialise group belonging or characteristics based on stereotypes, though not denying that differences had some measure of empirical reality. For example although whiteness and blackness is a social construction there is a gradient of skin colours which at the ends of the spectrum are obvious and visible.

Through the 1980s and 1990s the turn in social science towards cultural studies led on to the rise of identity-based community development and politics. Despite various waves of feminism, gender inequality has not been achieved in the workplace or the family and the recent #MeToo campaign has highlighted the persistence and unacceptability of misogyny, sexual violence and coercion. Campaigns for LGBT rights and ‘pride’ have made significant headway since the 1980s, though not without

resistance, particularly in male-dominated religious institutions. It is also true that 'othering', takes place across and between these various identities. For example many East Europeans despise the Roma, anti-Semitic views are often expressed in Muslim communities, and homophobia is common among various diaspora communities.

Perhaps the most difficult issue that progressive liberals have to face is the evidence that the white working class, especially men living in post-industrial peripheral areas (such as council estates, seaside towns and former coalfield communities) have fallen behind economically, educationally and in health and well-being compared with the national average, and the historic benchmark of the 1960s. This applies in the "rustbelts" of Britain, Western Europe and the USA, and being an unemployed or low-paid 50 year old man in Hartlepool, [Henin-Beaumont](#) or Harrison County, West Virginia hardly seems like white male privilege. It is no surprise that such communities offer political support for right wing populist politics which despite numerous claims of 'I'm not racist, just patriotic' always have (at least an implicit) ethos of white supremacy.

One of the most significant changes in the contours of racism occurred following the Iranian revolution of 1979 and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, whereby religion, most notably Islam, became a more salient factor. The Satanic Verses controversy began in February 1989 with the fatwa against the author Salman Rushdie and subsequent demonstrations and book burning from Bradford to Beirut. In the mid-1990s the conflicts that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia had ethno-religious dimensions which pitted Croats (mostly Catholic), Serbs (mostly Orthodox) and Bosnians (mostly Muslim) against each other. In Britain in November 1997, the *Runnymede Trust* launched its report *Islamophobia – A Challenge for Us All* and has recently marked its 20th anniversary (2017). The religious turn in racism was solidly established well before the spectacular attacks on the USA in September 2001, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Nor is inter-religious conflict restricted to that which is sometimes defined as Christendom (the West) against the Muslim world. There are also ethno-religiously marked African conflicts such as Nigeria and South Sudan. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist Sinhala communities fought Hindu and Christian Tamils. In Myanmar Buddhists are currently driving out Rohingya Muslims while in India communal violence between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs frequently erupts in violence. And most intransigent of all is the conflict between the state of Israel and the Christian and Muslim people of Palestine, which in numerous contexts across the world and in the UK has become conflated with a revived anti-Semitism.

It is not surprising then that according to a [Guardian/ICM](#) poll published in 2006 with a representative sample of over 1000 British people 82% of those questioned say they see religion as a cause of division and tension between people. Only 16% disagree.

Racism and the church - segregation and silence on justice

So where does the church stand in relation to this emerging globalised but also localised revival of cultural racism? In the UK and especially in the churches, the reaction to white supremacist populism in the USA has largely been along the lines that 'surely we are not as bad as they are', 'that sort of thing could not happen here' and 'Christians would never condone that form of politics'. However mindful of the gospel story of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14) I believe we need to examine ourselves more rigorously. And for me the "we" in the sentence includes me as a white, aging, well-educated male who still considers himself an evangelical Christian.

Within the Christian church we tend to avoid conflict and present our life together as one of sweetness and light, arguing that we are all brothers and sisters together in God's family. It's true that rabid racist comments or support for the Far Right are rarely heard from pulpits or even in fellowship times after church. This is probably an improvement over the cold shoulder of fellowship which was experienced by the Windrush generation of Caribbean settlers in the 1960s (Walton 1985, Smith & Green 1989). Indeed, there are numerous examples of warm relationships and Christian love between believers of different ethnic backgrounds in many local congregations. There is also much commendable work in progress offering a welcome and providing support services for asylum seekers and refugees, where Christians, along with those from other faith communities and none, are at the forefront.

