

Black History Month 2020

Black Majority Churches and the transformation of Christianity

Julia, Dr John Maiden:

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JULIA: So welcome, everybody, to this talk with John Maiden. I'm just going to introduce John briefly, and then the play of the session is that he's going to talk for about 35 to 40 minutes, and then there will be time for questions and discussion afterwards. Just another gentle reminder to-- I have to keep on reminding you to turn your cameras and your mix off. That would be would much appreciated.

And so, Dr John Maiden is a senior lecturer and current head of discipline and religious studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He has an interest in modern religious history, and he's currently involved in various projects, including the Horizon 2020 project on religions, toleration, and peace, which sounds super interesting.

He's previously involved in an HRC-funded project called Building on History-- Religion in London, and he is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a committee member for the religious archives group. So very much an archives and history person, which we like to have over in FASS. His current work looks on the evangelical and charismatic Christianities in local, national, and transnational contexts.

And he is currently finishing up a monograph on Oxford University Press, which is called Age of The Spirit, A Global History of Charismatic Renewal, 1945 to 1980. So, as I should introduce myself, my name is Julia Downes I'm the FASS EDI academic lead and also a lecturer in criminology.

So, I'm very happy to introduce John maiden, who's now going to give us a talk called Black Majority Churches, and the transformation of British Christianity. So, if John, you'd like to turn on your camera and your mice and take it away.

DR. JOHN MAIDEN: Thanks, Julia. Can everyone hear me OK?

SPEAKER 1: Yeah.

SPEAKER 2: Yeah.

DR. JOHN MAIDEN: Thanks. Yeah, I was going to introduce myself, but Julia, you've told everyone a little bit about me. I'm-- yeah. I'm a historian of religion, 20th-century religion.

And one of my interest is the intersections between Christianity and anti-racism in the UK context, and I'm going to talk for about-- it won't be as long as-- I hopefully, it'll be like 25, 30 minutes and then there'll be plenty of time for questions at the end. So, I want to start on the 27th of October 1979 St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which that evening resounded to a chorus for dancing sung in English and Akan.

And the occasion for this was a service called-- sorry. Just going to have to master this. A service called unity and love celebration. And this was a service recognizing the diversity of British Christianity and bringing together members of its historic denominations and the, quote unquote, "Black-led churches of the African-Caribbean and West African communities."

The press release had promised an occasion demonstrating that, quote, "Praise and fellowship, mutual acceptance-- I'm getting some feedback there. Someone have the mic on?" "Praise and fellowship, mutual acceptance, and Christian love are not only possible, but enjoyable and inspiring experiences." So, music was one vehicle for this.

Three hymns were accompanied by organ, but there were performances from six individual choirs from churches like the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the New Testament Church of God. The congregation was invited to join in singing a gospel song called You've got to love everybody. And during the interval, people were encouraged to introduce themselves to members of other churches sitting nearby.

Greetings were brought by various dignitaries like the Right Reverend, Robert Runcie, who would go on to be Archbishop of Canterbury. And by African Caribbean representatives of churches, such as the Calvary Church of God in Christ and the New Testament church of God and the West African Cherubim and Seraphim council of churches.

So, the purpose of unity and love was to publicize the activities of a group called the Joint Working Party, a Black-led and white-led churches. And this was a group established in 1977 under the auspices of the British Council of churches, a kind of ecumenical organization for Christian denominations.

And this group, this joint working party, aim to foster cross-cultural engagement between churches. Relations between white and Black majority churches and this is terminology which

I'll come back to and explain in a moment. Relations between white and Black majority churches had been extremely poor in previous decades.

But this celebration service, however, in a cathedral, in a place historically depicted as the centre of a global spiritual empire was profoundly symbolic of a reconfiguration of British Christianity through new commonwealth immigration.

So, in the rich literature we have on post-war Christianity in Britain, and that's a literature that tends to assume a religious decline or secularization, decline of the churches. Very little has been said about the African-Caribbean Pentecostal and holiness churches and African initiated churches.

Now, I'll refer to these as Black majority churches or BMCs. But post-colonial Black Christianities had a vital impact on the-- what you might call the afterlife of Christianity in Britain. I'm not sure about that too much, actually, but it's a term sometimes used in the literature.

I want to argue two main points today. First that the history of religious change in British Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s remains incomplete without full consideration of the Black majority churches. This is not just the story of religion in the second half of the 20th century in the UK context. It's not just a simple linear story of religious decline. There is evidence of decline and growth.

