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A Time to Question: The Role of the Black Church in British Society

by Paul Grant

In this essay I raise some questions concerning the role of Black faith and religious institutions in Britain. It seems to me that certain assertions made concerning the progressive nature of this role have remained unquestioned. Lest this be perceived as yet another attack on Black faith from an outsider, it will be presented in terms of an exercise in self-criticism. I will use a collection of papers on Black theology in Britain, which I co-edited, to illustrate my argument concerning the limitations of our faith-based radicalism.

Given that the aim here is less precise conceptual clarity and more broad political mapping, debates concerning the exact composition of the Black Church in Britain need not detain us. It is suffice for current purposes to say that I will use the term to refer to those denominations and fellowships that could be regarded as Black-led, as well as Black Christians involved in white-led churches. Furthermore, discussions concerning the exact ethnic or national origin of the churches are less important than the trends in their concerns, structures and responses to social injustice that seem to cut across ethnic boundaries.

One of the more discernible of these trends is the assertion that the Black Church in Britain is undergoing a period of reassessment. In terms of the Black-led churches, this tends to be presented as an “identity crisis,” where churches are wrestling with a range of challenges to their traditional structures and practices. These find expression in debates about the relationship between mission defined as social justice and traditional commitments to evangelism defined as the saving of souls; and the changing demographics of the Black presence, especially the increasing class differentiation within the churches themselves and the centrality of women in church life and the possibility and purpose of theological reflection grounded in the spiritual and material experiences of life in Britain.

On the other hand, for Black Christians in white-led churches, the crisis is less that of responses to changing conditions, and more their unchanging experiences of exclusion within their own churches. Whereas for Black-led churches the question is, “Who are we now?”; for these Christians it is, “Where are we?” with a focus on the marginalization of Black experiences in the practical and spiritual lives of churches characterized by class-based, racist and gender hierarchies. Although these formulations of crisis acknowledge external trends and factors in compounding these difficulties, central to both

is the view that the crises are essentially internal to the churches themselves. Consequently, solutions gravitate towards the maintenance of community and culture within and between fellowships, rather than changing the structures and processes of the society in which the crises are rooted.

This tendency also underlies recent writing about Black Christian faith in Britain. Over and against earlier characterizations of that faith as escapist, exotic or simply primitive, contemporary writers tend to identify the Black Church as a place of actual, or potential, political, cultural and psychological emancipation. Arguments for viewing the Black Church as a site of liberation take a number of forms and differ partly in terms of whether the church is Black or white-led. For example, some suggest that the experiences of racism in the United Kingdom encouraged a radical activism similar to those of “recognized” theologies of liberation in the First and Third Worlds. This view argues that the Black-led churches’ greater autonomy, self-developed infrastructure and cultural cohesiveness have allowed for a more direct and radical relationship between church and community.

Others consider that Black faith is better understood in terms of a more passive radicalism, a proto-liberatory phenomenon, which through its holistic pastoral approach and theology, sustains cultural and psychological survival over and against the forces which threaten to overwhelm Black people. Although this “war of position” view also draws on the experiences of Black-led churches, it tends to be offered by Black Christians in mainstream churches and reflects the particular structural restrictions placed upon the expression of their faith. These Christians are both blessed and cursed by a double consciousness: in the absence of real acceptance as Black people, they draw on informal networks within and without the fellowship to maintain their faith. Even so, fragmented in a variety of ways over a range of churches, there is not the quality of formal networks, organizations or leadership which would allow them an effective voice in the affairs of those churches, let alone anything more than a token presence in their respective places of power.

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Both of these perspectives offer the Black Church as a progressive force in British society, inspiring and sustaining, if not leading, the cause of racial and social justice. I would argue that this is to overstate the extent to which Black Christians have offered any credible challenge to the broader processes and structures of inequality at work in that society, especially over the last twenty years. In these terms, the crises experienced and articulated should be understood rather less as internal matters of identity and representation, and rather more as issues of political practice and theological engagement. Such a perspective allows us to look beyond celebrating

the church's survival in a racist society to an evaluation of its failures given the resources at its disposal and its place in minority and national life. And it is to the consideration of these failures that we now turn.