However, it remains the case that in major cities Sunday worship is highly segregated as various ethnic groups tend to sift themselves out according to the homogeneous unit principle beloved by Church Growth theory (McGavran 1990). Though this has been critiqued through the lens of Biblical theology many times (e.g. Padilla, 1982, Smith 1983), it remains the case that urban congregations, where there is a diverse religious market, draw like-minded people together, according to age and family status, educational level, theological and worship style preference but above all by language and ethnicity. London in particular has congregations worshipping separately in scores of different languages, which is understandable since the miracle of the day of Pentecost does not seem to be repeated even in Pentecostal churches. Although good work has been done since the 1970s onwards in building good

relationships between the leaders of black majority churches and mainstream ones, it is widely assumed that whole denominations still draw 95% or more of their members from a single ethnic group. In mainstream denominations there are many mixed congregations, and a growing number of clergy from minority backgrounds. Some like John Sentamu have even been promoted to senior positions. Yet there are multiracial congregations (including the one in which I regularly worship) where leadership and active lay involvement remains largely with white (male English, middle class) people. Conversations about colonial history in white-led evangelical circles often begin and end with self-congratulatory, virtue-signaling narratives around Wilberforce and the abolitionists, plus a mention of the great Christian leadership of Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu.

My personal experience of local church life has been in multi-cultural congregations. For ten years our family attended a black (Afro-Caribbean) majority Baptist congregation in East London, with significant numbers of West Africans and South Asians. It was (and continues to be) pastored by a white male minister, though the diaconate has been diverse for many years. More recently we have been involved in an inner-city parish in Preston. The congregation is majority white, but with significant numbers of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian members, and currently under the leadership of a Pakistani minister. However, it has been a long and unsuccessful struggle to bring BME people into lay leadership as active Church Council members, or into ministry roles such as work with children and young people or in community projects. My experience resonates with that shared in a recent [blog](#) (extract below) reflecting on participation in Movement Day by Matthew Rhodes, leader of a very diverse Baptist Church in South London.

Unity as whitewash?

For me, the stand out session was a discussion entitled “Is your unity movement a whitewash?” Addressing the issue of relationships between local churches from different ethnic backgrounds, it assessed both the opportunities and challenges this presents.

The “elephant in the room” is how we begin to understand the vital importance of building multi-ethnic churches, as expressions of what [Ephesians 2:13](#) describes as the “manifold” (or in the Greek literally “multi-coloured”) wisdom of God.

Relationships built between, for example “black churches” and pre-dominantly “white churches” are vitally important, however that will only take us so far as the Body of Christ.

Painful journey

I am a leader in a church in Lambeth which comprises over 70 nationalities and is roughly 50% white and 50% non-white. In the last 10 years we have journeyed, sometimes painfully, from an unrepresentative demographic to something more reflective of our locality. We now regularly say from the platform “if you’re looking for a black church, this isn’t the place for you; and if you’re looking for a white church, the same applies.”

For me, building a multi-ethnic congregation is a true expression of the kingdom of God – but it’s not easy. We have a long way to go because a diverse Sunday service isn’t enough – true integration demands that we are in each other’s lives, that we spend time with each other outside of church, eating and playing together, truly sharing our lives.

Connecting, let alone integrating BME Christians into the mainstream church has remained difficult. The Evangelical Alliance has invested heavily since the mid-1980s in building links with leaders of the black majority churches, through the West Indian (subsequently Afro-Caribbean) Evangelical Alliance and more recently the One People Commission. It has had black general directors, senior staff members and Council members yet membership and participation in its activities by ordinary lay members remains overwhelmingly white (and majority male, middle class and older generation). A panel survey in summer 2016 recruited from Alliance networks was completed by 1325 self-defined evangelicals; 92% of them described themselves as White British, a further 3% as White but not British and only 1% as either Black (African Background), Black (Caribbean background) or South Asian. Even their “Building tomorrow’s Church today” diversity church survey carried out in 2014 (Evangelical Alliance 2015) which was targeted to recruit younger BME Christians through contacts in the Black Majority churches in London had 79% White British and less than 14% BME respondents. In this survey 39% of the BME respondents and 55% of the white respondents said they attended a church where “most of the people

in my church are of the same ethnicity as me". 60% of the BME respondents and 39% of white respondents said their church was significantly or predominantly 'influenced by a particular cultural background'.

