



Racial justice and the Church

Orthodoxy and orthopraxy



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Introduction

Police brutality on black males is a well-documented phenomenon in American culture. The killings, however brutal, are often subjects of a polarised media circus. In many cases, the establishment finds legal and political resources to justify them. Something was different, however, with the killing of George Floyd. Firstly, the whole process of the killing was filmed. Secondly, the calm and cold demeanour of the killer – a police officer – as he kneels down on neck of the helpless black man was unnerving. Thirdly, the victim was begging, 'I can't breathe!' – a phrase that became a rallying cry for Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors. The combination of these three reasons elicited emotional reactions that sent a global shockwave. However, a deeper and more unsettling aspect of these routine atrocities is often forgotten in the ensuing conversations and that is the fluctuation in the value of human life.

The world of politicised adjectives

In South Africa a man has fallen in a drainage channel on the roadside. Someone calls for help shouting, 'White man down!' The cry for help was not ill-intentioned; the caller was a product of the worldview that sees human beings through the prism of black-white binary. The caller went to their default position of subscribing to the politicised adjective – 'white man'. The intuition is to generate a certain reaction in terms of the intervention by adding value to, or taking it away from, the person in question.

Doubtless, there would be a few people who would rush to save the person regardless of the adjective. However, the immediate effect of the adjective is that it dramatically diminishes the possibility of unity in intervention because people remain conditioned by their ideologies.

Ideologies are frameworks. They are useful to organise our life and what (we think) we know. On the other hand, ideologies are absolutised ideas. They draw rigid lines between us and those who we consider to be 'others'. Ideologies make mutual understanding, or entering each other's narrative world, more difficult. They drain our empathy with our ideological others. When taken to extremes, ideologies drive people towards painting 'the other' as an obstacle that needs to be removed, or a political and economic expediency that can be exploited. This would become even more dangerous when power and privilege are used to incentivise them.

George Floyd's story was not different. He was a 'black man' – the adjective is hard to miss. It has multi-layered manifestations in real life. In the life-system of the people of African descent who live in the Western hemisphere, Floyd's killing was not a distant and theoretical ethical mishap. It was an integral part of the imminent danger they face in their daily life and brought existing fear and uncertainty closer to home.

For the global black community, the Floyd's murder carries a painful symbolic significance. His plea, 'I can't breathe!' reverberated around the world as many re-lived their painful past and

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1. J Williams, 'Black lives matter in the Bible', *Christianity Today*. Available at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/june-web-only/black-lives-matter-in-bible.html

2. G McDermott, 'Race and Redemption', *First Things*. Available at www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/06/race-and-redemption

3. JK Dew, 'Southern Baptists leaders issue joint statement on the death of George Floyd', 1 June 2020.

experienced the emotional trigger of the colonial and imperial suffocation.

Those who are usually indifferent towards injustice to black minorities were caught off guard. Floyd was killed on camera. The viral nature of the news made indifference uncomfortable. Some decided to voice their support for the protest because they were genuinely shocked and appalled by the injustice. Others offered half-hearted lip service because silence became untenable.

For others, the tragedy became a commodity and a means of achieving political goals. Floyd's death created a vote-winning opportunity across the political spectrum. Some politicians rode on the promise of mainstreaming the demands of the people groups left in the social and economic margins. Others used it to galvanise their base on the promise of protecting them from racial and religious newcomers. They both had two things in common. Firstly, they both knew there would be very little change beyond lofty rhetoric. Secondly, they all wanted the politically infused adjective in the spotlight – politically, it was profitable.

Battle for memory

There are a number of measures that are being taken to address the concerns raised by the BLM protesters. Under intense global pressure, government bodies, educational institutions and companies feel they have to do something. Some of these actions are very superficial, almost bordering on comical; others are more controversial. For example, the removal or a call to remove the statues of slave masters or prominent colonial figures. However, this begs an important question. What would the removal of statues accomplish in terms of alleviating the day-to-day struggle of ordinary individuals in a racially charged world?

Before having a closer look at this question, however, there is another one we need to tackle. Why are these pieces of art (the statues) so important – both for those who ferociously attack them and those who vehemently defend them?

Memory is, and has always been, an important political battleground. Part of the reason is that memory is our recollection of events in the past that have become a part of us. That is simple. The complexity, however, is that one single event could become as empowering to one and extremely dehumanising for another. There are those who fondly remember the time their ancestors owned slaves and there are, on the other hand, those whose ancestors experienced unspeakable loss during the slave trade and the ensuing experience of slavery. Memory, therefore, represents ancestors from this violence-ridden past attempting to extend their experiences, glorious and humiliating, in and through us. These differences make the politics of remembering very contentious.

Not only that, memory, uplifting or painful, has layers of evolution. At an individual (and

intimate) level memory operates, as the ancient Greeks would say, as 'wax in the soul'. It shapes our thinking. It colours our interpretation of our surrounding. It regulates our relationships. When it finds a group of individuals with overlapping experiences, it becomes a collective memory. This group of people, then, act with a degree of coherence, without necessarily institutionalising it. When memories find concrete expressions, such as statues, they graduate themselves into a culture. At this level, they become institutionalised and immortalised, so they represent the official position of the establishment.

Let us now address our initial question of what removing the statues would accomplish. Statues are not necessarily about the past. They are about securing the future through the ancestors. Therefore, in an ideal world, for the subjugated, removing the statues would bring some sense of closure for those who struggle with painful memory. Such an action would open a new and, perhaps, more egalitarian and accommodative paradigm. It would give a feeling that the plights of the subjugated have been listened to and accounted for by society. For those who are against the removal, their future is their past. The extreme elements in this camp feel their glorious past needs to be re-enacted in a certain manner. Others are more calculated. For example, in Edward Colston's case, they chose to remember his generosity to the poor in Bristol while deciding to forget the atrocities he committed against African slaves.