And relevant here is not only the growth and diversity of the Black majority churches within British Christianity but also perceptions of religious change. And the second thing I want to argue is that I want to try and contribute to the still-developing area of research around the role of Christianity in race relations in Britain. It was referred to as race relations.

I will talk about the emergence of a Christian ecumenical multiculturalism, which arose parallel to discourses in political-- in political culture and society around multiculturalism in British life. So, before I set off, just some comments about terminology and labels, so the labels Black-led and Black majority are contested labels.

The former label of Black-led is now rejected by some Black Christian leaders as a white liberal category. And furthermore, both the labels Black-led and Black majority to describe these churches. It's been argued that those labels overlook significant historic denominational theological diversity within those churches. And that's something the Arlington Trotman has argued quite persuasively, and these are serious considerations that I am very conscious of particularly, as a white scholar.

So, in this article, I'm going to use the terminology Black-led only to reflect the historical usage. But I'm going to utilize the term Black majority, Black majority church, on the grounds that this particular term has obtained wide currency and has been adopted widely by Black Christian churches and church organizations. So Black majority church refers to a church, either an individual church congregation or a church denomination, which is majority Black either African-Caribbean or African in the context of this talk.

And also, I want to give a forewarning that because the history of white Christian racism is an aspect of this paper, it will include references to ideas and language which are emotionally sensitive or objectionable. So, the background of Christian relations. So, if you look at the post-war years, you'll see a stark contrast in African Caribbean church attendances.

In a landmark study in 1963 found that although levels of attendance to Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches in the Caribbean was relatively high, only 4%. That's 2,563 of immigrants from African Caribbean immigrants attended those same denominations when they arrived in greater London. So, a very high attendance of those churches in the Caribbean, but only 4% attendance in Greater London.

In the census of London, Birmingham, and Manchester, the picture was mixed. A small number of migrants settled in mainline churches, but many did not attend church at all. Others were drawn into Black Christian gatherings. Now, I want to say that single factor interpretations for the development for this development and the development of Black majority churches are grossly inadequate.

Social scientists who use the terminology of Black sects in the mid-1960s tended to draw on the theoretical explanation of relative deprivation. So, you had someone like the Australian scholar, Malcolm Cowley, spoke of, quote, "The thorough going of obsessive ritual withdrawal of the saint from the world."

Now, these studies underestimated experiences of white Christian racism. A reality to which various later reminiscences of Black Christian leaders attested. In many other cases, African Caribbean migrants received a more generous welcome. A Recent scholarship overall indicates a range of white Christian responses to those newly arrived Christians ranging from overt hostility to a certain coolness, thoughtlessness, or inflexibility to a level of openness more socially progressive than much of wider society.

Mission and tradition also played important roles in the formation of Black majority churches in Britain. In the 1950s, Black church planters were active in forming bedsit gatherings known as churches in the home, which formed in a camaraderie of shared living space. The same decade saw the appearance of denominations which transplanted distinctive Christian

traditions, which had been indigenized in the Caribbean and were usually under the oversight of either a white or Black-dominated mother church in the United States. So, the New Testament Church of God would be one example of this.

Alongside these larger bodies, many smaller denominations with organizational connections to the Caribbean appeared. So, for example, in 1958, the Church of the firstborn was established in Britain, which has its headquarters in Jamaica.

There's an emerged various independent bodies, many in the oneness Pentecostal tradition. Now, I'm not going to get into theological explanations here, but basically, within Pentecostalism, you have a oneness tradition, and you have a Trinitarian tradition. And it's basically all to do with the rite of baptism, but I don't think we need to go into that here.

So, you have these independent churches in the oneness Pentecostal tradition operating on a congregational basis, such as the Shiloh United church of God apostolic. And then, from the mid-1960s, West African migrants established what are sometimes known as spiritual churches, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim and various Aladura churches.

As all this was underway, as these Black majority churches were being established, reported experiences of cross-cultural ecumenical, so ecumenical. And by ecumenical, I mean, relations between different churches and cross-cultural relations between different churches, Black and white majority.

These experiences varied but were often marked by prejudices or ambivalences. As one Black Pentecostal minister remarked London in the late 1960s, quote, "There was little interest among the Black churches in links with white churches or vice versa." Now, where there was Black church exclusivity perceived as a barrier where insularity was preferred. No doubt, the experience of white racism or a preoccupation with immediate social challenges might contribute, as could differing theological emphases or moral expectations.

Yet as one white observer remarked in 1982, white congregations had imbibed talks by missionaries over decades, which were quote, "Flavoured with the hints that there was something slightly inferior about these native Christians, which would be remedied in due course by education and teaching from the west." End quote.

