

## A Theological Identity of Protest

**Anthony G. Reddie**

I was born in Bradford, West Yorkshire in October 1964. I was 60 in October 2024. Reaching such a milestone is no small or semantic matter, given that I was born several weeks premature weighing only 2 pounds and not expected to live. Therefore, to reach the age 60 has given rise to a great deal of reflection.

I write as a 60-year-old Black man who works for Regent's Park College, in the University of Oxford. I am a Black liberation theologian. My work, is to reflect on the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, trying to discern the relationship of that God to the continued struggles of Black people in Britain and across the world, against the scourge that is systemic racism. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 reminded us that we were living in the midst of two terrible pandemics. One was new – the Coronavirus. The other was centuries old – systemic racism arising from the existence of White supremacy, often seen in various epochs, be it the so called 'Transatlantic slave trade', Colonialism and the ongoing rise of neo-liberalism and White western dominated forms of capitalism.

Given that I have recently turned 60, I have decided to make this blog entry a personal one. In writing this piece, I am not speaking for and seeking to represent anyone else; simply myself and what I feel and believe to be true. It is certainly not the whole truth, 'so help me God'; rather, it is 'a truth', mine, gleaned from within the consciousness of my own being and thought.

I have recently completed a book for Oxford University Press, my first very first for this publisher. It is entitled *Living Black Theology: Issues of Pedagogy, Mission and Praxis*. Writing as the first ever Professor of Black Theology in the long history of Oxford University, I have used this relatively new designation (the title was conferred by letter from the Vice Chancellor in September, 2023) as an opportunity to reflect on my life and what it means to be a Black Christian man living in Britain in the early decades of the 21st century.

Living Black theology in this context speaks to the sense of meaning one construes from the act of measuring one's existence in light of an interpretive framework called 'Black Theology'. As James Cone outlines in his second memoir, he was Black before he was Christian, given the nature and reality of White supremacy.<sup>1</sup> My cultural and intellectual formation has been an ongoing dialectic between these foundational ways of understanding my existential condition as a human being – namely, the challenge of correlating my human identity as a person born into a Black skin that has been thought by many as deeply problematic, alongside my faith identity as a follower of Jesus. Like James Cone, I was not always a Christian, in the conventional evangelical sense of being in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, whom many believed has saved our souls, mine included. I 'gave my life to Jesus' when I was 14 years old.

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<sup>1</sup> See James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986) pp.17-40.

In spite of the compelling rhetoric of the religious community of which I was a part, namely, Eastbrook Hall Central Methodist Mission, in Bradford, West Yorkshire, that 'Being Saved' would change my reality completely, I soon found that was not the case. The purview of the world of inner-city Bradford, West Yorkshire, was not improved or indeed, even markedly changed by my now being able to call myself 'A Born Again Christian'. My social realities did not change. My Black skin did not disappear nor did White people's gaze on it change either. My attempts to transcend my Blackness and so show myself to be a moral, upright human being worthy of the term 'Born Again Christian' did not change the wider social world of working-class, inner-city Bradford, as one might have hoped or presupposed.

That said, access to the life of this prestigious Methodist church did give me brief admittance to and a glimpse of the world of White middle class entitlement. I have written elsewhere on the formative influences of growing up in the strict holiness culture of Wesleyan Methodism.<sup>2</sup> The idea that I could go to university and enter the ranks of professional work as opposed to the manual work that marked out the work experiences of Father and his peers, was first implanted in my mind through being a member of the church's 'Youth Fellowship'. In the church's Youth Fellowship were many of my older peers, a number of whom had already left home and the church and were at university or were applying to follow in their footsteps. Although I was not like them in any direct sense, given that they were 'White' and 'Middle-class' and that I was 'Black' and 'Working class', nonetheless, my proximity to them gave me a sense of feeling I could at least approximate their experiences.

I am the eldest child of Noel and Lucille Reddie, Caribbean migrants who were part of the Windrush Generation. I was born in Bradford, West Yorkshire. My early formative years were spent in a predominantly White working-class area of East Bowling, BD4, one of the poorest wards in the city. My father was an ardent trade unionist. I was named after the famed Labour Party socialist MP, Anthony Wedgwood Benn, or Tony Benn in ordinary parlance. My father was a member of the General and Municipal Workers Union and at one point was a Works Convener. My Mother was a part time worker in a factory, then a housewife, later a cleaner and finally a dinner lady before she retired. My family lived in an unspectacular working-class community of predominantly White working-class families. The six of us lived in a relatively small terraced house, with an outdoor privy or toilet. Our neighbours were mainly White working class from several generations of post-church, in a culture of perennial unemployment. I remember there being two dominant White families in the street whose two households consisted of three generations of people, all of whom were unemployed, even during periods of full employment, when there was a surfeit of manual and skilled work in factories across the city.

