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Response

Race and respect

I am grateful to Robert Beckford for the care he has taken to present the argument of my book and for his incisive comments and criticisms. My book has been reviewed by other black theologians, in the UK and the USA, who have avoided the argument of the book, preferring to play the race card: any criticism of black theology can only be an expression of white racism. I am grateful to the editors of *SJT* in affording me the opportunity to respond. It would be tedious to become involved in a detailed exchange of he-said–I-said. I have chosen to respond to two issues raised in Beckford's review.

The first concerns the matter of race. Reviews often regret the fact that the author did not write a different book. Beckford has been awaiting a book on race by a white UK author, a book which would deal with the whiteness of academic theology in this country – and the underlying racial assumptions of British colonial theology. As he observes, this is not it. The reason is not that I am insensitive to racism in theology, but that throughout my career I have concentrated on class rather than race, on economic class of which social class is an expression. My interests have been on power, the unequal distribution of power, the interests which conserve and accumulate power in the hands of the few. Above all I have attended to the religious legitimisation of power by which Christians have associated themselves with political and civil authority. This was the subject of my study of *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*. I see race in the context of contending power, unequal power, the unjust exercise of power, the maintaining of interest and advantage by one group over against another. Those who benefit from racial discrimination have argued for the superiority of one race over another. To engage with them is to fall into the trap of accepting the premise that race is the issue. The independence movements in Malawi in the 1970s, Zimbabwe in the 1980s and South Africa in the 1990s were described as struggles against racism. They were in fact struggles about power. In each case the end of racial discrimination has not brought about an equitable society, because the new ruling class has retained for itself the old advantages of power. In my book I argue that to continue to see the issue in America as one of race is to fall into the trap of racism itself. The exodus from New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck saw thousands left behind. It exposed the division in society. It was not blacks who were abandoned: it was the poor, both black and white. The division was exposed as one of

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class and not race. Nicolai Berdyaev famously said: 'If I go hungry it is a physical evil; if others go hungry it is a moral evil.' True, but incomplete. When others go hungry there is a moral obligation to feed them, but there is a more profound moral obligation to discover why it is, in a situation of plenty, some nevertheless are denied. This requires economic analysis. In a discussion in Birmingham in 1998 Jon Sobrino admitted that after thirty years of liberation theology the poor in Latin America had become poorer. I believe that liberation theology regarded the poor as a moral issue and did not pursue the economic analysis. In the same year James Cone could say of the USA that 'Black suffering is getting worse, not better, and we are more confused than ever about the reason for it.' After thirty years black poverty is increasing and black theology has been unable to explain or even address this issue. Black theology has consistently refused to address the issue of economic class. The rhetoric of race analysis is clearly inadequate: class analysis is required. Robert Beckford would like a book on white race analysis. My book is not it, not by chance, not by insensitivity but because race analysis has now been demonstrated to be dangerously outdated. It falls into the racist trap and fails to address the primary basis of inequality in the USA. The same could be said of the UK. Robert Beckford is the leading exponent of black theology in the UK – by some measure – but the work of Joe Aldred has its own significance. As a bishop in the Church of God of Prophecy Aldred is closely in touch with several black communities and is active in inter-racial organisations. However, he takes the bold step of rejecting 'race' as the primary category for describing his constituency, preferring 'ethnicity'. He wishes to develop a British Caribbean theology which is neither black theology nor Afro-Caribbean. Even more interesting is Aldred's claim that his people do not see themselves as victims. Most of them are second generation, born in the UK of Caribbean immigrants. They look rather to agency, to their opportunities and capacities to shape their own lives and contribute to society. Aldred links identity with ethnicity and in my book I cite the sociological studies of Claire Alexander in which the identity of black youths is linked to culture.

Whatever Robert Beckford hoped for, my book is not about race, but this for good reason. In South Africa Mokgethi Motlhabi warned that the issue was not race but power. In America Victor Anderson has warned against making race an 'ontological category'. Now we have examples from the UK of empirical studies in which British Caribbean communities refuse to identify themselves by the socially constructed category of race. The American womanist writer Audre Lorde has said, famously, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. We must ask whether the concept of race is not itself one of the master's tools. Does a continuing focus

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on race distract from an analysis of the economic basis of the disparity of power? And whose interests does this suit?

The second issue concerns respect, which indeed is the title of Joe Aldred's major work: *Respect: Understanding British Caribbean Christianity*. Beckford considers that I show a lack of respect, presumably towards black theologians. I could imagine another reviewer complaining that I had shown too much respect and had been too uncritical of black writers and activists. I show respect, even reverence for the achievements of Edward Blyden. I praise the contribution of Marcus Garvey, even making light of his appalling organisational failures. Yes, I criticise Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr for their lack of analysis and political programmes, but only after I have expressed my deepest regard for their moral courage and integrity. I even present more contentious figures in the best possible light. While praising Malcolm X, I even risk defending Louis Farrakhan against some of his detractors. To whom do I show a lack of respect? I criticise James Cone because of the unbalanced views of his early works, but I am unstinting in my praise for his achievement. He made it impossible to continue theological business as usual. I even say that in face of feminist criticism he should apologise for nothing. He was a man of his time when others did not know the time of day. I praise excessively the work of Alice Walker and her development of womanism. The originality and insights of Delores Williams I am delighted to recognise.

To whom then do I show a lack of respect? To the bandwagon theologians, to those who come along and call themselves black or womanist theologians but bring it into disrepute. Black theology always describes itself as 'contextual'. It certainly was forty years ago in the context of the civil rights movement. Race analysis was everything. But, as already indicated, this is no longer the context. The issue is poverty in the black communities and yet the present generation of black theologians repeat the mantra of race in the rhetoric of the civil rights campaigns. James Cone is puzzled about black poverty. If black theology addressed the issue, even if it failed to fully account for it, it would earn our respect. As black theologians themselves concede, the black churches are not interested in black theology: they do not respect it. Early in the presidential primaries of 2008 the question was raised as to whether Barack Obama was 'black enough'. One black comedian commented: 'He was raised by his mother when his father disappeared – sounds black enough to me.' Contemporary black theology is still insisting on coming from a slave family, while black reality is about unemployment, deprivation and housing developments with 90 per cent single-mother households. What is required is a new contextual theology for the present conditions. For Gayraud Wilmore the issue is not whether black theology continues or not, but whether black theologians address these conditions.

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What is disappointing is to hear the repetition of the themes from forty years ago. If black theology cannot bring itself to mount a critique of American capitalism, whose interests does that suit? Beckford would like me to show respect to these theologians. I have been fulsome in my respect for those who, in the past, have deserved it.

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