Black majority church leaders reported white clergy viewing their churches as theologically eccentric or unnecessarily loud, or of white clergy displaying a ecclesiastical snobbery whereby Black church leaders were seen as self-styled or self-ordained. The primary interface for connections between Black and white Christians was in the negotiation of space.

Black majority churches often look to white-majority congregations to borrow higher or purchased their buildings. And the historian, Wendy Webster, had suggested a common white narrative by the 1960s was of, quote, "Anxiety about collapsing boundaries between the, quote, "Host," and the, quote, "Immigrants."

So when, for example, Elspeth Huxley observed migrant life in Brixton for Punch Magazine in the mid-1960s. She described local concerns based on stereotypes of loud music and untidiness of immigrants. In the context of these wider anxieties and prejudices about the collapsing of, quote, "Internal frontiers of Englishness."

Similar attitudes existed in the religious sphere towards Black Christians and their worship styles. Where space sharing did occur, and Black leaders frequently complained of high rent or of poor conditions or of the sudden sale of a church building that they had been using to a commercial buyer. They were overlooked, perhaps, to a commercial buyer.

There's one case of a church being sold, I think, to a bingo hall rather than to a Black majority congregation. And in general, where there was space sharing, it was almost on the basis of a landlord-tenant model. Other factors influence the attitudes of some white clergy.

Some were ambivalent because of their own liberal anxieties about so-called, quote, "Ghettoization." White liberals often took pride in distinguishing British race relations from the racist practices apparent in the American South and South Africa. The social scientist, Michael Banton, warned against, quote, "The creation of English Harlem's."

And the Notting Hill and Nottingham riots of 1958 heightened this emphasis contributing to pressure for municipal bodies to do things like busing of immigrant children to specific schools. And later various dispersal policies in housing aimed at promoting assimilation. Some white Christians saw the aggregation of Black Christians into their churches-- into Black majority churches as a worrying development.

So, for example, the reverend Norwyn Denny a Methodist clergyman in Notting Hill as someone who was a leading anti-racist, also warned that the dangers as he saw of isolationism of something like a, quote, "Full apartheid system in the church." And argued that it was unlikely that unity between white and Black churches could be obtained further down the line.

So while Danny had been active, as I say, in anti-racism and promoting the Ministry of Black church leaders and white clergy in Notting Hill on the basis of being equals, he was also highly critical of Black majority churches and as being exclusive. And also, of the theology,

what he saw as a conservative theology of Black majority churches, and he warned that this might prevent the theological progress of Black young people.

So, what was the background to this British Council of churches dialogue. So, the World Council of Churches in the late 1960s began to encourage denominations to consider racism and the legacy of colonial histories. The British Council of churches, which was a branch of the World Council of Churches, increasingly, sought to face the realities of a multiracial society and setting up various working parties to look at this.

Then during the early 1970s, within the orbit of the British Council of churches, there were various local interactions which later provided contacts for a high-level dialogue. So, one example of this would be the Zebra Project. This was a project which started in 1975 in the bow mission in the London North East districts of the Methodist church, an area with a strong radical Methodist pedigree.

And the Zebra Project tried to foster grassroots and cross-cultural relations between churches in the multiracial context. The British Council of churches and the New Testament Church of God, the Black majority church became supporting bodies. Its initiatives included things like the sing joy together, worship meetings, which attracted churches to share musical items from their different religious and cultural backgrounds.

And the Zebra Project was conscious of ignorance or prejudices as barriers to fellowship between Christians and convinced that this could be overcome by education and interaction. So, one worker for the Zebra Project who I interviewed, Paul Charman said, it is our differences which enriches. We explore differences for our mutual benefit.

So, the Zebra Project promoted the experience of religious plurality as a component of the multicultural society. And not least I think because Black church leaders were seen by some white church leaders as points of community contacts for social activism. Black majority church leaders were not only responding to white initiative far from it.

Some were more vocally asserting by the early 1970s, the legitimacy of the Black majority churches within the British context. So in 1970, for example, The British Weekly, a Christian magazine, published interviews with the South African born, Reverend Moses Sephula, who was planting an African Methodist Episcopal Church congregation in London in which Sephula stated, quote, I would not talk first about "integration." and certainly not about "assimilation." But rather about the "self-development" of the black man."

And one of those Pentecostals who operated within a tradition of radical social involvement and critique were particularly active in seeking closer ecumenical relations. Pastor David

Douglas, who ran a multicultural citizens and vice bureau in Watford, was a pioneering in developing links between the churches.