My parents were hardworking and ambitious migrants whose modus operandi in moving to the UK was to make a better life for themselves and their anticipated children. During the cycle of a normal week there were two moments that differentiated our family from that of our White neighbours. First, in the early hours of a week day morning, my Father would leave our home at 5am to walk the four miles to work in a large industrial engineering firm.

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<sup>2</sup> See Anthony G. Reddie, *Working Against The Grain* (Equinox, 2008), pp.2-4.

Most of his male peers would be in their beds sleeping off the excess of drunken nights in the nearby pub. The other moment of radical disparity was on a Sunday morning. Whereas our neighbours would sleep in, once again, shaking off the impact of too much alcohol the night before, the Reddie family would be up, resplendent in our Sunday best heading off to church.

I offer these disparities between our family and our White peers, not to claim some kind of spurious superiority between us and them. Rather, it is to show some of the critical disparities that account for the changes in the lives of my family as opposed to our neighbours. It also explains some of the historic divergences between Black working class and some White working-class peoples, which accounts for the lack of solidarity between the two, which has been deeply problematic on both sides. Earlier this summer, Britain was being engulfed by a wave of White, nationalistic, racist, mob violence venting its visceral anger at largely working-class Muslims and asylum seekers and refugees. In these so-called protests (interesting how White people are permitting to protest but Black and Brown people are called rioters), one sees very little in the way of class solidarity between predominantly White working-class communities and those living alongside them who are Muslims of Global Majority Heritage people.

The White working-class communities amongst whom I grew up, were not unlike the poor working-class communities depicted in the famed novels of Charles Dickens in the early and mid part of the 19th century. Several generations later and these communities were still located at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. By the time my parents had moved into our family home in 1960, our White neighbours were still largely poor and towards the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, only now, we were to blame for their poverty, not a long history of structural, socio-economic forces that had always exploited White working-class people. The Black theology I have imbibed and to which I am now hugely committed, is one that seeks to speak to the socio-political and cultural contexts that shape one's identity. My Black theology is one of protest that challenges the edifice of Whiteness that has shrouded academic theology and ministry in the UK. My reflections and writing will continue!

This autobiographical piece has been written as a means of reflecting on the nature of social class, as it collides with issues of 'race' in 21st century Britain. As a Black middle-class academic, working in the University of Oxford, but who still wishes to be solidarity with the people and the concerns of his working-class roots, how does one correlate these two realities? And what are the implications for Black theology and other forms of contextual, liberative forms of theology when their exponents possess different class realities than the ones that shaped their formative upbringing and consciousness?

My current work and forthcoming book argue otherwise! In this work, I am recognising my own identity as a middle-class professional, working in Oxford University, coming from working class roots. Black theology in Britain has emerged largely from Caribbean roots, mainly individuals like myself, born in the UK but whose parentage lies in the British empire, in islands several thousands of miles away from this country. Being Black and working class largely went hand in hand. I became a part of the Black theology in Britain movement in the early 90s, on the back of being an undergraduate student at the University of Birmingham

where I read for a degree in largely Church History. I became fascinated by Black theology as I reflected on my social and religious formation, realising the extent to which issues of race and class had rarely been discussed. Little did I know that the questions that prompted my involvement in Black theology would be ones I would still be posing and reflecting on thirty years later.

This blog, is in many respects, a microcosm of the book I have completed for OUP. In it, I am seeking to reflect critically on the how one's lived experience and subjectivity as a human being impacts on and informs the intellectual work of people like myself. Given that we know all theologies are contextual and that God does not do theology, in what ways does our social location and class consciousness shape what we subsequently believe and write? Too often, this subject has remained unexplored. That British academic theology, is largely, White, middle class and overwhelmingly Anglican is the big take away of this piece. It is that most people whose identity adheres to the aforementioned, largely think such matters are not worth discussing.

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