



The God of all people



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I have never experienced what some might describe as overt, violent racism in the UK Church. I've never been called the 'N' word, nor heard it preached from any pulpit that black people are inferior. Racism does not have to come in dramatic forms, but it can be felt and experienced by ethnic minorities in white majority spaces in subtle and pervasive ways that might not at first glance seem obvious to white Christians.

In conversations that have taken place in churches up and down the UK following the death of George Floyd and the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter protests, black Christians, often in white majority spaces, were revealing the pain and hurt they had experienced in those spaces; telling stories about the ways in which they had felt excluded, discriminated against or made to feel less than in the Church: the one place in which they understandably felt they should receive unconditional acceptance.

In the writing of my book, *God Is Not a White Man: And Other Revelations* in the months following George Floyd's death, I surfaced stories of how I too had felt that exclusion as a black woman growing up in majority white spaces, including the Church.

I did not have to look far into my own family history to find stories of how Christianity and whiteness had been intertwined. I was born in Nigeria and moved to the UK when I was four years old. I came from a family of generations of Christians in Nigeria. My great-grandfather, Canon Emmanuel Ene (aka Papa Nnukwu), had been

an Anglican priest in the south-east of Nigeria, ordained in 1940. He and my grandmother, Alice (aka Mama Nnukwu), ran a school for Christian wives alongside their parish ministry. Brides-to-be would often come to stay with them before getting married, to learn how to become 'good Christian wives'. In essence, this meant teaching Nigerian women how to bake cakes and serve tea out of china cups. This image is a jarring juxtaposition when I think about the vibrancy and the colour and the flavours of our native food and ways of being. The thought that we would have swapped bold traditional fabrics for white lace, or eye-wateringly spicy pepper soup for cucumber sandwiches, because somewhere along the way Christianity had accidentally been bound up with Englishness, is heart-breaking and infuriating. And so, from before my faith journey began, it has been difficult to extricate Christianity from the notion of Englishness and whiteness – and colonialism.

When we moved to the UK in the late 1980s, my parents were expecting to be welcomed into the Church by fellow Christians. And, on the whole, they were. But there is one incident that will forever stick in my mind. I recall our visit to a church in a leafy town in Hertfordshire. I arrived with my parents and two younger sisters one Sunday morning and we were met at the door by a woman on the welcome team. She warmly invited us in, but asked us why we had chosen that church to attend that day, rather than the black church down the road. Now, she may have meant this innocently, but we immediately felt like we did not belong in that place. I have never forgotten it.

NOTES

1. John Locke, 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' (1836).

In writing *God Is Not a White Man*, I wanted to give voice to the experience of what it is like to be both black and female in a world that is in many ways designed to elevate both whiteness and patriarchy. This is something we experience often in the Church in the UK, even though it might not seem obvious on the surface. White supremacy comes not only in the Klansman's white cape, but the subtle words that seem to betray the idea that white is right. White supremacy can come not in literal chains and shackles, but in the narrow definition of what and who is beautiful. White supremacy can come in a lack of welcome to anyone who is not white.

White, male God

As a black Christian woman, I wanted to explore the effects of the literal depictions of God as both white and male – God who so often is depicted as an old man who looks like Father Christmas sitting in cloud – and Jesus as a sandy-haired kind of hippie figure, who looks a bit like Robert Powell did in the 1977 film *Jesus of Nazareth*. These types of images are those we have all grown familiar with if you look at God and Jesus in art throughout history: from Salvador Dali's 'Christ of St John of the Cross', to Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World', to Leonardo da Vinci's 'Salvator Mundi'.

It has been fascinating to hear people's reactions to the title of my book. It seems obvious to most people who know anything or believe anything about God that God is not white and that God transcends gender. But if you look back at centuries of theology and practice within the Church, you see white supremacy and patriarchy writ large on the walls of the Church. That pervasive message seeps in when you look at church leadership, or the theological voices that are listened to, or even the very notion of Christianity itself as being a white European religion. Therefore, while we might think it is obvious God is not a white man, the practices of the Church have suggested otherwise. White supremacy can come in the form of monochrome leadership, theology and practice. In my experience of church, despite the knowledge that God is God of all, one might be forgiven for believing that our God values whiteness – white leaders, white theologians, white readings of Scripture, white Western forms of worship – as supreme. We might believe that God is a white man.

Questions of diversity, representation and racial justice have been wrestled with in many denominations for decades – long before the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. One of the most prominent church denominations to be wrestling publicly with these issues is the Church of England. Over the past 40 years, several reports have been written into racism within the Church, with long lists of recommendations about how to tackle it. But at General Synod in February this year, Lord Boateng, chair of the Archbishops' Commission on

Racial Justice, told members that it was 'chilling', 'wounding' and a 'scandal' that there had been no action on the long list of recommendations over the years. He praised the Church's good intentions but criticised the lack of delivery. Introducing Lord Boateng at Synod, Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said racial justice was a 'critical issue for the

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life of the church, the life of the nation and the life of the world'. He added, 'Sometimes, the Church's opposition to racism, particularly in our own day, is dismissed as some sort of inappropriate dallying with race politics and culture wars.'