Eleven years after the election of the Conservatives in 1979 and a full ten years after the first so-called "race riots" of the 1980s, *A Time to Speak: Perspectives of Black Christians in Britain* was published under the auspices of the Black and Third World Theology Group, Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice and the Community and Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches.¹ It was a ground-breaking publication in several ways. First of all, it was a forum for Black Christians to articulate their views independent of white control. There was a strong theme of spiritual "anti-colonialism" in the contributions: previously white academics and clerics had free rein to describe, define and delimit the activities of Black people in churches without effective opposition. The book turned this upside down and offered Black people as the subjects of history and white society the object of discussion. Secondly, it broke with the previous tradition of narrative or semi-autobiographical reflections from Black ministers and presented nascent attempts to describe and analyze the experience of Black faith in a more structured and rigorous manner. Drawing on a much wider range of contributors, especially so-called "second-generation" writers, the material reflected a breadth of concerns beyond the pastoral and spiritual, wrestling with issues ranging from urban social policy to the role of women in Black faith. Thirdly, and most importantly, it was the first self-conscious attempt at the creation of a British Black theology.

This development marked an effort to critically reflect upon and wrest meaning and direction from experiences in Britain and link this with broader movements in Christian thinking around emancipation and liberation. However, placed in the context of broader social, economic and cultural shifts which had taken place from the mid-1970s through the late-1980s, our work was rather less the definitive break with the past than we believed. That *A Time to Speak* was captive to the very methods and concerns it sought to criticize can be illustrated in number of ways. For example, a number of the reviewers characterized it as a cry from the heart, a fraternal plea to be included. To be sure, there was no in-depth radical theological, let alone political, analysis contained in the contributions. The focus of the work centered on the state of relations between Black and white Christians and attempts to improve them.

So, at one level it offered a tacit corrective to the marginalization of Black voices and issues in a slowly emerging, larger and more genteel Christian movement for social justice at the time. Such omissions had been neatly encapsulated by the publication of *Faith in the City*, five years earlier, with its articulation of what could be best described as a "theology of moderation." However, despite the fact that this movement had been energized by a recognition of the worst excesses of neo-

liberal economics and neo-conservative politics (sold under the brand name of Thatcherism in the United Kingdom and Reaganomics in the United States), *A Time to Speak* had very little to say about the issues affecting Black communities beyond the walls of the Church.

In certain times and conditions such a focus might be both understandable and forgivable. It could be argued that it was a strategic decision to focus on church rather than community issues. This was not the case. We published the best of the work that was made available to use: examinations of broader economic and social trends were simply not being done by Black Christians at the time. Alternatively, one could say that criticism starts where people know best, so clearly the primary focus for Black Christians would be the Church. This argument has its attractions, but becomes a little difficult to sustain given the political and economic policy under Thatcherism and its well-known impact on Black communities. In this context, the failure to criticize and critique such policies is a mortal sin. This, I suggest, was no accident, but instead reflects the highly ambivalent position of the Black Church in British society and its entanglement with the United Kingdom "race relations" industry.

An integral part of the Black church's history in this country has been its willingness to condemn the vices of its own community and the wider society. The emphasis on good works and strong moral codes attracted the attention of the Conservatives in the period of the post-1980s uprisings, as they sought allies in their mission to reclaim the inner cities and to side-step criticisms of their social policies advanced by the established churches. Overtures were made and connections consummated. It should be pointed out that despite this indictment, the Black Church has consistently (and honestly) reported and organized itself to tend to the pain of their communities. However, the theological perspective from which this is done has always shadowed the liberal political integrationist position: pain was presented to those in power in the expectation that they would react rationally (and morally) to alleviate it. That this faith was sustained for any length of time after the mid-1970s, let alone under the post-1979 Conservatives, should imply a need for a more profound reassessment and analysis of the role of the Black Church that is currently expressed by some observers. That some of this work was laid out two years later, in *A Time to Act* does not excuse failures of analysis and practice in the 1980s, nor our failures to listen to the voices of the streets, schools, and workplaces.

Note

¹Paul Grant and Raj Patel. *A Time to Speak: Perspectives of Black Christians in Britain* (Racial Justice and the Black Theology Working Group, 1990).

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