Removing or retaining the statues should have been based on consensus that comes out of compassion for those who are hurting. Such a consensus is not based on a rapturous movement sweeping across the world. Instead, it takes careful education so society can identify and discern the chaff from the grain. It takes time to bring about a change that comes not out of coercive pressure, but out of discursive conviction. Otherwise, the combination of force and pace can produce either a shortcut for cheap redemption for those who feel guilty or a backlash from those who are angered. This, in turn, makes the discursive space more hostile and diminishes the virtue of listening to each other.

Orthodoxy and orthopraxy: A Christian struggle

When it comes to BLM issues, Christians struggle with the duality between right teaching (orthodoxy) and right practice (orthopraxy). Even a brief survey of Christian media outlets demonstrates Christian community is not really at fault when it comes to orthodoxy, even though it is unrealistic to expect uniformity when it comes to the details. Take, for example, these words from *Christianity Today*: 'God created black people in his image. God redeems black lives in Christ. Black lives matter to God because the Bible teaches they matter.'¹ *First Things* (an ecumenical and conservative journal) condemned the killing of George Floyd and added,

'Paul describes the unity of the human race in creation: God "has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth. All men share the same blood."' James K Dew, Jnr, the president of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, on behalf of the Southern Baptist leaders, echoes similar sentiments about the equality of human value: 'As a convention of churches committed to the equality and dignity of all people, southern Baptists grieve the death of George Floyd'. Furthermore, he calls for action by saying, 'The images and information we have available to us in this case are horrific and remind us that there is much more work to be done to ensure that there is not even a hint of racial inequity in the distribution of justice in our country.'³

However, it is the transition from right theology to right action that has proven to be elusive. While there are churches that are intentional about bridging racial divides, there are many who still struggle to land their message of equal human value in practical life. What, therefore, are the areas of action that need to be considered?

Firstly, the Christian community, as the body of Christ, need to reconsider the way it engages with agendas set by political entrepreneurs. Ideologues often tap into half-truths or ride on dominant feelings. The Church needs to set an agenda of its own that is biblical and inclusive to prophetically engage the public discourse. It also needs to be a leader, not a follower, in matters of justice. When the Church loses its direction in dealing with injustice, it loses its ability to speak with authority on BLM issues. Politicised racial adjectives are traps that undermine the ability of the Church to speak the truth without fear or favour.

Secondly, there has to be a common recognition among Christians (blacks and whites) that George Floyd symbolises humanity, not just the black community. When one human being denies the right of another human being to breathe, and does it with impunity, the depth of the problem is beyond racial. The whole incident is a dramatic example of the depth of human brokenness. The discussion, therefore, should be taken beyond skin colours. Anger is the right reaction in the face of atrocity. However, it would be unfortunate if this anger were directed solely towards a few individuals or a specific group. The Christian community should be angry at the mindset or ideological tenets that divide humanity into hostile groups. Clearly, black people bear the brunt of physical abuse, economic marginalisation and social injustices. However, the spiritual damage transcends racial boundaries. The response should not be sheer force, but education and discipleship to make human persons whole.

Thirdly, the Church needs to take a reasonable distance from the political establishment and provide a prophetic voice on public issues such as this. As I hinted above, the Church has lost its

incarnational posture and has left open a way for corrosive political elements to subvert its narrative. Its preoccupation with 'culture war' has made the Church lose an important war that from early on it was keen to address – diversity and inclusion. The Church, therefore, cannot act as a distant commentator of this tragedy – it is an important contributor to it. Racial violence is a result of narrative tragedy. The Church, as a crucial storyteller in the culture, has failed to construct a common destiny that transcends tribal fault lines. There is a need, therefore, for the Church to take a distance from ideology and draw its message afresh from its original source – the example of Christ.

Finally, the Church and Christian organisations need to set concrete examples of inclusivity and equality. This starts with understanding and recognising the uphill battle that young black people have to get opportunities in life. The window of opportunity for black people is as narrow in Christian organisations as elsewhere, if not even narrower. When they get one, those opportunities come with extra struggle in workplaces. A friend put it this way: 'Black people are greeted with suspicion in their positions until proven otherwise, while white people are greeted with trust until proven otherwise.' Even those who are highly qualified struggle from unconscious biases as well as conscious, and subtle resistance embedded in the system. There is no ready-made answer for the challenge of unconscious bias. However, Christian organisations should be more intentional about addressing it. This could mean opening doors, entrusting them with responsibilities and mentoring them so that they can thrive. This includes creating a level playing field for job opportunities, empowering individuals with talent and coaching them into leadership roles.

Conclusion

Violence against another human being is a dehumanising experience, not only for the victims, but also for the perpetrators. The only difference is that one bares the physical scars whereas the other faces spiritual deprivation. The Church has the mandate to address both. The activism of the Church in the public sphere, vis-à-vis BLM issues, needs to address the totality of a human being. A discourse of justice that takes skin colour as a point of departure, however sophisticated it might be, is bound to fail with regards to bringing a lasting solution. It does not go deep enough because it stops at the skin. This is the reason why a Christian approach to racial justice needs to make a combined effort to address the mindset as well as performing concrete actions on the ground such as education, employment and improved workplace policies. The goal, therefore, is re-humanising by restoring the distorted divine image in humanity.