Douglas importantly was concerned also for unity between Black majority churches and to diminish the theological barriers between them. And also, sometimes, the Caribbean island identities by which tended to divide some of these churches. He believed that unity might act as a precursor for ecumenical engagement with the white majority churches.

And Douglass was a leading-- had a deep leading role in the development of an organization called the International Ministerial Council of Great Britain in 1968, which was a federation of Black majority churches aiming to promote their concord, but also seek dialogue with white-majority churches. So, the immediate background for the British Council of churches talks was the relationship between David Douglas and Roswith Gerloff, a German Lutheran who had been doing doctoral work on the Black majority churches in the Birmingham area.

And it was Douglas and Gerloff who were largely responsible for initiating the idea of a consultation between leaders of Black majority churches with white-majority church leaders, the Dartmouth House in London in September 1976. The aim of this gathering was to prepare a paper initially drafted by Gerloff on relationships between the white and Black majority churches. So how do we get from this meeting at Dartmouth House to St. Paul's Cathedral where we started?

The order of service for the meeting between Black and white church leaders at Dartmouth House included the prayer. "Let us confess our share in that sinfulness which causes disunity, division, and strife: for our pride of race, white or Black, for our pride of our own denomination and tradition and intolerance to that of other brethren in Christ." The key theme was Christian mutuality. Gerloff, for example, asserted that white British Christians could not merely make white South Africans and Americans the quote "whipping boys" for racism.

One Black leader commented that white leaders' diaries were always full of invitations to preach in Black majority churches were declined in case reciprocal arrangements were expected. Gerloff argued that if white Christians were more aware of the diverse histories and traditions of the Black majority churches, and also their significance is part of what she called a quote, "Suffering Black church."

They could easily-- they could less easily be marginalized. They should be, quote, "Equal partners on the British Christianity." Thomas House or various Black Christian leaders critical of what they saw as white paternalism. IRA Brooks of the New Testament church of God spoke of the experience of white churches, quote, "Strangling him in their own theology." He

asserted the need for recognition and respect as a deeper spiritual level and not just, quote, white entertainment from Black gospel choirs.

There was also a wariness of the notion of recognition, and instead, the language of partnership, what David Douglas described as working together in the Christian sense was agreed. After Dartmouth House, the joint working party of Black-led and white-led churches was established. And it begins to address various issues between 1977 and 1980.

The discussions focused on three specific areas, each resulting in a short booklet. One was coming together in Christ, which made practical suggestions for grassroots cross-cultural engagement based on partnership. Building together in Christ discussed the thorny issue of hiring, sharing, and selling church buildings between white and Black majority churches and argued, quote, "To speak of landlord and tenant and a market rent is to fail to see each other as the body of Christ."

Finally, learning in partnership in 1980 elucidated some of the rationale for cross-cultural theological education. Some of those involved in the dialogue desired that one outcome might be for Black majority churches to join the British Council of churches. However, various underlying difficulties and tensions are complicated this process.

Gerloff had asserted that migrant churches applying to join this organization should not, quote, "Be confronted with statistical and technical requirements, which could be racist in their very nature." Apparently, when David Douglas at first raised the issue of the possibility of joining the British Council of Churches, he was informed that it was necessary for any church to have a membership of 5,000, a demand which led one West African joint working party member to comment, quote, "If Jesus had been bothered by numbers, he would come at Rome, not Nazareth."

A further factor limiting the ecumenical potential was the range of attitudes amongst Black-led churches towards the British Council of churches. And ministerial council of Great Britain, which I mentioned earlier, was seen as a threshold organization for the smaller churches to join the British Council of churches. And it became an associate member in 1979.

Then, in 1979, the Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches was founded by Olu Abiola of the Church of the Lord Aladura, a denomination which originates in West Africa. And this largely represented African initiated churches and associated with the British Council of churches in 1982.

However, in 1977, another group, the Afro West Indian United council of churches, was established. And this very largely represented African Caribbean Pentecostal groups, with the

New Testament church of God having a leading role. And it expressed a distinctive type of collective Black Christian consciousness with the Black church is called to respond to secularizing and racist forces, quote, "The common threats to the witness they are giving in this country from challenges such as racial prejudice, the media, and concerns that religious education might be removed from the school curriculum."

The Afro West Indian United council of churches emerged at the same time as the joint working party and which it saw as being which it saw as being which the Joint Working Party, sorry. It was the African question-- sorry, need more coffee. The African West Indian United council of churches saw the danger that the joint working party would be perceived as whites, quote, "Whites doing something for Blacks."