To be fair, the attitudes of British evangelicals towards immigration and ethnic diversity are relatively liberal. In the Evangelical Alliance survey *The World on Our Doorstep* (2012) there is little evidence of racism or xenophobia on a widespread scale. For example, 54% agree and 18% strongly agree that *'immigration has led to a vibrant diverse society in the UK'*. The proportions are significantly higher among women, younger people and those who have family roots outside the UK. Roughly the same number support the statement, *'The Church in the UK has benefited greatly from the contribution of immigrants over the last 50 years'*, and the proportion agreeing strongly is 21%. (Smith ed. 2015 P169). There is a general uncertainty about the prevalence of racism in the church in the UK. Only around 23% agree or strongly agree with the statement, *'There is an unacceptable level of racism in the church in the UK'*, compared with 34% who disagree or strongly disagree and 43% who are not sure. For evangelicals 99% say being a Christian is a very or most important part of their personal identity compared with 9% for ethnic or racial background (compared with 44% for the general population as measured by the Citizenship Survey in 2010 (ibid p. 172). Prior to the 2015 election only 6% of evangelical respondents selected immigration as the most significant issue facing Britain today compared with a Mori survey of the whole electorate where for 21% it was the single most important issue. Yet despite such progressive views, and the warmth of relationships between many Christians of different ethnic backgrounds, it is the silence of those who often sing the contemporary worship song 'Behold the Lamb' about current issues of racial justice issues, that remains deafening.

Theologies of Racism

From a Christian (evangelical) perspective, resources based on Biblical material and anti-racist theology is readily available. In the 1980s a multiracial group of Christians called Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice (in which I personally was deeply involved) came together and struggled with these issues,

producing a journal Racial Justice and a study pack [New Humanity](#) which included a manifesto for racial justice.³

In the same period, Anglo-Catholic community theologian Kenneth Leech (1982, 1988, 2005, 2006) was making a major contribution through his many books, his work with the Runnymede Trust and his street level politics opposing the National Front and the BNP in East London. Various strands of Black Theology and Liberation Theologies have also raised these issues. In the UK, the work of Beckford (1998, 2011) and Reddie (2006, 2014, 2016) are outstanding.

Some of this theological ground work was done long ago, and it could benefit from re-contextualisation for today's world. However, in an age of a personalised, domesticated gospel and therapeutic spirituality, such strong cries from the heart and soul are rarely preached from pulpits. Social justice and social action may be higher up the agenda, but there seems to be a fear about mentioning racial justice, or commending political action to further a cause that may divide the church. Of course, church leaders ritually condemn the activities of the new Far Right, and the appropriation of Christian vocabulary and symbols by the likes of the EDL. Occasionally some are visible alongside minority faith leaders on the streets in peaceful counter-demonstrations, but such 'prophetic' activity is usually confined to radical minorities among Methodist and Catholic clergy. It is, for example, the ecumenical Churches Together in Britain and Ireland who take the lead on [Racial Justice Sunday](#) which very few evangelicals and Anglicans seem to endorse. There remains a danger that, like Trump and white evangelical leaders in the USA, evangelicals will remain silent, or even, by condemning anti-racist protestors signal a moral equivalence between neo-nazis and those of us who refuse to say shalom when there is no shalom. There is a clear and present danger that the racist poison promulgated by some leading white American evangelicals will infect Christianity on this side of the Atlantic.

