

# What does the European Protestant Reformation have to do with Global Pentecostalism?

Response to Professor Alan Anderson

By Professor Robert Beckford

I am a black liberation theologian, which means amongst other things, that I mine the Christian tradition for themes, ideas and practices consistent with a view of God as a liberator of oppressed peoples, especially those who have been excluded, ostracised, demonised and *racialised* in human history.

Doing theology this way presupposes that the Christian tradition is neither neutral or unblemished in relation to the tectonic forces of non-being that stalk world history. God takes the side of the 'least of these', and so must the church. In the words of the black church chorus, "when God gets ready, you got to move."

So, in responding to Professor Anderson's paper, I foreground two optics for analysis: liberation, and justice.

I am interested in what the Reformation means for black Christians, specifically African Caribbean traditions in Britain.

Talking to people of the African diaspora about the Reformation is like referring to the Enlightenment. Enlightenment for who? Reformation for who? The reformation like the Enlightenment is performed in diverse ways in differing altering contexts, and African people's relation to this religious history is multiple and contradictory. All of which makes talk of a uniform historical process problematic, yet, historical differentiation

underlines the importance of contextual and particular analysis of the history. And this is my approach here – a contextual analysis.

African Caribbean Christians are direct recipients of the missionary frenzy born from the Reformation's focus on personal salvation through grace, and evangelical zeal to convert heathen nations.

However, the Reformation theology bequeathed to Africans was not gift from God, but a corrupt gospel message, complicit with the occult practices of the British empire in the killing fields of West Indian plantations.

Charles H. Long, father of American sociology of religion, borrows from Rudolf Otto to frame the coming of the West on African as *mysterium tremendum*. *Mysterium tremendum* describes the sense of terror evoked by the presence of an overpowering religious force.

In black Atlantic history *mysterium tremendum* from the location of its victims, registers the experience of slavery and colonialism as far more than an economic and physical assault – it was also a spiritual attack on the soul of African peoples.

For most of Caribbean history, with few exceptions, protestant mission resided inside colonial expansion and its occult proclivities, complying with it than opposing it.

So, how was Protestantism complicit with the occult of empire? There is a deceptive clue in Professor Anderson paper:

“...most historians agree that the most enduring influence on Evangelicalism, and consequently on Pentecostalism, came through eighteenth century Methodism, which in turn was heavily

influenced by the Moravian movement led by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf.”

Zinzendorf is a good person to focus on to critique the meaning of Reformation in the Caribbean and subsequently in African Caribbean Pentecostalism.

The work of the Moravian Church in Jamaica begins with the arrival of the first missionaries in the third decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Initially their missionary plans succeed – away from the towns they made converts in rural eastern Jamaica. Despite communication problems, the missionaries made it clear to the enslaved that Christ had died for their sins in the same way he had done for whites. However, Count Zinzendorf amongst the first wave of missionaries on the Island, provided a nuanced soteriology for the enslaved – one that underlined the Reformation’s inability to connect faith and justice in the Americas.

In a sermon to the enslaved in Jamaica, Zinzendorf justified slavery. Through a selective retelling of Paul’s household codes in (Ephesians and Colossians) and the Curse of Ham (Gen 9), he exhorted the enslaved:

Be true to your husbands and wives, and obedient to your masters and *bombas*. The Lord has made all ranks – kings, masters, servants and slaves. God has punished the first Negros by making them slaves, and your conversion will make you free, not from the control of your masters, but simply from your wicket habits and thoughts, and all that makes you dissatisfied with your lot.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in G. Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World*. Columbia University Press, 1978 p. 32.

The sermon appropriates only a selection of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3. And 'reads' them literally, so that they maintain the political status quo.

Not all protestant missionaries or enslaved people took the same view as Zinzendorf.

Much has been written in Caribbean history of the soft-power politics the Methodist and Baptist who were opposed to enslavement and determined to undermine the plantation system through social and educational ministries. Yet, despite their best efforts they too were inside of white supremacy on the Island. In 1831, when the black Baptist minister, Sam Sharpe, was on the cusp of mobilising a mass army for a non-violent evolutionary protest against the British on the Island, the protestant missionaries opposed him. They opted to side with the murderers and torturers disguised as plantation owners, overseers and soldiers.

The protestant reformation was transcoded into the crucible of Caribbean slavery as a false gospel. It failed to reconcile salvation through grace along with human equality, and set in train a binary opposition between faith and justice, religion and politics that echoes into the present. The past is still with us.

Fast forward into to 2017. If Sociologist of Religion Linda Woodhead and geographer Dany Dorling are correct, white Evangelicals and Pentecostals in Britain appear to have overwhelmingly accommodated a racist Brexit discourse with their protestant salvation through Christ

alone. But separation of faith and racial justice is not just an issue for white evangelicalism.

As I have shown elsewhere, black Pentecostalism in Britain, including the relatively new African Church traditions struggle to overcome the theological legacy of colonial Christianity, especially a separation of religion and politics, faith and social justice.

Their disavowal of the social world is more than product of a conservative reading of eschatology, but instead, I contend, the residue of the unholy alliance of Protestantism and empire.

I believe that the reformation *is* important to these church traditions, but only as a dangerous memory. Metz describes dangerous memories as:

...memories which make demands on us. There are memories in which earlier experiences break through to the centre point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh and steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with and show up the banality of our supposed 'realism'. They break through the canon of the prevailing structures of plausibility and have certain subversive features. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past. They are memories that we have to take into account, memories, as it were, with a future content.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in R Beckford, *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity*. Bloomsbury 2014, p.96.

The Reformation as a dangerous memory requires us to consider two things. First, to be cognisant of how being so gun-ho for one's own liberation that you end up oppressing everybody else. I am thinking here about the importance of intersectional consideration – as explored in womanist (black feminist) theology.

Second, it is important because the Reformation's failings suggest that we need a black Pentecostal Reformation.

This new reformation is soteriological, ecclesial and evangelical. It must develop a doctrine of salvation which encompasses all of creation, particularly the social and cultural world where some lives "do not matter." A new reformation should align baptism in the Holy Ghost with a baptism into the struggle for justice on the planet. And no reformation is complete without a passion for spreading the good news, but in this case, it is the Good News of a God who says you cannot be free in Christ yet live in bondage! Or as the old black church song says, "when God gets ready, you got to move."