A controversy erupted in 1978 on the occasion of the discussion of the Methodist conference of its overseas divisions annual report. This included claim, and I quote, "Because the Black churches came into being in reaction against white rejection, we have no right to be self-righteous."

But we may include more in sadness than anger, that at the very least, ghetto congregations are guilty of hoarding talents, which ought to be diffused throughout the wider Christian community. At worst, they are denying the catholicity of the church. Catholicity, I suppose. Broadly you could say means unity, the unity of the church.

Now, the phrase ghetto congregations was singled out for particular criticism by the Zebra Project by various other the similar projects and also by Ben Cunningham, who is the secretary of the Afro West Indian United council of churches. And he said this. That phrase, reveals what Black Christians have always suspected, that they still-- they white Christians, white churches, still believe in the projection of a Jesus Christ, who wears a pinstripe suit, a bowler hat, and swings a tightly rolled umbrella. And any group of Christians who refuses to share this perception, such as churches with predominantly Black members are to be belittled as ghetto congregations with a ghetto mentality.

The Afro West Indian unity council of churches and the New Testament church of God appeared to have had very little active involvement with the joint working party during its existence. This didn't necessarily mean opposition to the joint working party, but it did reveal, I think, the theological, socio-political, and cultural complexities which underlay the British Council of churches dialogue. Now, a few conclusions. Thank you for sticking with me so far. I'm hoping that there are people still there.

JULIA: Yeah, there are plenty of people here, John, and you've got about five minutes left.

DR. JOHN MAIDEN: It's weird talking into my laptop.

JULIA: Yeah, it is strange. Yes, so you've got-- it's just like 2:34, so you've got a good five minutes to conclude now, then we'll get onto discussion and questions.

DR. JOHN MAIDEN: Great, thank you. When contrasted with Black and white Christian relations at the beginning of the 1970s, the ecumenism and model of partnership discussed in this paper was, although modest in its immediate impact, a notable development in British religious life.

The co-chair of the joint working party bishop, sorry, bishop Hewlett Thompson, a white Anglican bishop who I was able to interview, recalled this about the conversations, quote, our demeanour towards them, Black leaders on the joint working party, which we were learning to exhibit was that these people are genuine Christians. It sounds very paternalistic, but after all, we all-- but after all, we start from this very paternalistic attitude. People of my generation were brought up when the British empire was the British empire.

And as a boy, I can remember us all having this attitude. So, we were teaching ourselves not just to act-- not just to act, but for it to come from us truly that we regarded the Black-led churches as totally genuine and equal partners in the gospel. And I can remember teaching myself to be like that.

A context for this expression of Christian partnership was the beginnings of a shift, I suppose, in the social and political discourse around race relations away from assimilation and more paternalistic forms of integration towards multiculturalism. And I quote, the affirmation of one's own traditions and outlook is an appropriate stop on the way to sharing and cooperating with people of another culture, not a hindrance.

The common culture in Christ for which we are all can only be developed through carefully multicultural arrangements. And that was what the Black and white members of the joint working party affirmed in 1980. So, what I call ecumenical multiculturalism reflected a wider development in fact in British race relations.

With partnership also came a transformation of the language used by white Christians could describe what had been described as Black, quote, "sect," and the language shifts to Black-led church. And some white Christians began to see the Black majority churches themselves as a potential force for desacralization, for a resurgence of Christianity in an otherwise secularizing context.

And but whereas white Christians had previously seen Black Christian Christianity as a potential source of Christian resurgence if only the white majority denominations and their local congregations could somehow tap into this by the end of the 1970s. Some were now the churches as themselves, the sources of potential Christian growth.

As the radical theologian, Trevor Beeson wrote in The Guardian in 1979, quote, "in these African and West Indian churches lies the very best hope re-Christianizing the British nation and in helping the weary churches of these islands to re-discover the true character of Christian faith and worship." This was the emergence of a anti-secularization narrative based on the ethnic transformation of British Christianity, which will become very influential.

There were challenges. The joint working party deepened relations between its participants but struggled for its ideas to gain traction and more widely amongst the white majority denominations. There were various reasons for this. And however, the joint working party was replaced in 1980 by the Conference for Christian Partnership which continued dialogue and interaction.

And the British Council of churches maintained an active commitment in this area through its Black Christian concerns group from 1997. And then the minority ethnic Christian affairs secretariat from 2003. And so, I think it's fair to say that while the changes which I'm discussing in the 1970s in this paper may seem modest, they were, in fact, marked the beginnings of a shift towards an inclusive understanding of British Christianity. And then ecumenism based on a model of Christian partnership, not paternalism, and I will stop there.

Thank you for listening.