Evangelical Christianity and other faiths...especially Islam

Of even greater concern is the subterranean racism in some evangelical quarters that masquerades as the gulf in religious understandings that separates Christians from Muslims. This view so easily slips into

³ All issues of Racial Justice and the study pack are available in this public [Google Drive](#)

the perception of all Muslims as fundamentalist extremists and potential terrorists, that also incorporates the paranoia that Islam is in a conspiracy to take over the world. Among white US evangelicals, the accusation that President Obama was a Muslim is commonplace and Trump-supporting leaders such as Franklin Graham deploy an overtly Islamophobic narrative. In a post to his Facebook page, in July 2015 Graham [proclaimed](#) that:

... all Muslims should be barred from immigrating to America and treated like the Japanese and Germans during World War II. Muslims who come to America have the "potential to be radicalised" and participate in "killing to honor their religion and Muhammad," he said in response to the murders of four Marines in Chattanooga (Merrit 2015).

Transatlantic relationships, communication channels and sense of common identity with white conservative evangelicals in the USA, coupled with Islamophobic narratives from fringe political groups such as the English Defence League and the rightwing tabloid press could lead to this extreme hostility to Islam becoming dominant in some Christian circles in the UK. Thankfully British evangelicals express a much wider spread of views and a generally more tolerant attitude as seen in the collection of essays edited by Bell and Chapman (2011). Evidence from a recent Evangelical Alliance panel survey on Religions, Belief and Unbelief in 2016 suggest a range of nuanced views among evangelical Christians in the UK. They vary from the paranoid and exclusive to views that are tolerant, broadly inclusive and see Muslims as allies against the secular world.⁴

Exclusive views from the panel included...

- *I'm concerned about 'positive discrimination'; the authorities would be much more careful about offending the Muslim community than they would Christian community. Perhaps because we*

⁴ The uniqueness of Christ is held by the vast majority - 84% thought Christianity is the only path to God", (compared to 28% of 1498 Anglican clergy surveyed by YouGov in 2014). Furthermore, when asked to decide between four possible theological positions (of 1245 who answered the question) 81% opted for the exclusivist Jesus is the only way of salvation - all those who have not put their faith in Him will not enter into eternal life." 12% of the panel preferred a more inclusive Biblical statement (Acts 10:35) that "Because of what Jesus has done, God accepts people from every faith community who fear Him and do what is right". Only 2% had a pluralist view and 1.5% a universalist one.

would not react as fiercely? "Jesus" is used as a swear word and nobody reacts. Imagine if the name of Allah was used publicly as a swear word...

- *I approve of Christian schools but strongly oppose Muslim schools*
- *We are far too pro- liberal, Muslim, atheist, whereas Christianity is attacked and repressed. Evangelical Christians particularly are those being persecuted for their beliefs (...) Christians we are being marginalised by mainstream media and the government. However Islam seems to be given carte blanche to say and do whatever it likes. Churches and ministers getting involved with Islamic groups are wrong (...) How can we worship the same God, if we believe Jesus is God and Muslims believe him to be simply a prophet? Jesus is Lord!*
- *Christ, as the only way to salvation and eternal life, is the distinguishing feature of Christianity; an exclusiveness which those of other faiths, and of none, find repugnant.*

Inclusive statements such as these were also found...

- *As I gain more understanding of other faiths, I become more tolerant and suspect God may well judge others of different faiths more lovingly than we might otherwise realise.*
- *I think that God will accept into His kingdom some who are ignorant of Christ on the basis of his sacrifice and their faithfulness to the light they have received (such as the Old Testament saints). However, I believe this applies to relatively few in practice (...) For most people it is only responding to the gospel which brings this about.*
- *I think that secularism is a greater threat to Christianity and religious freedom in the UK than the rise of Islam. I believe it is often easier to speak about faith and find common ground with Muslims than liberal secular humanists (...) I believe Christians should strongly avoid offensive language (about other faiths); we should speak the truth in love. Some Christians do the faith a disservice by the harshness of their presentation (...) there can be good co-operation between faith groups, against secular humanism, for example the recent Parliamentary debate on the right to die, where there was co-operation between most evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews and Muslims.*

Nuanced statements falling between these two stances were perhaps the most common...