In *God Is Not a White Man* I write about my experience of reading the *New York Times* best-selling novel, *The Shack*. It was the first time I encountered God in my image. William P Young tells the story of a man who, after going through an unspeakable family tragedy, encounters God in three persons in the middle of a shack. Here, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as an Asian woman, Jesus as a Middle Eastern man, and God the Father – or 'Papa' – as a black woman. In the film version, God was played by Octavia Spencer.

When I got to the pages in which Papa was revealed in the book, I had a profound moment of revelation. This was the first time I saw God portrayed in a way in which I could really see myself. It was extremely moving and opened my eyes to who God is, not because I think God is a black woman, but because I know that neither is God a white man. Despite the fact that to this day, when I close my eyes, I picture God as white. It will take many years for me to unsee and reimagine white Christ and white God in my mind because of all the aforementioned images of God I have seen throughout my life.

The Kingdom of God is like a mosaic

While studying theology at Cambridge University, I learned a valuable lesson: my voice matters. In the Divinity Faculty I learnt that those closest to God were white men. For why else would the whole of the theology syllabus be dominated by them? At university, I had attempted to present a simple reading of theology as a series of intellectual arguments listed one after the other: this theologian thought this and that theologian thought that. Like the journalist I wanted to be, I had attempted to take myself out of the

story, achieving in my essays the goal of being that objective writer, a faceless observer. I had presented few of my own thoughts, feeling them to be unimportant and potentially distracting in writing academic essays about the nature of God.

I have spent much of my life continuing to do this: making myself smaller, accommodating the expectations of how others want the world to be. While patriarchal influences draw a box in which women must sit and conform, white supremacy quiets the unique voice of the Black experience.

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There is not room for both. Perhaps I should have listened much earlier to the lesson that my Cambridge supervisor taught me: my voice needed to be heard, not merely in the social justice or political sense, but because, when it comes to theology, the personal account is just as important as the historic, academic or intellectual. In the same way, my life experiences also matter.

This is arguably more true of theological explorations than it is of any others. Since God cannot be seen or touched in a physical sense, we can only experience God spiritually, in our inner beings, and our experience of God can then only be relayed through our words, our speech – a translation exercise taking place in which communicating our experience of God cannot escape being shaped by our histories, our social contexts, our genders, our racial backgrounds, our individual stories. It is these personal stories that shape our knowledge of the divine. How can God be revealed except through the variety of different personal stories, physical realities and cultural contexts in which humans experience God's presence? As seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke wrote: 'God, when he makes the prophet, does not unmake the man.'¹

I believe in a God who is the God of all, who is experienced by all. No one has a monopoly on divine revelation. Those of us who are not white and not male have an experience of God that is just as valid, no matter our background.

In Ephesians 2, we read the following:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in

him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

(Ephesians 2.19–22, NIV)

In this passage, we read of various groups coming together with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, how Christ breaks down the dividing wall of hostility. Here, the walls are broken down but the diversity remains something we should celebrate.

I think we need to address the racial power imbalances in the Church because it is in the celebration of diversity and difference, in seeing and hearing things in new ways, that we can be awakened again to the beauty of the creator God. But the Church has failed profoundly on this front. In my three and a half decades of majority white churches, we have lost this truth. Though we celebrate multiracial churches, so often within those spaces whiteness still dominates and other cultures are asked to conform to the dominant culture. Division remains.

I believe the Church is supposed to be better than this, not because we are better people, but because at the crux of the Christian faith is this crazy idea that – like we read in the Ephesians passage – there is no more dividing wall of hostility. Just like the barrier broken between God and humanity; the Church should actively be the ones who break down the dividing walls that exist between people groups. In the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God; the Church should be like a mosaic. A place for people of all different races and backgrounds and cultures. Like a mosaic, the pieces are of all different shapes and sizes and colours. Close-up they might look like they do not fit together, but stand back and these mosaics create a beautiful picture.

This is why issues of diversity, representation and racial justice matter for the Church. It is not just part of a 'woke agenda', but critical to us having a fuller and larger understanding of who God is and who we are as people loved and created in God's image.

I believe the Kingdom of God should be like a mosaic – a tapestry of colour, each part equal and in relationship with each other.

Conclusion

A Christianity that is more focused on maintaining the status quo of white superiority, as if whiteness is something that God sees as worthy of protecting, is not the Christianity of Jesus Christ. It bears no resemblance to the New Testament's critique of empire and religious leaders who see themselves as pious yet ignore the plight of the outcasts, the wounded, or the subjugated.