- *We need to be tolerant towards the views of others, but it has to work both ways (...) to Christian believers just as much as to Muslims, etc. It is a good thing to be educated about different religions or none - but usually we don't get the full story about these religions. Islam, we are constantly told, is about peace, etc, etc, but the teaching of the Koran does not seem to support this.*
- *I would make a distinction between the monotheistic religions such as Islam and Judaism and the polytheistic religions such as Hinduism.*
- *My view would be that Jews and Muslims seek to serve the same God as Christians but their understanding of His character and nature are different. We therefore have some common ground on which to have meaningful dialogue.*

Statistics based on responses to various attitude statements about religious diversity, tolerance and Islam in Table 3 (below) support the suggestion from these statements that evangelicals are either subtly nuanced, or possibly perplexed, in their approaches on these issues. They seem to be strongly in favour of tolerance and religious freedom, positive that Muslims can be allies against the march of secularism, yet fearful that Islam has designs to out-compete and dominate other religions. Thus among British evangelicals there appears to be a general acceptance of Muslims as fellow citizens of the UK, and even a degree of solidarity with them as a fellow religious minority, which is coupled with a rejection of Islam as a major theological error. Underlying this may be a realisation that the dominance of Christendom is finished, that Christians are an embattled, (even persecuted) minority, and that even though as steadfast 'Bible believers' they cannot endorse theological pluralism, they may well have to settle for peaceful coexistence and competition in a diverse religious marketplace. This is far removed from the hostility to Muslims as a dangerous "other" that seems prevalent among North American Evangelicals.

Table 3: UK Evangelicals' views of religious diversity and Islam. Evangelical Alliance panel Survey Spring 2016 – (opportunity sample with 1320 respondents).

Proportions agreeing or strongly agreeing	
Halal food should always be labeled so that people can choose whether or not to consume it.	89%
There should be no place in the UK legal system for sharia law.	87%
In certain settings and roles such as in courts, or as teachers or medical professionals Muslim women should be required to uncover their faces.	85%
Christians should challenge Muslims about the right of all people to choose and change their faith.	84%
Muslims in Britain should continue to have the right to produce and consume halal food.	76%
The Western powers are right to take military action against Da'esh/Isis (the so-called "Islamic State").	72%
Christians should admire Muslims' devotion to prayer and their scriptures.	59%
Muslims are aiming to become the dominant religion in Britain and to impose Islamic rule in this country.	58%
Muslims should have the right to wear whatever modest clothing they wish in the street, including the hijab (headscarf) and niqab (full face veil).	57%
I personally find it difficult when I see Muslim women wearing the niqab (full face veil).	53%
Muslims generally are well-disposed towards Christians.	43%
Muslims and Christians share a similar set of moral values.	40%
Religion is a frequent cause of war	40%
Religion tends to divide communities	37%
Growing religious diversity has enriched British society	34%
The established church is a strong defence against secularism.	30%
Islam is basically a religion of peace.	22%
Britain is essentially a Christian country	22%
Christians and Muslims both pray to the one true God (or the same God).	15%
Christians should never consume halal food.	13%
Violent extremism is very common among Muslims living in Britain.	12%
All religions in the UK operate on a level playing field.	11%
The UK should allow Muslims to settle issues of family law and inheritance through their own courts.	7%

What is to be done?

So, in the light of the above data and historical and sociological context, how do we assess the position in regard to the interaction between race and religion in the UK in 2017?

First, there are some alarming trends of a rise in racism expressed in verbal and physical violence with contours that are shaped more strongly by cultural and religious identities than by race and ethnicity as traditionally defined. There is a new form of English nationalism behind the enthusiasm for Brexit and for which traditional Christian and Church of England identities seem able to be mobilised. Five hundred years after Luther, the shadow of Henry VIII's very different, tyrannical and cynical Reformation continues to cast darkness across the land. The flying of the flag of (our Middle Eastern patron) St George does not seem to be widely shared or promoted by the leadership and the more active members of the Christian community, yet in the long term it could still have corrosive effects. Such nationalistic populism, and still more its Trumpite version in the USA, must be rejected by Christians as heretical and idolatrous. Yet because it is shared widely in the left behind, older, white, working class communities of provincial England this presents a significant challenge to the mission of the church. In order to continue and develop mission and ministry, while recognising the human dignity and genuine sense of loss in communities where loyalty to kin, neighbourhood and nation remain important, how far should the church modify its ethos and message? Can we bring reconciliation across the divides? For me, it is more important to insist that the Gospel of the Kingdom is about embracing people from all nations and backgrounds and one which brings liberation for the oppressed and good news to the poor of all the earth.

Secondly what are the consequences of recognising that white, male, middle class, metropolitan and Christian privilege remains a significant feature of political, economic, educational and religious institutions in Britain today? Clearly all this is the result of centuries of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy and the British class system which have dominated, exploited and oppressed generations of people both overseas and at home. In this the church, particularly the established Church of England has been complicit. In many instances this history and continuing social reality is denied or ignored, or simply taken for granted and seen as too difficult to shift. Alternatively, it can just leave privileged people in a process of psychological guilt. While repentance and forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian gospel, the encounter of Jesus with Zaccheus the tax collector suggests that in these sort of

cases recompense and restitution is appropriate and saying sorry is not enough. It may be hard to determine what this could mean in practice although it is unlikely to be a win-win basis for all concerned. Yet in order for the situation to move on from patronising charity which preserves the victim status of the less privileged, it is essential that the agency of the oppressed is recognised. The principle of the [Poverty Truth Commission](#) that “nothing should be said about us without us” needs to be central in such conversations.

Next something needs to be done to challenge the complacency which allows segregation and parallel lives in the Christian church. Indeed this mirrors Britain's residential communities more closely than in the new community of the Kingdom of Heaven and the age to come. It is not sufficient merely to hold occasional worship celebrations, prayer meetings and leaders' conferences that celebrate a spiritual unity across diverse cultural traditions. It is not enough to glory in the fact that some congregations involve people from many different national and ethnic backgrounds, when they don't really know each other and are led from the top by privileged white males. There is a requirement that many people at many levels engage in the theological, spiritual, political and pastoral work that is needed to build up the body of Christ into the fullness of maturity and diversity. There is a need to repeatedly challenge injustices and power differentials in local parishes and wider church institutions that hinder the healthy development of God's people.

Finally, we need a radical reappraisal of the relationship of a theology of religions and our theology of mission. On the one hand, we cannot be true to scripture, the traditions and creeds of the church if we naively believe that all religions teach the same thing, that all roads lead to God and that the differences do not matter. On the other hand, a view which insists that anything that deviates from our own dearly held statement of doctrine and its expression in the culture of our own church tradition is 'of the devil', can only lead to hostility and conflict. Progress will depend upon the ability to speak honestly while recognising the need for nuance and the possibility that we too might be changed in the dialogue. It will involve the whole people of God developing a grounded political theology and praxis, that goes beyond praying about how we should vote in elections (and referenda - should any government ever risk another). It involves a prophetic politics of everyday life that reflects not so much our citizenship in

the British nation state, but our citizenship in heaven. In this we follow in the footsteps of Abraham, of whom it is written:



By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

(Hebrews 11, 9-10)



For Reflection

- How much sympathy do you have for the populist feeling that led to Brexit and the election of Trump? If none, what are the alternatives you would try to promote? Does populism have any possible theological under-girding?
- What is your own understanding and experience of racism in contemporary British society? Do you accept the analysis presented in this paper and where are its strengths and weaknesses?
- What, if anything, should be done by government to promote racial justice in the next 20 years?
- How do you respond to the current levels of ethnic segregation and power distribution in the British church?
- Do you agree that Christians, especially evangelical leaders, have kept silent, or failed to be “prophets” over issues of racial justice? If so why do you think that is?
- How would you summarise in a few sentences your own theology (or values) concerning ethnic and cultural diversity?
- How do you understand and respond to Islam as a religion and to the significant and growing presence of Muslims in Western societies?
- What should be the mission priorities of the church in our diverse and unequal society?

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